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Abstract

This paper exhibits a study about medium-sized companies in Austria (in the region of Salzburg). There are the HR manager in the center of attention and their views of relaying processes in companies and their “Conception of Man”. The employee recruitment and job assurance represent a major challenge up against the background of demographic developments in Europe [1]. HR managers are looking out for the self-interest of companies, in search for highly qualified talents. In the scientific literature, characteristics of recruitment processes are increasingly using the terminology “war of talents”. Due to “war of talents” employees that have been working for 10 or more years in a company have been greatly affected. They are the ones who pass on their knowledge to new employees and they know their company. So the following question is in the core of the paper: From the perspective of HR managers: How can the intergenerational transmission processes be described – what do the older “learn” from the younger employees and vice versa? These issues are illustrated by an empirical study.

The companies were willing to provide an insight into their practice of recruiting with detailed conversation. The theoretical framework of the paper is based on the classical theory of Schleiermacher who grapples with the question of what role can play the older generation to the younger generation. The theory Schleiermacher’s will be highlighted by this study empirically and carried a reformulation with respect to the challenges of relaying processes in pluralistic societies.

1. Introduction

"[...] it is certainly of interest to pose the question, what can the old learn from the young” (U1, 382-383) – in fact, the spontaneous response of an HR manager in an interview straight away demonstrated the generally held view that we have shared for thousands of years: We get the knowledge imparted by the elderly. Various cultures have had storytellers, who travelled around relating myths and legends, or even telling of their own experiences. Although the stories were meant to entertain, most of them also conveyed a moral or the accepted standards and values of the culture in question. The transfer of knowledge by the older generation also had the function of keeping a collective memory alive. It is a kind of natural progression, that in a linking of generations, the young generation primarily acquires knowledge that is passed on by the older generation. If we analyse this knowledge transfer, we can see that it also occurs in professional communities, even in the transfer of individual, collective knowledge initially between individuals or groups. HR managers are employed in companies so that this interaction succeeds on a personnel level. But how do they construct transfer processes between employees, who they (are supposed to) initiate, mentor, or even manage! Who passes on what kind of knowledge to whom? Anyway: Can older employees in a company learn something from the younger generation?

In this discussion we will examine a theoretical training view, that, on the one hand, innovative business strategies can be developed through the analytical examination of operational realities. On the other hand, theoretically based reformulations can make a contribution, in differentiating the theory-practice transfer in HR Management.

2. Theoretical embedding and methodological starting points for the study of intergenerational transfer in companies

This paper deals with the question of how intergenerational transfer processes are reconstructed in companies from the perspective of HR-managers: What do the younger generation get in their careers from what is imparted by their older colleagues, and what does the younger generation give back to their older colleagues in return.

The main actors in the setting of intergenerational transfer processes are the so-called mid-careers or long-term employees on the one hand, and the newcomers in the company on the other. Last, but not least, the management of the company plays an important role in the organization of intergenerational understanding. The management level represents the corporate philosophy, conveys
ideas about working methods, and arranges conceptually cooperative alliances. According to Latour [3], these human actors and the actor-network-theory they represent can be extended to non-human actors that can also be significant in the intergenerational exchange process, for example, social media. If we follow the interpretation of Foucault [4] and his conception of power, time structures or furniture arrangements in offices can also be significant players in professional exchange processes in the workplace. However, readers will only be considering the human actors in a company in what follows. But why is the HR manager’s view of the younger and older generations in the company of interest? HR Managers are involved in management processes that affect, or even alter, that socialization between the generations. They have, for example via recruitment processes, a significant influence on who will be the next generation in the company and what knowledge resources are preserved over the years, or are to be replaced by new or different ones due to changes in the company. Nonetheless, the workplace itself is a relevant instance of socialization, because professional conduct is an influencing factor in the constitution of society in post-modern contexts. In this context it is important that individual and social agents be integrated in one another and not be seen as a dichotomy. At this point, reference should be made to Bourdieu’s socio-analysis [5] with regard to the connectivity of this discussion.

If we want to understand how HR managers reconstruct intergenerational transfer processes, it is necessary to clarify what is actually meant by intergenerational transfer. In a second stage, I will then introduce example sequences from the interviews and explain how the “management way of thinking” can be understood from an educational science perspective.

2.1. Intergenerational transfer as a socially relevant concept – selected tradition points

So, what is meant by intergenerational transfer? When we think of the term generation, several examples occur to us from an everyday context, which, however, have been extensively examined in the scientific literature in recent years in both the German and English-speaking worlds: the ’68 generation, generation X, as eponymous title of the episodic novel by Canadian author Douglas Coupland, or the so-called the “baby boomer” generation. Perhaps we think of “three generations under one roof” and that this generation structure is configured differently, at least spatially, now than it was 50 years ago. In contrast to rather philosophical formation generation concepts, the concept put forward by Karl Mannheim has strongly established itself in the German-speaking countries. He understands generation primarily as a link in the sense of common references. He coined the term generation storage, in which the individual places himself: This placing depends on the cultural context, a temporal equality, or a shared experience of events (e.g. the fall of the Wall) as a kind of “fellowship borne of fate” [6].

