

## GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN KEY VALUES AND ETHICS

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**Purpose:** The purpose of this article is to explore the generational differences between five generations of adult Poles including the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, X Generation, Millennials and adult representatives of iGen exploring their key values. The study also examines the different approaches taken by the generations towards ethics.

**Design/methodology/approach:** 606 people from all over Poland took part in the survey. The participants included 4 people from the silent generation (0.7%), 85 from the Baby Boomers (14%), 197 from generation X (32.5%), 309 from the Millennials 309 (51%), and 11 from the iGen (1.8%). The *Computer Assisted Web Interview* (CAWI) method was applied which is used to reach a large number of respondents and obtain data for analyses in a short time.

**Findings:** The study showed that the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, X Generation, Millennials and even the iGen share the family as a common key value. This finding should be taken into account in any work or research on generational differences and their relation to work values.

**Research limitations/implications:** The survey was conducted using sample and is therefore not representative of Polish society. This can be considered as an exploratory study.

**Practical implications:** The results of the study should encourage researchers involved in work values to take into account the life values of the generations that influence and even constitute the foundation for work values.

**Social implications:** The study demonstrates that values are present in the lives of individuals and societies. The key life values of a particular generation influence their work values, their motivation and their approach to cooperation. Understanding this should influence the actions of companies and HR departments.

**Originality/value:** The article contains new research on the key values of the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, generation X, Millennials and iGen.

**Keywords:** generational differences, key values, life values, work values.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

## 1. Introduction

Whilst the differences between generations have been stark, they are becoming increasingly noticeable in modern day. However, globally, universal digitalization and computerization has made a significant difference in the way in which we understand the world around us. Part of this change has included learning the skills to take advantage of the latest hi-tech innovations which are becoming increasingly more significant in our lives. Today, generations are divided between those from before the era of digitization and those who have only ever known the digital era. The way in which people react to their environment as well as the values that guide them also differ between generations. Although differences in values, especially those correlated with work, have been studied for decades in Europe and the United States, there has only been interest in generational differences in Poland in the last several years. This paper aims to investigate the differences in the key life values of the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Millennials and the adult representatives of iGen which include ethics as one of the key values.

The study aims to fill a gap concerning the key life values, specifically the life values between the different generations in Poland. There are numerous studies and that have explored different work values (give examples). Some of these have included those that have a direct and indirect impact on employees' behavior as well as the choices that they have made or their motivation level. However, not as much importance has been given to the life values, or the key values of different generations of Poles. It is essential to focus on the life values as they are the starting point or even the foundation of work values.

## 2. Characteristics of the generations

A number of different approaches have defined the term generation (Mannheim, 1972; Smith, and Clurman, 1998; Szukalski, 2012). Given the aim of the study, the Mannheim definition has been chosen as the most appropriate one with minor changes, as described below. According to this definition, a generation is a group of people of a similar age, who have common life experiences that have developed from the same events in the world and a similar culture, politics, economic or environmental conditions (Mannheim, 1972; Smith, and Clurman, 1998). From this point of view, age, which is directly related to the cultural and social experiences of individuals and their worldviews, a specific style of thinking and their values, is crucial in defining a generation (Jurkiewicz, & Brown, 1998). However, it should not be assumed, that the values that characterize a specific generation do not change over time. On the contrary, it should be assumed that the above definition of a generation is compatible

with theories of value evolution (Beck, and Cowan, 2005; Barrett, 2017), and the European Values Study conducted over the last 20 years that will confirm these theories empirically (EVS, 1981-2017). This study focuses on main generations in Poland that include: Generations Silent, Baby Boomers, X Generation, Millennials, sometimes considered separately, as generations Y and Z, and adults from iGen, youngest generation.

The Silent Generation was discussed for the first time in 1951 in a Time Magazine article (Time, 1951). The term was intended to refer to the defining features of this generation, that is, silence and caution (Strauss, & Howe, 1991). The Silent Generation includes people born between 1925 and 1944 and primarily come from the period of the Great Depression and World War II, when Poland, having just gained independence was suffering through political upheaval and social and national instability. Mass culture also became popularized at this time and universal access to education emerged. This period was marked by a period of insecurity where people felt unrepresented however, also hoped for a better future.

