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Experiences and Meanings of the Existence of a Generation of Women

Eduardo Duque [1,2,*] and José F. Durán Vázquez [3]

[1] Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 1649-023 Lisboa, Portugal
[2] Communication and Society Research Centre, University of Minho, 4710-057 Braga, Portugal
[3] Faculty of Legal & Labour Sciences, Universidad de Vigo, 36310 Vigo, Pontevedra, Spain; joseduran@uvigo.es
* Correspondence: eduardoduque@ucp.pt

Abstract: This study examines a generation of women born in the 1940s–1950s in the Braga region, northern Portugal. It analyzes their relationships with *family*, *school*, *work*, *leisure and consumption*, and *religion*. The sample considers generation, gender, and social class, focusing on low, medium-low, and medium classes, which predominate in Portuguese society. A qualitative methodology was employed, using Focus Groups and Open Interviews to understand how subjects interpret their life experiences in the analyzed areas and how these experiences' meanings transform across generations. The initial hypothesis, supported by previous and current research, is that people of the same generation share certain bonds, manifesting in a particular way of being and understanding the world. This distinguishes them from other generations, creating complex intergenerational relationships. These relationships are sometimes oppositional, while other times they result in breaks or separations, and most of the time they transform the experiences and the meaning of the existence of the subjects involved. This reality is what we propose to describe and analyze in the present text, taking as reference the generations of women mentioned above.

Keywords: education; generation; women's experiences; values; life worlds; Portugal

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1. Introduction

The objective of this text is to show the results of research carried out in the Portuguese region of Braga, in the north of Portugal, on a generation of women born in the 1940s–1950s. We have focused our study on the relationship that people of this generation have established with the worlds of *family*, *school*, *work*, *leisure and consumption*, and *religion*.

It is important to clarify why this study focuses exclusively on the women of this generation. Unlike neighboring contexts, in Portugal, the absence of men due to the colonial wars and migratory movements resulted in a unique position for women, who had to reconcile the traditional role of caregivers and educators of their children with the need to engage in paid activities. Moreover, it was often women who assumed the primary role in religious socialization. These historical and cultural specificities set them apart from the men of the same generation, thus justifying the exclusive focus on women, in order to gain a deeper understanding of how gender, religion, work, and family intersected during this period.

Although the analysis could also have included men from this generation, the distinct social and historical context of the women—who simultaneously managed the household, educated their children, and worked for pay under adverse conditions—conferred upon them a singular experience. This specificity, not fully comparable to that of men, guided the methodological choice to center the study on women.

Therefore, one of the key concepts that this research articulates is that of generation. It is a problematic concept, since, although it aroused deep interest in the field of sociology and philosophy approximately a century ago, as will be seen below, it remained almost forgotten for quite a long time. However, about three decades ago, it once again captured the attention of social analysts, although in a very different context.

In what follows, we will first refer, in a synthetic way, to the first analyses carried out almost a century ago on the topic of generations. Later, we will show the reasons for its abandonment. We will conclude this introduction by referring to the recovery of this concept in recent decades.

The issue of generations was addressed, as is known, in the 1920s, acutely and profoundly by the German philosopher and sociologist Karl Mannheim [1] and by the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset [2]. Both thinkers considered that generation was much more than a chronological coincidence, or, in other words, that this coincidence was not a sufficient reason for common bonds to be created between people who had been born in a certain place and at a certain time [3].

From the perspective of vitalist philosophy, Ortega y Gasset understood that the main problem that had to be solved when facing the analysis of generations was how people who were born at the same time could also have similar convictions and participate in a certain common spirit [2]. From the point of view of Karl Mannheim, who openly criticized both the objectivist and materialist postulates of positivism, as well as the more spiritualist and subjectivist postulates of romanticism [4], it was about knowing how, by having a certain position in the world, people could face the world, their world, with similar attitudes [5,6].

However, facing the problem of not only investigating how certain common bonds were created between people of the same generation based on the mere objective fact of birth, but also analyzing how people belonging to different generations were related, involved addressing the issue of social change and temporality. For Ortega y Gasset, "The world changes with each generation because the previous one has done something in the world, it has left it more or less different from how they found it" [2] (Lección IV). According to Mannheim, "the emergence of new men certainly causes the loss of constantly accumulated goods; but (...) it teaches us to forget what is no longer useful, to aim for what has not yet been conquered" [1] (p. 213). Therefore, studying generations implies delving into the complex question of how human beings relate to the past, present, and future, based on their own life experiences, what they have received from previous generations, and what they intend to pass on to the next.

Therefore, those who want to enter into this complex world will have to try to answer the important question of how it is that people who were born in the same place and at the same time end up having more or less similar experiences and orientations that create a particular identity that links them, and how the relationships they establish with other generations influence all this, and also how through this process, both individuals and communities are renewed and changed.

Several of these questions were already raised early on by the first analysts of generations, as already mentioned, although they have since been long forgotten. In the last decade and a half, a certain interest in the topic of generations has been reawakened [7]. Below, we will show both the reasons for the resurgence of this interest and those that explain its insignificance for so long.

Starting with the latter, the reasons that would explain the little interest that generational studies have aroused for so many years may have to do with the social and cultural scene that opened up in Europe and North America after World War II. The atmosphere of reconstruction and renewal after this conflict, with youth as its protagonist and the consequent desire to break with the past, led to focusing the attention on youth. In this

context, youth showed the most jovial and happy face, which announced the liberation of the previous society, more authoritarian and sacrificial, and the desire to build a more egalitarian, freer, and also more hedonistic than sacrificial world. Childhood and youth appeared in this context as the hope of the free world. It could be said that the postwar generations, and particularly the *Baby-Boomers*, appeared under the sign of a new era that obscured the previous one [8]. What would come later would be a stage in this process of overcoming the past, presented under the sign of progress. All this meant that relationships with previous generations, linked to a past that was intended to be overcome, took a backseat, so much so that this situation was defined as that of "a generation without inheritance" [9] (p. 126). Perhaps one of the best descriptions of all was the profound reflection made by the North American anthropologist Margaret Mead, just when the 1970s began and this phenomenon was already evident:

"Within two decades, 1940–1960," she wrote, "events occurred that have irrevocably altered men's relationships to other men and to the natural world (...). From the point of view of all of us who were born and educated before the 1940s, we are immigrants ... And like the pioneering immigrants from colonizing countries, we do not cling to the conviction that, in the end, our children will end up being very similar to us. But this hope is balanced by the fear inspired by the fact that young people are becoming unknown before our eyes" [10] (pp. 92–93).

