

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Karen R. Foster, *Generation, Discourse, and Social Change*. New York and Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2013, 175 pp., \$105.00 hardcover (ISBN 13:978-0-415-81766-0)

Generation, *Discourse, and Social Change* is a welcome addition to the Routledge Advances in Sociology book series. It is small book — seven chapters and three short technical appendices — but punches above its weight and volume in its substantive contribution to sociology and to workers/workplaces.

The book opens with an oft-heard statement about younger people “They want more. They always want more” (p. 1). This is uttered by a respondent in Foster’s study of generational discourse in workplaces, but could have been said by any number of “people of a certain age” about younger generations. Yet, as the author points out, the picture of generational discourse, in reality, is messy. Management, psychology, and society in general seems to “know” about different generations and their approaches to work and life, yet little sociological research has actually directly and critically interrogated what is assumed to be true. Foster sets out to change that.

By way of introduction, Foster lets readers know, in a sociologically nuanced way, that she will take the commonly framed presumptions about generations at work and check them against work-life stories of real people she interviews. In this way, she seeks to find “what’s going on” with generations and discourse at work. Her focus is on discourse, specifically on two levels: generation as discourse, by which she means that which constructs generations as meaningful in human life; and generational discourses, the way certain discourses such as those about work and earning, are linked to the idea of generation.

In Chapter 1, the question of what we think a generation is, is engagingly poked and prodded from the vantage point of extant sociological and philosophical literatures. Foster sets out then to let the concept emerge from her interviews. Chapter 2 lays down the parameters of her qualitative study, the central research questions, the data collection process, and the methodological approach which is carefully designed to match the sociological goal. Everything is questioned in this study: what work is, whether generational differences exist, what matters, what can be generalized, and what generations mean to sociology. The study

draws on narrative accounts to enable insights to emerge from the stories told. The range of working people interviewed is impressively diverse. It includes: hotel maids, CEOs, fishers, and ad writers, amongst others. In fact, the list is even longer than the 52 people interviewed since many have had more than one career or job. This is in the Studs Terkel tradition of what he called “rogue sociology” that led him to profound insights into working lives.

Chapter 3 develops how generation as discourse emerges from the narrative accounts in two ways. First, generation as an axis of difference emerges when beliefs are expressed about older and younger people at work having different attitudes toward work and earning. An example of this is one respondent who seized on the concept of “credential arrogance,” by which he meant that younger workers seem to think that their degree is sufficient to confer seniority at work. Second, generation as discourse calls upon historical time differences in relation to technology, shifting gender expectations, and a whole slate of sociohistorical changes. An example here is one older respondent who began many of his points with “In our day . . .” suggesting that the present day was not *his* day. At the end of this chapter, the intriguing question is posed: how do the respondents’ perceptions about generation map onto their working realities?

Three generational narratives emerge from the stories respondents tell: ambivalence, faithful relations to work, and disaffection. Foster uses the innovative approach of “composite narratives” to illustrate each. Composite narratives, as the name suggests, are narratives comprising multiple responses from various respondents rather than from a single respondent. Ambivalence is Victor’s story: seeing work as inevitable and character-building, but not fulfilling. It is also Stacey’s who says, “It’s all foreplay to retirement.” The faithful relations to work theme is exemplified by Marsha who is enthusiastic about the socioeconomic system that she believes delivers great work opportunities to anyone who will seize them. And the disaffected are characterized by often conflicting attitudes, from a quest for work they can be passionate about, to asking what the point of work is after all. Paid work becomes one aspect of life’s projects that needs to mesh with other worthwhile life activities. In exploring how these themes intersect with age, the findings are not fully clear, but hint that younger workers fall more into the disaffected theme. An aspect of the self-fulfilling prophecy is apparent, however, whereby belief that the standard employment relation (SER) is dead and gone makes it happen.

As a last and highly evocative contribution of the book, Foster explores generation as discourse, how generation in the politics of rep-

resentation is a potent construct in shaping the social relations of work. What is interesting in the interviews is that it is power relations in work that matter more than age *per se* in the use of generation discourse. For example, Dean, age 25, a family restaurant manager, expresses his frustration with young waitstaff, “I see a lot more in the younger generation like mine and younger — there’s a lot more excuses made, and a lot more, you know, like ‘I need this’ and ‘I can’t — I’m sick.’” The most prominent discourse countering that of younger generations as entitled is the younger criticizing older generations for their pursuit of work and money above all else. Foster is clear to emphasize that generation as discourse is revealing of the stakes different generations have in work around relative advantage or disadvantage.

This is a delightfully written book to which justice cannot be done in a short book review. It is sociologically important in dispelling myths about generations in work. It could be a supplemental reading in any number of courses in management, sociology, psychology, or other social sciences. It should be required reading for human resources people and corporate leaders who too often accept myths when repeated as reality. Foster’s book can also serve as a model for graduate students and professors alike in how to do an innovative, clever, and highly insightful piece of qualitative research by thinking creatively rather than following formulaic research methods.

In full disclosure, Foster thanks me in the acknowledgements for my research as well as for generosity with time and insight. The research of mine from which she draws is in the public domain. The additional thanks are for my service as External Examiner on her Ph.D. through the miracle of videoconferencing. We have never actually met in person, nor did I have anything to do with the preparation or publication of this volume.

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