The period between 1945 and 1964 became known as the Baby Boomers generation, during the post-World War II baby boom. This period in Poland was also heavily influenced by the communist regime, who placed the whole country under repression. The people lacked basic freedoms and lived on rations without the basic food necessities. Against this backdrop was the muzzle of Radio *Wolna Europa*, where people longed to emigrate to the West for a better life. While in other parts of the world the Baby Boomers took advantage of the emerging opportunities, the people in Poland were forced to submit to the politics authorities and to adapt a difficult situation. The Baby Boomers were divided into a “we” and “they”. On one side were those with power and on the other side were those who were forced to blindly obey, left powerless and without opportunities. However, it was also at this time where women were first allowed to be educated and work in various occupations.

The next generation was generation born between 1965 and 1979 and grew up in Poland during an economic crisis. Due to the work of both parents and upbringing “with a key on their necks”, X generation are resourceful and independent people. They grew up during a period of economic transition and a shift of power in Poland and when many other countries around the world were also experiencing a change of power. However, in Poland, this was also a generation that were able to experience a number of new opportunities and freedoms. As a result they were open to new challenges and believed that they could achieve anything and seize new opportunities. Generation X has also experienced new technological advances during their lives and have been able to make the most of them. This generation is aware that they must work to overcome the lost time of previous generations in order to achieve the same advancements in science and technology as the West.

The continual expansion of technology and globalization has led to more rapid and distinct differences between the generations. Although historically, the period for a change in generation has been roughly 30 years, this number has decreased to 25 and then 20 years in more recent times. The Xenials, the generation born between 1975 and 1985, stand out in

particular. Whilst this generation had a similar childhood to the previous generation, their youth has been shaped by the digital era (Woodman, 2017), which has significantly influenced their hunger for technology. As a result this generation has become more open to globalization.

Similar differences can be seen in the next generation born between 1980 and 2000 who have become known as the Millennials. This generation is usually divided between generation Y (1980-1990) and generation Z which is intended to show that the intergenerational differences are occurring only 10 years apart. Generation Z, those born after 1990, has also become known as generation C as this generation has been characterized by specific behaviors such as *connect*, *communicate* and *change* that have eased processes of communication and led them to be more open for change.

The Millennials have grown up in an environment of accelerated economic development where surrounding countries have shown significant interest in pulling Poland out of the circle of influence of post-Soviet Russia. The Millennials have had access to everything from MacDonald to computers, from Mars bars to Coca-Cola and 3D cinema. They have grown up as children of resourceful entrepreneurs and government officials who have shifted their thinking to being “pro-consumer”. They are also the first generation where setting goals has become of prime importance. At the same time, their worldview has been shaped by unethical advertising, where the “I’m allowed everything” attitude that has emerged from the US where it is believed that if they work enough hard, they would be able to rise from poverty to become a millionaire.

Generation Y has grown up in constantly changing environment, that has embraced globalization, had increased access to the Internet and seen the increased digitalization of everyday life. They have also had unlimited possibilities of travel. The Millennials have seen significant shifts in authority and are now aware that authority and leadership should be related to their competence and skills, as opposed to their position. Their worldview has been shaped by hi-tech innovations, global social networks, growing social disparities associated with the emergence of social classes and a greater awareness of the opportunities available to them.

Generation Z (generation C), the second subgroup of the Millennials, only know the world with the Internet and social media, so fully explore the potential of technology. They are a generation that has been brought up, often from an early age, with unlimited access to network resources, computer programs that have allowed them to learn to read, write and play the keyboard. They have smartphone apps and fairy tales that are available 24 hours a day, on many different channels and in a number of different languages that often come to substitute real life. This is the first generation, whose worldview and values have been shaped by both local and global influences and where they are able to interact with people who are physically distant, such as celebrities or idols.

The iGen generation, also known as the “Me” generation is now entering adulthood. Although they are sometimes partly identified with generation Z, in principle this generation includes people born between 2001 and 2012. As only some of them are now adults, it is difficult to define what has specifically shaped this group and is an ongoing process. This could be reviewed in several years’ time.

### **3. Generational differences**

It is generally held that the values and beliefs of a particular generation differ and have a significant influence over the behavior of those within that generation. Intergenerational teams in organizations are particularly strong in their interaction with each other. For years researchers have explored whether these differences are a myth or a fact. To date, the largest long-term study has been the European Values Study which began in 1981. There have been nine waves of the study that have covered 16 to 47 European countries or regions (EVS, 1981-2017), the last of which took place in 2017. The European Values Study showed significant differences in the approach of denied generations to values correlated with different aspects of life. However, it does not ask about key values, nor about the place of ethics and individuals understanding of them.