There is no better description of the generational rupture, a rupture that is not represented by the conflict between one generation and another, which would still refer to a certain link between them, but by mere ignorance.

Now, this rupture was not posed as a problem in the intellectual environment of the 1960s and early 1970s, as Margaret Mead [10] or Gérard Mendel [9] had seen it. The problem was, on the contrary, how to free oneself from the iron institutional yoke that previous generations had built in their desire to dominate and reproduce the inherited social order [11,12]. We cannot be surprised, therefore, that in this scenario the topic of generations and generational relations did not arouse much interest, when the interest was in analyzing the mechanisms of domination, reproduction, and inequality.

In southern European countries such as Portugal and Spain, which also received this sociological tradition [13–16], but due to their particular political circumstances were further removed from the social and cultural environment of the 1960s and early 1970s, the transition processes from dictatorship to democracy that occurred in the mid-1970s also favored social studies focused on analyzing the new society that emerged from these processes, with youth as the protagonist [17,18]. This society represented modernity linked to democracy, freedom, and equality, compared to the dictatorship and authoritarianism of the previous stage.

After this long period of abandonment of generational studies, since the 1980s, it seems that a certain interest in this issue has recovered [7,19–22]. If based on this, it is understood that the word generation is increasingly used to draw attention to the emergence of new generations of young people. Now, this novelty is understood in relation to a series of unprecedented events in which the new youth have participated. This is how the names of *Generation X*, *Y*, or *Z* arose, and some others [23–30]. After the 2008 crisis, the movements of outraged youth that emerged in various parts of the world were described as the hope of generations [30,31]. Some authors have even used the concept of global generation, in reference to the young people affected by the Great Depression [32].

However, what is not clear in several of these studies is what the first scholars of the phenomenon of generations warned [1]—how from the mere generational position, that is, from the fact of being born in a time and place, and under certain circumstances, common experiences can arise that make the establishment of certain generational ties possible. Nor

are the relationships established by these generations of young people with previous ones clarified, focusing attention mainly on the supposed novelty that each new generation of young people represents.

We will return to these questions in the presentation and discussion of the results of our research. Next, we will describe the methodology that we have used to carry it out.

2. Methods

For this research on the generation of women born in the 1940s and 1950s in the Braga region of Portugal, we employed a qualitative methodology that integrated two main techniques: Life Stories (LS) and Focus Groups (FG). These were adopted in a complementary manner to enable a deep understanding of the socio-historical context and the lived experiences. We considered this generation in light of its socio-historical framework, corresponding to the period after World War II, which was characterized by a traditional, impoverished society with virtually no middle class, and governed by a dictatorial regime. However, while this context shaped their lives, it did not by itself produce a cohesive consciousness that unified the women of this generation. That collective consciousness, more or less latent, resulted not only from the political and economic context, but also from shared experiences, transmitted by previous generations and crystallized in certain life situations. This is what we seek to highlight throughout the text, by describing and analyzing the trajectories of women born between 1940 and 1950, focusing on areas such as family, education, work, religion, leisure, and consumption.

The sample was structured according to gender and social class. In this study, we operationalized social class based on education level and type of occupation, thereby establishing categories such as lower, lower-middle, and middle class, which reflect both origin and destination. By adopting this approach, we aimed to show how socioeconomic status and gender influence life trajectories and the construction of values. In the case of these women, social position shaped their access to education, their employment opportunities, and their perspective on family, religious, and professional obligations. Thus, the intersection of gender and social class produces specific patterns of experience and meaning, allowing us to understand both the diversity and the commonalities among participants.

For example, women with a university education working in teaching often come from families of small agricultural landowners with ambitions for upward mobility, while women with incomplete primary schooling who entered factory work at an early age generally belonged to more disadvantaged social strata. Such examples illustrate how social origin not only molds educational and professional paths, but also shapes expectations, values, and everyday life experiences.

Data collection took place between October 2021 and March 2022. One Focus Group (FG) was conducted with five women of lower and lower-middle social origins, transitioning toward lower-middle and middle status, and four Life Stories (LS) were carried out, three with women of lower origin transitioning to lower-middle, and one with a woman of lower-middle origin transitioning to middle class. The choice of a qualitative approach stems from the need to capture situated experiences—something achievable only when participants are placed in micro-situations that evoke the meaning of their lived experiences, linking them to their respective social contexts.

The FG recreates interactive micro-situations, in which participants spontaneously share memories and interpretations [33]. This collective dynamic makes it possible to identify common cores of meaning as well as significant divergences, thereby extracting a shared symbolic universe that, while not statistically generalizable, can be qualitatively analogous to other women in similar social conditions. Thus, the FG complements the LS

by capturing not only individual narratives, but also dialogs, consensuses, and tensions emerging from the confrontation of experiences.

The qualitative representativeness achieved is based on identifying recurring patterns of values and experiences rather than on the numerical extent of the sample. Thus, we do not seek to encompass all of Portugal or other generations, but to understand a specific social segment: women born between 1940 and 1950 in a rural context in the Braga region, coming from classes ranging from lower to middle. We therefore acknowledge the situated character of the results, which illuminate significant patterns within this population segment without any claim to total comprehensiveness. (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Social Mobility of Rural Women from Braga (1940–1950).

Life Stories Women Generation 1940–1950		
SUBJECTS	CLASS OF ORIGIN	CLASS OF DESTINATION
3 Women	lower	lower-middle
1 Woman	lower-middle	middle

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Table 2. Class Mobility in Women's Life Stories (1940–1950).

