

From Baby Boomers to Gen Alpha: Sociology professor asks 'Is it time to stop talking about generations?'

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"Millennials don't really want to work. They're far too focused on

avocado toast and chai lattes!" Just one of the many clichés expressed by workers over the age of 50. And those being criticized? Well, they often reply with a bored "OK, Boomer" followed by an eye roll and some ironic remark about the excessively performance-driven worldview of those born between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s.

Work, it seems, just isn't as important to the young as it is to older generations. But it's not just about [baby boomers](#) and millennials. Parked between them is Generation X, whose members were born between 1965 and 1980, and then there is Gen Z, which covers the age group born between the end of the 1990s and the early 2010s.

For those looking to make sense of the differences, there are shelf-loads of books and guides available, all aiming to explain just what it is exactly that makes a particular generation tick. Martin Schröder, professor of sociology at Saarland University, was also asked whether he'd like to add to this ever-expanding collection.

"A publisher offered me a lucrative book deal if I was able to show that millennials tick differently than older generations," he explained. So he set about analyzing hundreds of thousands of datasets spanning four decades.

Given just how much has been written about the subject and how regularly the topic crops up for discussion, the results were surprising. "I wasn't able to find anything to suggest that attitudes towards work and career are actually related to the year in which someone was born."

The image of millennials with their 20-hour week sitting on the beach in Bali coding "stuff for the web" or doing "something with media" is at best simply a cliché. And then there's the one about boomers on the verge of burnout in their mid-fifties, who made the country (and them) rich thanks to working 70-hour weeks for decades, while their [family](#)

[life](#) lies in ruins.

"Of course, as with all clichés there's a grain of truth in them, but when you take a closer look, the differences between the generations are not really that great at all. What turns out to be important is which stage of life people are in when they are asked about their work ethic or their attitude to work," said Professor Schröder.

The generational hypothesis states that attitudes expressed by individuals are strongly influenced by their birth year rather than by their age or by the year (or historical time period) in which they were surveyed. However, if one takes the latter two effects into account—known respectively as "age effects" and "period effects"—then "generational effects" become almost negligible.

Here's an example: A 60-year-old gripes about the 15-year-old apprentice who is not really interested in doing night shifts and working weekends to earn more and climb the career ladder.

"It turns out that this is not really a generational issue. What we found is that all of us think and act differently than we did thirty years ago," said Martin Schröder.

"It's not our affiliation to a particular generation that explains our thinking, but rather which phase of our life we're in when asked about our attitude to work. Today, each of us thinks differently about the world than we did some years ago, and that's as true for the 15-year-old as it is for someone who's now 60. If you ask different generations at the same time what they think about work, you'll find their answers are essentially the same."

Put another way, work is no longer quite as important to us today as it was to society 50 years ago—and that's true regardless of whether we are

15 or 50.

Schröder's conclusions have a solid empirical basis. He used data from almost 600,000 individuals from the Integrated Values Survey, which polled individuals in 113 countries between 1981 and 2022 to determine, among other things, their attitudes and values regarding work and career. The work is [published](#) in the *Journal of Business and Psychology*.

In addition to examining work motivation, Martin Schröder also mined this huge mountain of data to get a better understanding of the subjective importance of other factors, such as leisure time, good work hours, opportunities to show initiative, generous holidays, the feeling of being able to achieve something, having a responsible job, having an interesting job, having a job that matches well with one's own abilities, having pleasant people to work with and having the opportunity to meet pleasant people in your work.

The key finding: The generational cohort to which a respondent belonged has practically no effect on the answers given.

Martin Schröder sees three reasons why the generational myth is so persistent in the workplace. First, [young people](#) have always been less willing to work than middle-aged individuals—something clearly shown by the data—and all of us, regardless of age or year of birth, now see paid work as less important than was the case in the past.

"By confusing these age and period effects with generational effects, we're seeing generations where there are in fact none," said Schröder.

"The second reason why we (want to) believe in generations seems to be 'generationalism'—a new '-ism' that offers an overly simplified way of explaining the world. Our brain loves to put people into boxes because it allows us to see our social group as better than another, which makes us

feel good about ourselves. But thinking in '-isms' is dangerous and, like sexism and racism, often illegal. If we're not careful, we end up using unsupported generalizations that have no foundation in reality," explained Martin Schröder.

It seems that the almost irresistible urge to categorize and, if we're not careful, to stereotype and discriminate on the basis of innate characteristics like skin color or gender, also applies to another innate characteristic, namely, year of birth.

"The third reason why we tend to assume generational effects, where there really are none, is that for some people this claim is the basis for their livelihood," said Martin Schröder. Put bluntly, "youth researchers" and "generational gurus" have to ignore [scientific findings](#) that contradict their business model because their income depends on continuing to sell "generationally tailored" coaching sessions, books and lecture series—all of which provide advice and guidance on what is ultimately a myth masquerading as fact.

It's not a risk that Professor Schröder has to face. "Anyone who shows that it makes no sense to distinguish between generations is obviously not going to profit from that financially. It's the sort of finding that requires a deep dive into the data, usually by a university professor," said Martin Schröder with a wink.

More information: Martin Schröder, Work Motivation Is Not Generational but Depends on Age and Period, *Journal of Business and Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s10869-023-09921-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-023-09921-8)

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