### **4. Research hypotheses**

In order to investigate the differences between the key values of the Silent Generation, the Baby Boomers, the Millennials and the adult representatives of the iGen generation in Poland and to learn more about their approach to ethics, the following hypotheses will be tested:

H1: There are differences in the key life values within different generations in Poland.

H2: Ethics are seen as a set of orders and prohibitions to be respected.

### **5. Methodology**

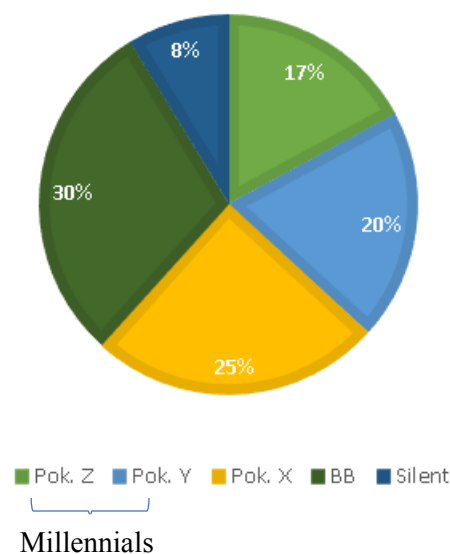
The population in Poland as of December 2019 was 38,382,576 with adult Poles with 31 million being adults (GUS, 2019). The Polish “here and now” have been shaped by all of the above-mentioned generations including the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, X generation, the Millennials (generation Y and generation Z) and adult representatives of the iGen.

**Table 1.**

*Generations in Poland, persons over 18 years of age, statistics from the Central Statistical Office (GUS, 2019)*

Generation		Quantitative
Z	} Millennials	5 375 012
Y		6 189 856
X		7 830 063
Baby Boomers		9 330 923
Silent		2 722 733

Detailed data on the size of individual generations of Poles can be found in Table 1, while the percentage of generations of the adult population is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Generations in Poland, statistics from the Central Statistical Office (GUS, 2019).

A survey was used to collect data, which made it possible to reach a larger sample of the population. A selected group of people were chosen to do the survey. The data was then analyzed using quantitative methods. The *Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI)* method was used in the study where respondents were required to answer the questionnaire on his/her computer or mobile device equipped with a web browser. While the CAWI method allows for the quick collection of data for analysis, there are some limitations. For example, people from generation X, Millennials and IGen were the most willing to participate in the survey and were therefore more represented than the Baby Boomers or Silent generations. Thus, the survey is not representative of the entire population and is only exploratory in its nature.

An online questionnaire was sent by e-mail to local information journals in Polish provinces requesting to make it available to readers on social media (Facebook, LinkedIn). The research was conducted between May and June of 2020.

## 5.1. Participants

There were 606 responses to the questionnaire, of which 9 persons (1.5%) were not of Polish nationality, so they were not included in the analyses. There were 434 women (71.6%), 166 men (27.4%) who took part in the survey, two people declared as “other” (0.3%) and four people chose not to answer (0.7%). The majority of the survey participants were Millennials – 309 individuals (51%). The next largest group of participants were generation X – 197 participants (32.5%), while of the Baby Boomers there were 85 participants (14%). The smallest groups of participants were adult representatives from the iGen generation 11 persons (1.8%) and there were 4 participants from the Silent Generation (0.7%) (Table 2).

**Table 2.**

*Demographic data of the survey*

<b>Gender = 597</b>	<b>number</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>F</b>	434	71.60%
<b>M</b>	166	27.40%
<b>Other</b>	2	0.3%
<b>Silent</b>	4	0.7%
<b>BB</b>	85	14%
<b>X</b>	197	32.50%
<b>Mil</b>	309	51%
<b>iGen</b>	11	1.8%

The participants were also asked about their place of residence. Among the respondents the largest group were 144 inhabitants of Małopolskie Province (23.8%); 137 persons from Silesian Province (22.6%); 72 participants from Mazowieckie (11.9%); 41 persons from Łódzkie (6.8%) and 33 persons from Pomorskie (5.5%). The smallest groups were represented by residents from Warmińsko-Mazurskie – 5 persons (0.8%), Podlaskie – 6 persons (1%), and Opolskie and Lubuskie – 7 persons each (1.2%). The vast majority of the survey participants lived in a city with a population greater than 500,000 (31,2 %), 24% participants lived in a city with a population between 100,000 to 500,000, 20% lived in the countryside and 14.9% lived in cities with a population between 20,000 to 100,000. The remaining participants – 8.8% lived in cities with a population less than 20,000.