Focus Group Women Generation 1940–1950		
SUBJECTS	CLASS OF ORIGIN	CLASS OF DESTINATION
5 Women	lower and lower-middle	lower-middle and middle

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Life Stories are essential because, by narrating their trajectories, women reconstruct their own identities, linking past and present [34]. LS deepen our understanding of how religious values evolve, as well as the role of work and family, showing how the meaning of existence changes over time and under varying circumstances. In conjunction with the FG, the LS enrich the analysis, enabling us to understand the emergence of collective discourses and the complexity of individual experiences.

The following section describes the results achieved.

3. Results

In what follows, we will describe the experiences, attitudes, and values of the people we have interviewed belonging to the 1940–1950 generation, born in the Portuguese region of Braga, in relation to the areas of family, school, religion, consumption, and leisure.

It is crucial to note that these participants were born and raised in rural communities marked by a traditional agricultural economy, severe material hardships, and a strong religious presence in daily life. This context decisively influenced the values and practices that would shape their lives.

Subsequently, we will submit these results to discussion in relation to the theoretical and analytical framework that we have used.

People belonging to this generation were born in a country like Portugal, which at that time was suffering the serious consequences of the Second World War. They grew up, therefore, in a social context of difficulties and material scarcity, in rural parish communities. They generally had a short period of childhood and youth, as they entered the spheres and activities of the adult world at an early age. In the case of women, the central subjects of this study, this incorporation was primarily in the domestic and agricultural spheres, in which they helped their mothers above all. Later, some of them entered the sphere of

salaried work. This integration occurred earlier in Portugal than in neighboring countries, due to the participation of men in emigration or colonial wars [35].

The majority of members of the 1940–1950 generation, close to 70%, did not even complete primary school [35]. In fact, compulsory schooling, only up to the fourth grade (the first stage of primary school), was not established in Portugal until 1956 in the case of boys, and in the case of girls until 1960, during the Salazar dictatorship [36,37].

In their second youth, the members of this generation later experienced processes of structural social mobility as a result of the country's modernization, especially from the 1970s onwards [35,38,39]. In this period of their lives, they were especially influenced by the events of the Carnation Revolution of 1974, which marked the end of the dictatorship and the beginning of democracy. They faced this situation, which represented an enormous political, social, and cultural change, based on their own experiences and the heritage transmitted by the previous generation, both of which produced a series of changes in the field of their experiences, attitudes, and values, as will be seen later. In what follows, we will describe how all this happened.

We will begin by showing the values received by the members of this generation. These values, as has been said, should not be understood as internalized beliefs through which individuals face their different life situations, but rather in close relationship with the actions they undertake in said situations, actions that are continually reinterpreted in relation to those values, just as these are also reconfigured in the course of said actions in certain social contexts [40] (p. 214 ff); [41] (pp. 430–431).

What are these values, then? The most important ones, because they articulate the different life situations in the sense indicated above, have a religious meaning. They are those related to *honesty and trustworthiness*, *respect*, *solidarity*, and *justice*.

It is worth emphasizing that while such values are assimilated in an environment permeated by religion, they are not strictly religious. Honesty, solidarity, and justice can also acquire non-religious meanings, supporting the social fabric and relationships of mutual trust, especially in the workplace and community life.

All of them are also linked, with this religious meaning, to the world of *work*. "The values that I have transmitted to my children, associated with religious practice, are there; the values of honesty, respect, that no one is more than anyone else, although recognizing one's merit", says one of the women interviewed (LS: *woman*, *retired primary school teacher*, *two children. Social origin*, *modest agricultural landowners. Class of origin and destination, lower-middle and middle*).

These values have been received by these people in their different life situations, through imitation and storytelling. This type of learning has been common in many societies throughout history [42] (p. 346 ff). In the case of the people of the generation in question, it is linked to the traditional family and the parish community, and generally, it has not been transmitted through an argued and reasoned discourse, but rather in the manner mentioned above, that is, through imitation and narration in certain life situations.

This is how members of this generation have faced and interpreted these situations. Through their experiences, they have, in effect, revitalized the values received, to the same extent that these experiences have taken on a new meaning in relation to the values reconfigured. In this sense, we can say that almost nothing of what is transmitted remains intact or is completely forgotten. And precisely for this reason, individuals can recreate their lives in certain situations, giving them a new meaning. This meaning emerges from the inheritance received, but also, in one way or another, breaks with it, since each generation has to face situations that are never entirely the same as those of those who preceded them.

Let us see how all this has happened in the case of the generation of women that are the subject of our research, those born in the 1940s–1950s.

As stated before, most of the values mentioned have a religious meaning, but this meaning has been acquired through the experiences that these women have had in their different situational contexts, through interaction with other people. "My mother was very religious, she went to mass on Sundays, and she did not allow us not to go with her.", comments one of these women (LS: *woman with two children. Primary education, retired driving school typist secretary. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*). And another says, "in religious terms, we fulfilled what all people fulfilled, there was nothing like that that the family transmitted to us (...). We went to mass, we made our first communion, our profession of faith, our confirmation, everything within the rules" (LS: *woman two sons. Completed primary studies. Retired school janitor. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*). Religion, as a set of beliefs and practices, internalized by individuals through their experiences in different life situations, thus becomes a taken-for-granted reality [43].

But precisely this reality is what later, although it is not openly questioned by the children of the women interviewed, is no longer accepted as something unquestionable that must be fulfilled. In fact, while these women have internalized the religious beliefs and practices instilled by their parents, particularly their mothers, through experiences linked to life situations that did not essentially differ from those of their parents, their children, despite being raised in families in which religious beliefs and practices were still very present, have lived other experiences, given the situation after 25 April 1974, the date of the Carnation Revolution. Therefore, they have faced the practices and beliefs received in another way, which has not led them to deny them, but rather to reinterpret them in a more open way, and not taken for granted. In this way, they gradually abandon the practice; the belief becomes more flexible and laxer, because their life is full of other tasks that have even more meaning for them. "They say that they go to mass on Sundays"—comments one of our informants—"but they also say that they have things to do, and that is why they do not always go to mass every Sunday" (LS: *woman with two children. Primary education, retired driving school typist secretary. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*). Another tells us, "it hurts me that my children do not follow the religious values that I have transmitted to them. They went to catechism, they had their first communion and confirmation, but later they began to make excuses, even though I tried to get them to maintain their religious practice". (LS: *woman, retired primary school teacher, two children. Social origin, modest agricultural landowners. Class of origin and destination, lower-middle and middle*).