The (narrative) construction of generation in association with memory has a long history of reception [7]. The placing of individuals in a (generational) community has, from the educational science perspective, for example, already been debated by the classical scholars, Aristotle, Comenius, Kant, or Comte [8].

At this point the reader will be introduced to a classic scholar of education, who has produced pioneering work for today’s understanding of intergenerational relationships. So, we go back to the first half of the 19th century and meet F.E.D. Schleiermacher. He posed the question – which in turn became a classic in educational science – “What does the older generation really want from the younger generation?” [9] Schleiermacher provides his own answer to his question and writes that there is an absolute necessity for the transfer of knowledge, otherwise the younger generation would “[...] always have to start all over again: there could be no further development of the human communal life, but it does takes place” [9]. The older generation wants, and therefore must, influence the younger generation: “Through the transfer processes, society is able to perpetuate itself and make history, as well as rejuvenating and improving itself after disruptive events. This is what constitutes the relationship of the generation and the transfer efforts made within it, as well as both the person as an individual entity and the community [10]. Here, Schleiermacher made a teleological argument principally on the basis of the socio-political circumstances of his time. Accordingly, the question, what does the older generation want from the younger generation is consequently less of a question and more of an imperative.

If we look at the companies under consideration here, they represent professional social instances within a society, which establish or reformulate stocks of knowledge in their own interests. Through transfer processes, they are able to stabilize, redefine, or even keep themselves in business. Consequently, in this study Schleiermacher’s question was taken up and expanded, whereby HR managers were asked: What can the younger generation learn from the older generation and vice versa – what can the older generation learn from the younger generation?
2.2. "Who gives to whom?" – a methodical sketch for reconstructing generational transfers

This tandem question was asked as part of a study, which I carried out at the University of Salzburg, in cooperation with the Career Centre of the University, in 2011-2012 [2]. First and foremost, the study asked how the initial scenarios of academics were arranged in companies and what role universities played from teaching to the placement of their graduates. The companies were medium-sized companies in the city and Land [federal state] of Salzburg.

The design of the study followed a mixed-method-approach, whereby the quantitative part consisted of an online questionnaire, which covered the expectations and wishes of the companies with regard to new starters. It answered the question of what qualifications companies expected university students to gain during their studies in order to be hired by a company. On the one hand, it provided an overview of what recruiting processes the companies used. On the other, an overview was able to be gained as to how the companies presented cooperation with the universities. The qualitative part of the study enabled a more detailed look at individual companies. Thus, HR managers from a total of 17 medium-sized companies in the city of Salzburg and the Salzburg Land were asked about the transition from university to the company and further aspects of the recruiting process. In this context, however, I was not exclusively interested in the entry in the company as the main priority, but rather also with the question of transfer- and learning processes within the company. The epistemological interest of the study presented here comprises sensitive information (from the companies’ perspective) about company policy. For this reason, the names of the companies and the HR managers are not given in what follows. A narrative survey approach was chosen because it enables this multi-faceted and simultaneously sensitive field to be covered adequately [11]. This technique makes it possible to overcome any possible abbreviated or abstract representation by the HR managers. Analysis of the data was performed using the documentary method of interpretation [12]. The following presentation provides a summary of the significant structures of meaning that have been obtained from the analysis of the data of selected companies in the total sample. The selection was based on the grounded theory [13].

3. Descriptions for the design of intergenerational transfer processes - from the perspective of HR managers

3.1. The transfer from "old to young"

In the descriptions of the HR managers, the construction of experience-based knowledge clearly dominates. The results from the dense sequences are brought together in the following. At the level of transfer from older employees to younger employees, this construction was formed in four ways: (1) So, in the view of the HR managers, the older generation have a knowledge advantage over the younger generation, which, on the one hand, can be attributed to specialized knowledge. On the other hand, the older generation also give the younger generation an understanding about the company. They transfer (a) a structure of the "circumstances and conditions" (U1, 402-403) in the company, (b) an understanding of the bureaucratic logic "that is the whole bureaucratic story [...] how one should speak to a particular person [...] and who has the right information and who is the right person to talk to, are things the organizational chart can't tell you" (U2, 432-434), and (c) "tips and tricks on how to get certain things and [...] how unwritten laws work" (U3, 134-135). (2) HR Managers also reconstruct the role of older people in dealing with the younger ones with regard to their influence on emotional and social behaviour. They show (a) how to be patient and calm in dealing with situations to which they cannot react to immediately simply, clearly and directly, as well as "to experience situations more consciously" (U4, 188-189). There is also (b) a general stress on the transfer of competences by the older employees: "the younger employee can learn almost everything from him [...] that is, from job skills to social skills, and it really is a very important aspect that the very young employees learn social skills as well as methodological competence from the older employees" (U1, 410-413). For another HR manager (d) the following saying was particularly apt in relation to the young: "You can't change the world overnight" (U5, 185-188). As part of the transfer, there are other sequences with regard to emotional and social behaviour, which put (d) "Appreciation" (U6, 365) at the centre of the constructive transfer processes. In addition, the sequences also document that the older employees in the company act as a corrective, namely that "that one [as a younger person; DC] must also fit into structures " (U5, 188-189). (3) The corrective function will be expanded with regard to the biographical prospective aspirations of the young person in terms of their career goals: So, in the view of the HR managers, the older employees are a successful example of personal progress in the
company, especially if they have proved themselves in the field and have also undertaken "tasks [...] which are routine and can sometimes be monotonous" (U4, 209-210). Finally, the HR managers also see in the older employees (4) a role in preserving the company's philosophy, particularly with regard to the transfer of "values, particularly, of course, company values" (U1, 405-406).