Responders were also asked about their education. Out of the 462 participants surveyed, 462 (76.2%) had a higher education, 119 (19.6%) had completed secondary education, 19 (3.1%) had completed a vocational education and 5 people had completed basic education (0.8%).

## 5.2. Survey structure

The survey questionnaire was divided into four sections. In the first section, participants assessed their life satisfaction by answering “I think I am satisfied with my life” by answering 1 to 5 with 1 being “I do not agree at all” and 5 being “I agree completely”. The life satisfaction section contained two components, the affective aspect (how well a person usually feels) and

the cognitive aspect (what a person thinks about his/her life and how he/she consciously evaluates it). These two components can be used to measure two sides of happiness, or life satisfaction (Veenhoven, 1991). Their positive or negative evaluation influences the degree of credibility of the test results, since many researchers suggest that life satisfaction is correlated with values and vice versa (Furnham, 1991; Brandstätter, 1994).

In the second question the participants were asked to assess how important in her/his life the following were: family, work, hobbies, friends, internet presence, rest and entertainment, study/education, religion/faith, politics, money, environment and health. Each value was assigned a number from 1 to 5, with 1 being completely unimportant and 5 very important.

The questions in section two were as follows:

1. Which of the values are the most important to you?
2. Which of the values do you set as second most valuable?
3. If five people closest to you were asked what your life is all about, what would they say?

In all the questions the respondents could choose the same values as in the second question of the first section as well as choose to answer "other".

The third section was related to ethics and contained the questions, "What is ethics to you?" and the possible answers that are closest to the person in question: "an unnecessary set of orders and prohibitions", or "a set of orders and prohibitions that I try to follow", or "a value in itself that enables a consistent life", or "I don't think about it at all", and "other". The respondents were then asked to choose the answer closest to them, matching the statement that ethics is needed, from among the possibilities, in personal life, in professional life, in personal life and work life, there is no need at all or "other" answer. The last section of the survey contained a demographic label.

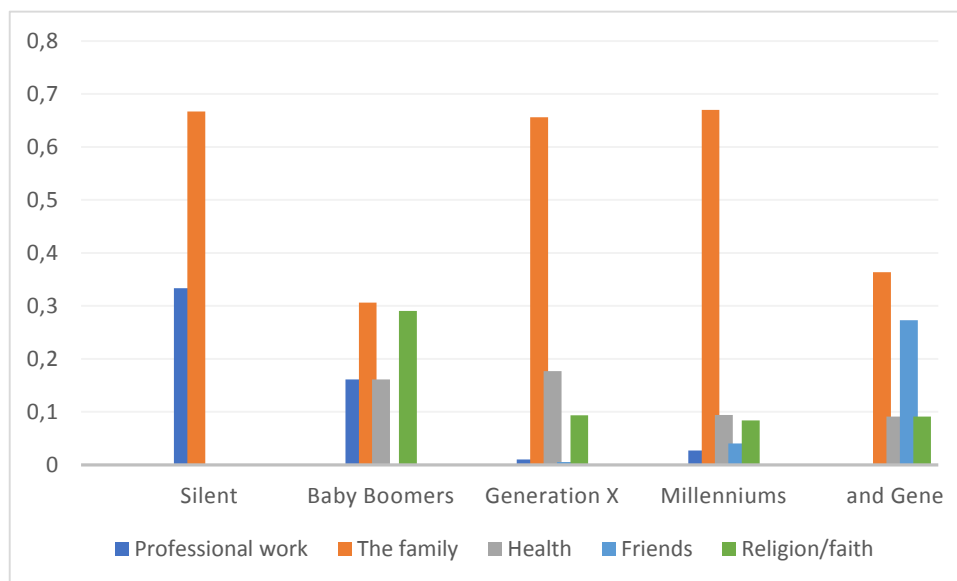
## 6. Results

The majority of the Poles surveyed answered that they were satisfied with their lives. Of the total participants, 75.4% chose the answer "I completely agree" and "I agree"; 18.5% had no opinion; 4.5% disagreed and 1.7% completely disagreed with the statement. The three generations, the Baby Boomers, Generation X and the Millennials scored close to 4. The least satisfied with life were the Silent Generation (3,25).

From the data collected in the second question of the survey, it appears that the most important value in all the examined generations was the family. Of the participants, 374 respondents (61.7%), consisting of 199 Millennials (67%); 126 persons from generation X (65.6%); 19 persons from Baby Boomers (30.6%); 4 persons from iGen (36.4%) and 2 persons from Silent generation (66.6%) chose this answer. From the Baby Boomers generation,



the family as a key value prevails over religion/faith only 1.6 p.p., while 27 % of individuals from iGen chose friends as the most important value. The discussed data can be found in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Key values of the generations under investigation.