When children abandon religion, it does not mean that they reject it outright, but rather that they perceive it more openly and flexibly, by virtue of other life experiences linked to a more plural and open society, such as those taking place after 25 April 1974. This is what give special meaning to the values that articulate the life experiences of the women of this generation, in the same way that these values are revitalized through said experiences.

By using the plural, we describe common tendencies, not unanimity. Although most participants share similar experiences, there are individual variations. The plural indicates recurring patterns, while still acknowledging the diversity of personal trajectories.

The experiences recorded revolve around the values of *honesty* and *trustworthiness*, *respect*, *solidarity*, and *justice*. All of these values are linked to mandatory duties, which grant a certain recognition, directing people's lives toward certain goals. This is how their life trajectories can be narrated with a certain coherence. One is, and has become what one is, through a series of experiences, which make sense when they are narrated in light of the duties one has been fulfilling, and which are expressed in certain achievements [44] (p. 64); duties that in turn are embodied in these experiences. "This is what I have"—says one of the women interviewed—"I am proud of having been hard-working, serious, honest

and helping others" (LS: *woman with six children. Unfinished primary studies. Suitcase factory employee. Widow. Class of origin and destination, low*).

Having fulfilled these duties has also meant making a series of sacrifices and efforts that give special meaning to the different biographical trajectories. "It is difficult for me to live thinking only of myself, when all my life I have lived thinking of others", says one of the people interviewed (LS: *woman with two children, retired primary school teacher, social origin, modest agricultural landowners. Class of origin and destination, lower-middle and middle*). Another says, "I felt like I had to sacrifice myself to study for my children; I felt like I had to make some efforts" (LS: *woman with two children. Primary education, retired driving school typist secretary. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*). These sacrifices also have a religious meaning. On the one hand, sacrifice shows the will of God, which gives meaning and strength to continue in life, despite the obstacles that one may encounter. "I don't know how I had the strength to continue all that. But with God everything is done", says one of the women interviewed (LS: *woman with six children. Unfinished primary studies. Suitcase factory employee. Widow. Class of origin and destination, low*). And another tells us, "God is with us through the people who come across us. . .I remember that they always told me (in the *Catholic Action* meetings that this person attended), God is with us, no matter how hard it is for us to accept it, and I said, if He is with us, why did my husband die so young, at 33 years old, and I was left a widow with 2 children. . . Why did this happen, and they told me, God tests us all the time, sometimes even through the most terrible things that happen to us" (LS: *woman with two sons. Completed primary studies. Retired school janitor. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*).

In short, one believes that one must sacrifice oneself, and in the sacrificial act itself, one finds new reasons to continue sacrificing oneself, that is, to consecrate one's life to that act. Now, these reasons cannot be interpreted as mere justifications, since those who sacrifice themselves offer themselves to others, and in this way their life takes on a particular meaning [45].

Religious beliefs thus act by articulating and alleviating the tensions that occur in everyday life, between what one expects and what one finally finds [41] (pp. 416–417). In this way, they position the transcendent world in relation to the immanent world, making the religious ideal order and grant confidence and meaning to face everything that happens in daily life, always threatened by chance and disorder. Religion thus allows one to reflectively address what happens to them in their different life situations. And to do this, it does not simply act by justifying what happens in the order of the immanent from the categories of the transcendent, but rather it confronts that order in a problematic way, never completely resolved, trying to find an explanation for mundane experiences in permanent dialog with the order of the extra mundane. This is how the people we have interviewed look at the mystery of life, trying to find a meaning that encourages them to continue living without giving up along the way [43] (p. 114 ff).

Now, precisely because the subjects of this study were women in a patriarchal society, in which they were assigned the role of caregivers and managers of the home even though they were working, these sacrifices found particular meaning in the performance of this role. "I left work at 7 in the afternoon" says one of our informants "then I still had to make food, and I hardly had time" (LS: *woman with two children. Primary education, retired driving school typist secretary. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*). "I left my house"—says another—"I left the food ready at night. At noon I went home to feed my children, and returned on the bus to work, I took the key to the factory's general warehouse to open the warehouse again" (LS: *woman with six children. Unfinished primary studies. Suitcase factory employee. Widow. Class of origin and destination, low*).

In this way, fulfilling a series of sacrificial duties, which were the expression of a set of shared values, was how these people shaped their experiences in their different life situations. And that was also how they could aspire to be recognized. Recognition is, therefore, the Grace expected in exchange for the fulfillment of these sacrificial duties: "I always thought, and I told my children this way"—comments our informant —"that it should not be them who praised themselves (in reference to their children), but rather the others; I don't like proud people" (LS: *woman with two children*, *retired primary school teacher*, *social origin*, *modest agricultural landowners. Class of origin and destination*, *lower-middle and middle*). For those who are proud put themselves above others, not feeling obligated or indebted to anyone, which is unacceptable behavior when everyone is called to fulfil their obligations. "We are all equal when we fulfil our duties and obligations", says one of the women interviewed (FG: *wife*, *two children*, *retired school janitor*, *primary education. Class of origin and destination*, *low and lower-middle*). However, this equality has nothing to do with a supposed natural equality, but with the fact that when we fulfill our duties in our different life situations, we can feel just as worthy as others: "Among the values that I have transmitted to my children"—comments another woman—"is that no one is more than anyone else, although recognizing one's merit" (LS: *woman with two children*, *retired primary school teacher*, *social origin*, *modest agricultural landowners. Class of origin and destination*, *lower-middle and middle*).

This is how one can feel proud of their performance. "My father told me"—says one of the women with whom we spoke—"that when the boss passed by, I should not lower my head, but rather raise it to show that I was doing my duty. That was a value that I always maintained, and that made me go through life with my head held high knowing that I had fulfilled my responsibility" (FG: *woman*, *two children*, *retired school janitor*, *with primary education. Class of origin and destination*, *low and lower-middle*).

Through this mutual recognition related to the fulfillment of a series of sacrificial duties, which were the expression of shared values, is how these people feel linked to the same world, all of which can be observed in their different life situations related to the areas we have investigated.