3.2. The transfer from "young to old"

In the HR managers' reports, the younger employees transfer knowledge to the older employees, which can also be reconstructed as experience-based knowledge and which can be differentiated as follows: (1) the young employees have a knowledge advantage over the older employees. This is demonstrated as follows, for example: "I notice that whenever someone comes straight from university, he comes with knowledge of the latest developments" (U2, 456-457). Older employees acquiring purely professional knowledge from young colleagues is seen in particular in IT"(U1, 387-388), where their "ability to cope with computer programs and new programs is taken for granted" (U5, 202-203). Also their ability with "social media, because older employees are simply out of touch" (U3 161-162). One sequence particularly stood out in the analysis, where an HR manager took on the role of the older employee himself and behaved like a consumer. He said "and now I can suck up an incredible amount of knowledge from the younger generation and that is such a motivator" (U8, 680). (2) Another dominant feature in the transfer from the younger generation to older people is seen in an open understanding of the world, which is explicitly expressed by (a) "an open-mindedness towards other cultures" (U3, 160) or, expressed in terms of their own country as "an ability to look outside" (U3, 146-153), which is attributed to the younger generation. Finally, in the view of the HR managers, young people are able to transfer their attitude of "openness to new ideas" (U1, 394-395). (3) The younger generation's resources also cover social and emotional components: Thus we find (a) the appreciation of generational closeness and understanding, because "now I have people who understand the new generation again" (U8, 688-689). The younger generation in companies is thus a bridge builder to their next generation in the market outside the company. Here there is a knowledge advantage that the older employees in the company can no longer catch up with. This knowledge advantage is regarded as a unique feature of the younger employees in the company. The reciprocal relationship between generations is clearly identified for the company: Thus, the younger employees boost the self-affirmation process of the older employees, by showing that their knowledge and experience is still needed. So it is significant that there is an exchange between young and old, in which "how much value there is in their experience" (U1, 385) is confirmed for the older employees. The younger employees also give the senior colleagues a "a bit of an easier-going attitude” (U6, 363) to the working day. Ultimately, they are also seen by HR managers as a corrective. They are able to pass on an appreciation to older staff that "sometimes a change is helpful [...] or that sometimes it is positive to try something new, or even to look at a situation from a different angle and from a different perspective" (U4, 214-215).

4. Conclusion

The reconstruction of the view of HR managers on the transfer processes from older employees to younger ones and vice versa, enables us to draw the following conclusion: Practical knowledge as an advantage of the older generation over the younger generation has been discussed in the specialized literature [13]. If we contrast the findings of the exemplary interpretations found here with the knowledge-advantage construct, we can certainly consider it as experience-based knowledge. This experienced-based knowledge is, however, also connected to the transfer from the younger generation and not exclusively to the younger generation in the company. The transfer is not, therefore, to be thought of as a dominantly older generation structural concept. This means: The older generation has not established its knowledge base by virtue of its many years of service or its age per se. It, just like the younger generation, is instructed by the debate within itself, between its individuals, and with external actors (e.g. the younger generation). This transfer relationship once again describes the traditional concept of education, as established by Humboldt, for example.

So, each generation brings its specific experience-based knowledge with it, which, in the interpretation of the HR managers, not only benefits the individual and his further development (professional or personal), but also, of course, the further development of the company.

At the beginning of this paper, we came across F.E.D. Schleiermacher, who made it clear in his sociology study that transfer efforts from old to young are a "must have" for the continued existence of society. This is, moreover, a utilitarian idea, which leads us through the micro and intermediate levels to the fundamental questions of social coexistence and cohesion. The interpretations of intergenerational transfer provided here, show empirically a classic, but nevertheless always current, virulent principle of development of systems, such as companies, for example: The generational representatives of the old and new generations are dependent on one another,
as a community. Here the younger people are actors, each with their knowledge base – like the face of Janus – (knowledge) communicating and at the same time (knowledge) acquiring. The same applies to the representatives of the older generation. To repeat: Age is, therefore, not decisive for the stock of experience-based knowledge, but, in Schleiermacher’s interpretation, the way in which the interaction is made between one’s own constitution as a (critical) individual and the external impacts of the other in each case. With regard to the reconstruction of the transfer movements, it is consequently clear that transfer processes can be understood within the meaning of cross-learning and thus “[…] a common acquisition of social and cultural heritage” [8]. The properties of both actors cannot, and must not, be reduced to one of the two properties – an acquiring or a communicating function.

5. References