The answers collected in section two confirmed the most important value declared by the respondents in the previous section. Answering the question “Which is the most important value for you?” as many as 61.7% (374 persons) of all the participants chose family, 12% chose health (73 persons); 9.1% religion/faith (55%) and 3.6% professional work (22 persons).

As the second value, which participants chose as being the most important in their life, 21.1% of respondents indicated professional work (128 persons); 20.3% for family (123 persons); 20.1% for health (122 persons); 10.6% for friends (61 persons) and 7.3% for religion/faith (44 persons).

In the third question, the participants were asked, “If five people closest to you were asked what your life is all about, what would they say?”. Although 41.4% (251 persons) of the participants chose family, as many as 16.3% (99 persons) chose professional work, 8.9% (54 persons) chose study/education and 6.3% (38 persons) chose religion/faith.

To the question, “What is ethics to you?” 73% of the participants replied that the value of a coherent life in itself (445 persons), 16.7% that a set of injunctions and prohibitions it tries to comply with (101 persons), 2% (12 persons) that an unnecessary set of injunctions and prohibitions, and 5.1% did not think about it at all (31 persons).

For the question, “Are ethics necessary?” 90.6% responded that they are needed in their personal and professional life (549 persons); 4.1% that they are only needed in their personal life (25 persons); 2% only in professional life (12 persons) and 2.8% that they are not needed at all (17 persons).

## 7. Discussion

The aim of the study was to answer the hypotheses. H1 was: There are differences in the key life values within different generations of Poles. It can be concluded from the data that amongst all the generations, the most important value was the family. It is worth noting that in the Baby Boomers generation the family as a value was almost equal to religion/faith and for iGen the family is equal in value to friends. Hypothesis 1 has not been confirmed.

However, the space for further deliberations opens up the question, which in the study was only checking, i.e. what is the key value realized in participants life seen by others. This question aimed to establish whether the values chosen by the participants were also realized in their lives. The answers from the participants indicated that they are not. In the first question, 61.4% of the participants declared that family was the most important value in their life, but only 41.6% put this into practice. In actual fact, family was not the most important value in their lives. Of the participants, 12% answered health as being the most important value in their life however, according to those closest to them only 3.7% practiced this in their lives.

One unexpected result was work being chosen as the main life value. In the first question, it was only chosen by 3.7% of the participants however, as many as 16.5% say that in the eyes of other people they realize this particular life value as the main one. There were similar responses with the value of science/education. In the first question, only 1.9% of the participants said that science/education were a key value in their lives, however as many as 8% of those closest to them indicated that this value would be important to them. The results can be seen in Table 3. In order to discuss the significance of these variations, more extensive data is required, opening a space for further research, as it touches on an important topic such as axiological or ethical cohesion of individuals.

**Table 3.**

*Differences in the responses and realization of the main value of Poles.*

Value	1 <sup>st</sup> question	2 <sup>nd</sup> question	Differences
Family	61.4%	41.6%	↓ by 19.8%.
Work	3.7%	16.5%	↑ by 12.8%.
Health	12%	3.7%	↓ by 8.3%.
Education	1.9%	8%	↑ by 6.1%.

The second hypothesis of the study, “Ethics are seen as a set of orders and prohibitions to be obeyed” has also not been confirmed. Nearly three quarters of the respondents said that they considered it to be a value that enables coherent life. It should be pointed out that more than three quarters of the participants have a higher education, which is not representative of the Polish population (PARP, 2013). This area also requires further research and analysis. Nevertheless, in the question on ethics, over 90% of the participants said that ethics is needed

in both their personal and professional life. This should be considered as a good indicator of ethical awareness in Polish society, even if the surveyed group is not representative of the entire population.

## 8. Summary

This study has shown that the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, X, Millennials and even the iGen have more in common with each other than has been acknowledged by society. One value that was consistently chosen among the generations was the family. This finding should be taken into account in any further research on the differences among generations in relation to work values. There may be many reasons why people choose their work and the values related to these choices. However, as demonstrated in this study, personal values often influence work values. As it has been demonstrated, work values influence motivation and personal values which can also influence the choice of work values, the degree to which they are achieved and other factors related to life choices. Work values should therefore not be analyzed in isolation from personal values of both individuals and generations. In relation to personal values, the differences between generations may not be so significant and behind these differences there may be a value that is common to all.

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