Firstly, in the family, in which these people have been socialized during their childhood and early youth. There, they have received the religious beliefs associated with the practices, which, as stated before, give meaning to the main values that articulate the experiences of these people. "My mother was very religious", says one of them, "she went to mass on Sundays and made sure we went with her" (LS: *woman with two children. Primary education*, *retired driving school typist secretary. Class of origin and destination*, *low and lower-middle*). The religious beliefs associated with the practices, which give meaning to the main values that articulate the lives of these people, are those that they have tried to transmit to their children, although the latter, as has already been said, have gradually abandoned them in relation to other experiences, in the context of a more secularized, democratic society. "The values that I have transmitted to my children, associated with religious practice, are there"—says one of the people interviewed—"the values of honesty, respect, that no one is more than anyone else, although recognizing one's own merit" (LS: *woman*, *retired primary school teacher*, *two children. Social origin, modest agricultural landowners. Class of origin and destination*, *lower-middle and middle*).

Religious beliefs and practices are also linked to the parish community environment, through participation in mass and other celebrations with more or less religious contents. As seen before, this participation was instilled and encouraged in the family, especially by mothers, but also because of the numerous parish celebrations, which mixed the religious and the festive. One of the people interviewed remembers how in her youth she went to certain festivals organized by the parish, at which many young people gathered and had a

lot of fun (LS: *woman with two sons. Completed primary studies. Retired school janitor. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*).

Along with the family and the parish, another area of religious socialization was school, particularly when it came to schools belonging to religious orders. "Every day in the morning we prayed first thing in the refectory", says one of our informants (LS: *woman, retired primary school teacher, two children. Social origin, modest agricultural landowners. Class of origin and destination, lower-middle and middle*).

This religious socialization was sometimes completed with integration into religious associations such as *Catholic Action*. "Later, in pre-adolescence"—says one of the women interviewed—"I got to know Catholic Action" (LS: *woman with two sons. Completed primary studies. Retired school janitor. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*).

In the family and religious spheres, the values linked to the world of work were also transmitted. These values are associated with the need to help the family from early on, and later with the obligation to *work*. "Since I was a child, I used to help my parents with work in the fields", says one of these women (LS: *woman, retired primary school teacher, two children. Social origin, modest agricultural landowners. Class of origin and destination, lower-middle and middle*). And another comments, "my mother told me that then I had to go to work" (LS: *woman with two children. Primary education, retired driving school typist secretary. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*). "My family"—says another of these women—"wanted me to start working as soon as possible" (LS: *woman with two sons. Completed primary studies. Retired school janitor. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*).

Now, the value of work is not linked merely to the need to help the family and then get to work. Although work is an unquestionable obligation that cannot be renounced, this obligation also entails certain virtues related to the fulfillment of a series of duties related to the values of honesty, trustworthiness, responsibility, and also solidarity and justice. "My father told me"—comments one of our informants—"that when the boss passed by, I should not lower my head, but rather raise it to show that I was doing my duty. This was a value that I always maintained in my life, and that made me go through life with my head held high knowing that I had fulfilled my responsibility" (FG: *woman with two sons. Completed primary studies. Retired school janitor. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*). "My father told me"—says another woman—"that any job was worthy if it was performed honestly" (FG: *woman, retired primary school teacher, two children. Social origin, modest agricultural landowners. Class of origin and destination, lower-middle and middle*). And another comments, "a person at work has to be hardworking, serious and honest, they have to work and help others. . . That was what my parents taught me" (LS: *woman with six children. Unfinished primary studies. Suitcase factory employee. Widow. Class of origin and destination, low*).

The meaning of work is also associated with certain expectations of social mobility, particularly in the case of those people belonging to slightly more affluent families. "I told myself"—comments one of these women—"I have to be better than my parents. And although my parents were not in need, because they had properties to cultivate, I wanted a better life, and for my children too" (LS: *woman, retired primary school teacher, two children. Social origin, modest agricultural landowners. Class of origin and destination, lower-middle and middle*).

The obligation and duty to work were also interpreted in a religious sense, "it was that culture"—says one of the people interviewed—"that in this world we have to work, that whoever does not work does not eat" (LS: *woman with two sons. Completed primary studies. Retired school janitor. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*). Therefore, this obligation obeyed the Christian duty of preservation of life [46] (p. 170), but also the idea that through work, a service is provided to society. This sense of work was acquired

by some of the women interviewed in religious organizations such as Catholic Action. "In Catholic Action"—says one of them—"I learned that our work has to be seen as a help for social development. All jobs have to be seen from this point of view" (LS: *woman with two sons. Completed primary studies. Retired school janitor. Class of origin and destination*, *low and lower-middle*).

Another of the values internalized by the people interviewed in their families of more or less humble origins are those of *savings*. Like work, saving is a necessity that ends up becoming a virtue. Indeed, in the situation of a lack, sometimes extreme, in which these people lived during their childhood and early youth, the need to save for what may happen was imposed. One of our informants relates that their mother "instilled this in them, not to spend money randomly, first think about what you need (. . .)". "Be careful", she told them, "we don't know what tomorrow will bring us, spend wisely. Even after I was married" she continues, "my mother told me to see what I needed. Spend what you have first, break what you have first and then you buy" (LS: *woman with two children. Primary education*, *retired driving school typist secretary. Class of origin and destination*, *low and lower-middle*). This behavior and attitude end up becoming a norm in life, a norm that also has a religious foundation: "later in *Catholic Action* we also discovered that we do not need to have more than we spend" (LS: *woman with two sons. Completed primary studies. Retired school janitor. Class of origin and destination*, *low and lower-middle*).

However, later, when this situation of lack disappears, although the value of savings linked to those first life experiences is still present, it does so in a different way, since subsequent experiences, linked to a more comfortable situation, lead the subjects to reinterpret said value, by virtue of which new experiences are formed. "I like to go shopping at the mall"—says one of our informants—"but only to buy what I need, not to show off or flaunt" (LS: *woman with two children*, *retired primary school teacher*, *social origin*, *modest agricultural landowners. Class of origin and destination*, *lower-middle and middle*). As can be seen, the purchasing experience is observed in accordance with a certain value of savings linked to the experiences of childhood and youth in a time of hardship and scarcity. Now, this value has been reinterpreted in a situation of greater abundance, in the context of consumer society. "We always have to buy things", says another of the women interviewed. "Now, you buy more or less what is necessary. I am not one of those people who buys just to buy... It is necessary to see if we have 3 or 4 pairs of shoes, think carefully if it is necessary to buy the fifth pair. It's like buying a blouse, it's fashionable, it's pretty, but you also have to see if it's out of vanity to buy more. It is necessary to contain expenses" (LS: *woman with two children. Primary education*, *retired driving school typist secretary. Class of origin and destination*, *low and lower-middle*).

Now, this value of savings, thus reconfigured, clashes to a certain extent with the way of thinking of the children of these women, who were born and raised in a much more prosperous society in which consumer culture was very present. "My children grew up with much more ease and well-being than I had", says one of them. "I always told them what could and could not be. I didn't like the way they dressed, I told them they looked like scarecrows" (LS: *woman with two children*, *retired primary school teacher*, *social origin*, *modest agricultural landowners. Class of origin and destination*, *lower-middle and middle*).

The values mentioned so far are those that have mainly articulated and guided the lives of the people we have interviewed in the sense indicated above, values that they have internalized through their family and community experiences, impregnated with a religious sense, and that they have then reinterpreted in relation to their subsequent experiences. Compared to these values linked to experiences, those related to the *school* world have secondary importance, mainly for people of this generation, who are the majority, who left the school institution before completing primary education [35]. The

class trajectories of these people were fundamentally oriented toward work, an area in which they hoped to build their lives in relation to the aforementioned values. "My parents did everything possible for me to study"—says one of the women interviewed—"only there was no obligation to study, and I didn't study... My sister was even worse than me, because I studied until the 4th grade (primary school consisted of 6 courses), but she didn't even want to go to the entrance exam, and then she started working as a dressmaker" (LS: *woman with two children. Primary education, retired driving school typist secretary. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*). "My family"—says another—"also wanted me to start working as soon as possible, and I also had that in mind" (LS: *woman with two sons. Completed primary studies. Retired school janitor. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*). Only those people who continued their studies, which as we have said in the case of this generation were a minority, especially women [35], interpreted their school experience in relation to meritocratic values. "I told myself", says one of these people, "I have to be better than my parents" (LS: *woman with two children, retired primary school teacher, social origin, modest agricultural landowners. Class of origin and destination, lower-middle and middle*).

In short, as has been observed, the people of this generation have experienced their lives in the midst of more or less difficult situations, in relation to a series of values, such as honesty and trustworthiness, respect, solidarity, and justice, which were expressed in different sacrificial duties, through which they sought to be recognized as worthy and respectable.

In this context, there was little room for *leisure* and fun. However, the moments in which one could let go of the obligations linked to the indicated duties are remembered, especially in the stage of childhood and early youth, as a time of joyful liberation. "I remember"—says one of our informants—"freedom. With freedom we were like birds, we ran through the fields, we jumped... That was a joy, we ran out there, especially with freedom (...). We were happy in a way, even though we were missing everything" (LS: *Retired school janitor. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*). As community life was full of religious events attended by the youth of the town, these events served as an occasion to promote all kinds of entertainment. "In my youth—says the person in the previous quote—a group of young people got together on Sundays, and we went to pray the Rosary at church. And at the end, we all gathered in the atrium of the Church, and we had a party there. We sang, we jumped, we danced" (LS: *woman with two sons. Completed primary studies. Retired school janitor. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*). As can be seen through this testimony, religion is associated not only with sacrificial duties, but also with liberating joys, acquiring a particular meaning in relation to both dimensions of existence. Later, when this same woman had already started working, she tells us how her job still allowed her those moments of liberation from time to time: "Then I started working, and on weekends when I didn't work, we would meet, it was a joy. We met after work, I left at two in the afternoon. I had a group of friends who had the afternoons free and there we would all go to the fair, and then to the river to swim" (LS: *woman with two sons. Completed primary studies. Retired school janitor. Class of origin and destination, low and lower-middle*).

Life is thus remembered through the contrast between these two spheres, through which it acquires a special meaning [47]. In contrast to sacrificial obligations, which are the expression of different values that make sense in relation to life experiences linked to certain more or less hierarchical and disciplinary social structures, there are other more liberating experiences, linked to more egalitarian and communal social relations.

Through these life trajectories, a certain generational identity has been formed, which is not expressed so much in a particular will to belong, but rather in a way of being in the world and orienting oneself toward the world. This identity is dynamic, as it is transformed in close relationship with different experiences in different situations, and also in relationship with people from other generations.

In the next section, we will discuss the results of our research in relation to the theoretical and analytical framework used.

4. Discussion

In this section, we propose a reflection on the results of our research based on the theoretical and analytical framework used. For this, we will focus on one of the fundamental concepts that articulates it, that of generation.

In this reflection, we revisit the empirical results presented in the previous section: early labor trajectories, the simultaneous management of domestic and professional life, and the transmission of religious and meritocratic values. By comparing these findings with the theoretical framework adopted (generations, class, and social action), we show how the participants' narrated experiences support and complicate the debated concepts, revealing how historical and social context shapes generational consciousness.

Our study found that the majority of women in the sample began working in agriculture at an early age, often assisting their mothers in household and farming tasks. This early integration into the labor force aligns with Mannheim's concept of generation as a shared experience resulting from historical and social conditions. The economic difficulties prevalent during the postwar period in Portugal, as described by Barreto [39], likely compelled families to rely on child labor. This contrasts with the findings of Willis [48], which show a later entry into the workforce among women of similar classes. By placing our findings in dialog with this existing research, the particularities of our studied context of the Portuguese region of Braga become more evident.

Regarding the simultaneous management of domestic and professional life, our study showed that the interviewed women often juggled work with childcare, household duties, and religious obligations. This finding is closely tied with the role ascribed to women in a patriarchal society, as described by Donati [20]. These women had to reconcile public work with their reproductive role in the domestic sphere, a double burden rarely faced by the men of the same generation. While Feixa, Fernández, and Figueras [25] also mention the double burden, the unique historical context in Portugal—as referenced by Ramos [35]—placed added pressures on women's ability to balance work, family life, and religious activity.

Regarding the transmission of religious and meritocratic values, our research found that women passed on values such as honesty, solidarity, hard work, and duty to their children, often deeply intertwined with religious practice. This highlights how experiences shape personal values, as theorized by Joas [40]. Although these women passed religious values on, their children, despite being raised in families in which religious beliefs and practices were still very present, lived other experiences after 25 April 1974. These younger generations face such beliefs in a different way, resulting in a more open interpretation, not taken for granted. Ferreira, Lobo, Rowland, and Sanches [26] corroborate this trend of generations reinterpreting received values, although they do not emphasize how this process occurs. These results suggest that intergenerational transmission is not a simple repetition, but rather a continuous reinterpretation of heritage, as stated by Moreno [49].

It is therefore essential to establish the connection between the empirical results and the previously discussed theoretical works, as well as to highlight the dialog with similar research. The experiences of early integration into the workforce, the reconciliation of the domestic and professional life, and the transmission of religious and meritocratic values—

dimensions identified in this study—precisely reflect the dynamic nature of generational consciousness, as suggested by Corsten [7], who emphasizes the importance of understanding generation as a social construct resulting from shared historical conditions. Likewise, the emergence of values intertwined with the religious sphere, as analyzed here, can be read in light of Aboim and Vasconcelos [5], who underscore the influence of historical–social contexts on the formation of generational identities and their orientations toward the world. Furthermore, the continuous reinterpretation of these values, which becomes evident when considering the changes that occurred after the Carnation Revolution and how subsequent generations question, adapt, and render inherited religious practices more flexibly, confirms what Attias-Donfut [19] and Kertzer [21] highlighted regarding the crucial role of intergenerational relations in rethinking normative and symbolic orientations. This set of data reinforces the notion that a generation is not merely a chronological category, but a living product, continually reshaped by the successive interpretations and reworkings that emerge from interactions among different generations, values, and social contexts.

As has already been pointed out in the introduction to this text, generation cannot be considered a merely objective fact, since it involves not only a simple *being with others in the world*, in a time and a place, but also a *being with others for the world*.

The experiences of the women in our study exemplify this complexity. They did not simply internalize values and roles, but actively interpreted and adapted them according to their lived reality. While most of the interviewed women worked in agriculture, some also had other forms of work (as factories workers, for example), reflecting how social circumstances and access to opportunities, influenced by class positions, shape generational experiences. These experiences are similar to other rural areas in other countries during the same period, as pointed out in Willis [48], but that does not mean that there is a collective identity that unites them. Therefore, it is important to show how our findings reveal unique dynamics that are relevant for understanding the interaction of class, gender, and social contexts.

What remains to be demonstrated is how both realities can be interconnected, creating a certain sense of belonging, sometimes less reflective and taken for granted, other times more conscious and reflective. This fact was what led the first scholars of generations, such as Karl Mannheim, to feel dissatisfied both with the positivist explanations, which were fundamentally attached to objective reality, and the romantic ones, which focused above all on the most spiritual and subjective aspects [1].

From this perspective, the concept of generation would show its explanatory possibilities, as long as it could be shown that subjects born under the same circumstances share similar experiences and senses of the world that link them in a certain way, although this link does not necessarily have to be voluntary, reflective or conscious, but may be more taken for granted.

At first glance, Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* might appear suited to showing how the objective positions people occupy in the world relate to their subjective dispositions toward it [49]. Bourdieu describes *habitus* as "structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" [50] (p. 86), that is, structures not only influence subjects, but are also created by them every time they act in the world. These actions are always conditioned by the structures in which subjects are embedded, particularly class structures, which predispose them to act in certain ways. As a set of practices and representations, *habitus* "is the generating principle of objectively classifiable practices and the system of classifying these practices" [51] (pp. 169–170).

From this perspective, the concept of generation would have few explanatory possibilities, since different social relations, and also generational ones, would always be mediated by class structures that condition the experiences of the subjects, since through these, the subjects would do nothing more than produce and reproduce those structures, more or less unconsciously [52]. But in this way, the meaning of those experiences is also hidden to a certain extent, from the moment they are reduced to different sets of interests linked to class structures. Therefore, it cannot be surprising that in Bourdieu's work, the perspective of generations is absolutely secondary and marginal, and that when it appears in any of his works [53], it does so in relation to people who belong to the same field and who participate in the class struggles of that field, putting their respective capitals and habitus into play [54]. Now, in this way, attention is only focused on how the actions of the subjects are conditioned by their position in the world, not on how in the course of these actions they experience the world with a certain meaning, since ultimately this meaning refers to that objective position.

Mannheim had already realized that, to understand the phenomenon of generations, and also that of classes, it was necessary to account for these two dimensions, the most objective and the most subjective [55] (p. 336 ff). Indeed, although both class and generation are related to objective social positions, which can give rise to certain similarities between the people who occupy them, they do not in themselves create affinities and links between them [1] (pp. 207–208). For this to happen, it has to be proven that there is a certain relationship between the position that subjects have in the world and their orientation with respect to the world. Here, Mannheim places emphasis on one of the fundamental problems of the Marxist theory of classes, that of the relationship between the *class in itself* and the *class for itself*, a problem in which, as is known, Marxist theory always remained more or less entangled [56] (p. 83 ff), and that, as Weber proposed, could only be overcome by going beyond the concept of class [57] (p. 242 ff). The later Marxist tradition itself attempted to get out of this quagmire by relating class as a structural category and a cultural experience, offering very fruitful theories and explanations [48,58–60].

In short, both the concept of generation and class face the same need to show their relevance, for which it must be proven, as previously stated, that there is a certain relationship between the generational position, that is, being born in a time and place, and in certain circumstances, and the presence of a certain generational link, more or less latent or manifest. But while the burden of proof falls with all its force on the concept of generation, the concept of class seems to be free of all this, being implicitly taken for granted.

A presupposition that cannot be started from, as has already been said, is the fact that the subjects are under the same objective circumstances; this does not produce a common identity between them. These circumstances influence them, but in another way, not in a cause-and-effect relationship, since human beings guide their actions in certain contexts and with a certain meaning, through situated experiences. In the words of Hans Joas, whom we follow in this regard, "our perception of the world appears structured by our capacity for action (. . .). Our experience when perceiving reality is not a subjective dressing of reality, but reality par excellence (. . .). Intentions, motives, values, no longer appear as components of an inner world that can only influence the outside world through one's own act of decision. Perception and knowledge are conceived rather as phases of acting through which it is conducted and redirected in situational contexts" [40] (p. 215) and [41] (p. 431). In other words, our experiences are situated, because we experience the world in certain circumstances, not in a causal way, but in a relational way; that is to say, when we face certain situations, which pose a challenge to us who live them, we interpret them both in accordance with previous experiences and with the experience of the action lived, which limits as much as it enables new actions.

Although more recent studies have emerged, the classical contributions of authors such as Karl Mannheim and Hans Joas remain highly relevant for understanding the relationship between generation, values, and cultural orientations. To date, these references have not been superseded by more current approaches, which justifies their continued prominence in our theoretical framework. The absence of more recent citations is not a shortcoming, but rather a recognition of the lasting solidity and pertinence of these perspectives.

Through this process, a more or less latent or manifest common consciousness can emerge, when experiences are lived and interpreted in a more or less similar way by the people who share, for example, the same generational position, having been born in the same place and at the same time, receiving similar influences. We could say then that there is a certain generational link between them, and although this link may be influenced by other circumstances such as class position, as long as it can be demonstrated that such a link exists, the explanatory relevance of the concept of generation will have been proven.

Now, generational consciousness is also related to the way in which some generations relate to others. Here, the important question of intergenerational transmission arises, and therefore that of continuity and social change. The encounter between those who enter the world for the first time and those who already have more or less extensive experience in it, produces, in effect, a review of the inheritance received. Without this encounter, as Hannah Arendt warned, every society would rush toward decadence and ruin, absorbed in its own heritage, or it would be renewed again and again with each generation, with no more horizon than that possessed by those who have the least experience in the world [61]. Therefore, analyzing intergenerational relationships means considering that the members of each generation interpret their situations in a complex way, both in relation to the inheritance received from other generations, and to their own experiences over time. All of this can give rise to different reconfigurations of experiences, which do not necessarily imply continuity or discontinuity, but rather a change in perspective in light of what has been transmitted by previous generations, and also the own experiences of those who have received that legacy. In the same way, those who are transmitters of this legacy also reconfigure their beliefs in contact with their own experiences and with the relationships they establish with members of other generations in certain situations. This is how values, experiences, and meanings of existence are created and continually recreated [41] (pp. 430–431).

This is what we wanted to show through the stories of the women we interviewed, born in the 1940s–1950s in the Portuguese region of Braga. Their generational position, linked to having been born and raised in traditional communities in a time of severe economic difficulties, such as the one after the Second World War, has conditioned their experiences, but these have made sense in relation to a series of values. In the same way, these values have been revitalized through said experiences in those situations, thus creating a way of being and orienting oneself toward the world in which these people recognize themselves.

This whole reality has been transformed over time in relation to the experiences that these people have had in new life situations, in contact with other generations. In this context, they have had to rework their experiences and values, becoming aware of their own identity. Sometimes, this has led them to forget part of their past, and other times to keep it in mind, albeit in a different way. In this way, life has taken on a new meaning for these people, as part of a process that is the result of what they have been, what they have become and what they have planned to be. In the middle of this plot, not exempt from contradictions, the lives of the women of the generation we have investigated have passed.

5. Conclusions

In the text that we now conclude, we have shown, through research on women born in the 1940s–1950s in the Portuguese region of Braga, the difficulties and possibilities that generational studies pose.

The difficulties are related to the prolonged abandonment of this field of research from the 1930s to the 1980s, for the reasons explained in the introduction to this work, as well as the fact that interest in this topic recovered from the 1980s onwards. This interest has been more focused on showing the supposed novelty of successive generations of young people than on relating this novelty with previous generations, which has not infrequently been understood from the point of view of separation and rupture. But these difficulties are also linked to the suspicion that the generation concept has been generated as an explanatory and comprehensive category compared to other concepts such as class. Therefore, where the concept of class is accepted as a dominant explanatory fact, freed from reasons to prove its dominance, the concept of generation appears as a diffuse and problematic reality. However, as has been shown throughout this text, both the concept of generation and that of class must prove, if they want to be operational, the relationship that exists between the objective position that subjects have in the world and their particular orientation toward the world.

Through our research, we have shown that such a relationship exists; the subjects we have investigated have had common experiences that arose in a common situation, and through these experiences, impregnated with certain values, they have interpreted those situations. Through these value-laden interpretations, individuals recognize each other as part of the same world, sometimes in a more reflective way, other times as part of what is taken for granted. All of this takes place within a complex and dynamic process, since these experiences are continually reconfigured in certain situations in relation to the experiences of subjects from other generations, which generates other possibilities for facing the world.

The women of the 1940–1950 generation from the Portuguese area of Braga have been conditioned by the precarious situation in which they were born and raised, but they have experienced and interpreted this situation in accordance with the values of honesty and trustworthiness, respect, solidarity, and justice. These are values that they received from the previous generation, but that they have been reconfiguring in close contact with their own life experiences, and also with those of the next generation. In the midst of this complexity, a new generational consciousness has been arising, which is expressed in the way these people recognize themselves as part of the same world. However, this consciousness cannot be interpreted in a simply rupturist or continuity sense, since the lives of these people have been created and recreated between both extremes, over and over again, through the encounter between the past, the present, and future.

Through this research, we believe that we have shown the possibilities of other research, which faces the problem of generations. To do this, it is necessary to continually open the theory to the cases investigated, and these to the theory. Through this fruitful encounter between theory and empirical research, this field of research can be revitalized, going beyond those perspectives that observe generations only from the perspective of novelty and rupture, but also those that, based on other theoretical assumptions, do not see behind this concept any relevant reality that must be explained and understood.

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