

# Three Worlds of Professional and Managerial Staff in France

## Trois mondes parmi les professionnels et les cadres en France

### Tres mundos de profesionales y directores en Francia

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Résumé de l'article

Les changements dans le travail des professionnels et du management (cadres) en France ont été étudiés dans le cadre d'un projet de recherche sur la base de 100 entretiens, menés dans sept entreprises privées et publiques. Une analyse du discours et une analyse factorielle des correspondances basée sur un corpus de 600 000 mots montre que cette catégorie professionnelle ne peut être considérée ni comme une entité homogène, ni comme totalement fragmenté. En partant des expériences de vie au travail des employés, nous décrivons trois groupes, correspondant à une division horizontale des cadres : les sereins, les individualisés et les résistants.

Les « sereins » perçoivent leur vie professionnelle comme étant exempt de problèmes majeurs. Leur trajectoire de carrière est montante, conduisant à des postes de direction dans l'organisation. Les possibilités de formation sont pleinement utilisées et l'évaluation personnelle par les superviseurs est considérée avec bienveillance. Ce monde est stabilisé par la loi ou par des accords négociés collectivement. Il est caractérisé par l'autonomie et par le souci du bien commun, qui sont la base de leurs croyances.

Les « individualisés » se considèrent responsables de leur propre succès et ils estiment être les architectes de leur carrière. Ils consacrent d'innombrables heures de service, en arrivant tôt le matin et en rentrant à la maison tard dans la soirée. Ils privilégient le travail à la famille et voudraient être actifs dans des marchés hautement concurrentiels. Les individualisés ont tout pour être « heureux », sauf que le travail ne leur laisse que très peu de temps pour leur vie privée. En outre, ces employés craignent les menaces sur la sécurité de leur emploi et de leur carrière.

Le temps de travail des « résistants » se mesure en heures et minutes. Des heures supplémentaires non rémunérées sont refusées. Cette réglementation stricte du temps de travail est néanmoins accompagnée d'une charge de travail considérable. Les délais sont difficiles à respecter. Les manifestations de stress et les responsabilités dans la gestion du personnel conduisent les résistants à une vision négative du travail. L'importance de la sociabilité dans et en dehors du travail compense ici la perte du prestige traditionnel des cadres.

# Three Worlds of Professional and Managerial Staff in France

Jens Thoemmes

**Changes in the work of professional and managerial staff (*cadres*) in France were studied in a research project based on 100 interviews, conducted in seven private and public companies. Through a discourse and correspondence analysis—of a corpus amounting to some 600,000 words—, this study concludes that this particular French employment group can be seen neither as a homogeneous entity, nor as a totally fragmented socio-professional category. Rather, reflecting on working life experiences, it describes three groups that correspond to a horizontal division of professional and managerial staff: the serene, the individualized and the resistant.**

**KEYWORDS: professionals, management, rules, work, discourses analyses.**

## Introduction

The existing social sciences literature on the upper category of employees in France (*cadres*) demonstrates the heterogeneity of this social group. It generally underscores the emphasis placed on internal differentiations of these employees by statute, profession, corporate position, class, gender, etc. Our approach goes further with the assumption that, if doubts concerning the cohesion of a social group do exist, the research framework and the methodological conclusions should allow for a possible division of these highly qualified employees into completely different social worlds. These worlds are to be examined in the context of the coexistence of different social systems (Reynaud, 1997) and the everyday life of employees belonging to each of them. Our research consequently shows a gap between a socio-professional category (*cadres*) rooted in historical developments (Desrosières and Thévenot, 1988) and current living and working conditions. In what way do the working experiences reflect common or differentiated visions of this social group?

In order to answer this question, we need first to establish the limits of the socio-professional category. In the French-speaking Canadian province of Quebec, and more generally in North America, a *cadre* is a “person who exercises a management function in an organization or business, and who holds decision-making powers.”<sup>1</sup> In

France, the National Statistics Institute (INSEE) defines a category known as “cadres and higher intellectual professions.” This category of employees includes teachers and scientific professionals who, in the fields of exact sciences or humanities, make direct use of in-depth knowledge in areas of general interest for research, teaching or health; information professionals whose activities are related to the arts and media; administrative and corporate sales executives; employees holding important responsibilities in the management of companies; engineers and technical managers; and employees in positions of responsibility that require further scientific knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> In France, this category represented 17.5% of total employment in 2013 (for women: 14.5%; men: 20.2%).<sup>3</sup> The category of “cadres” encompasses the higher category of employees in business and administration, as recognized by collective agreements. Management is a significant part of it, yet not the whole category. *Cadres* would be translated into English as “professional and managerial staff” (PMS).<sup>4</sup> This category was defined by the International Labour Organization following a conference in 1977 and was translated into an international standard classification of occupations in 1988 (ISCO-88).<sup>5</sup>

The titles of executive, key personnel, white-collar employee, manager, managing director, senior employee, knowledge worker and high-skilled worker in the Anglo-Saxon and German economies are sociologically and historically differentiated from PMS (Mills, 1951; Pross and Boetticher, 1971; Barnard, 1982; Boes and Trinks, 2006; Kotthoff and Wagner, 2008). In France, the PMS have their own universities, trade unions, labour offices, press and educational institutions. In the 1930s, this group was created as a social movement of the middle class, which was demarcated from the labour movement and sought a socio-political third way between capitalism and collectivism (Boltanski, 1982). Following this interpretation, the unity of the PMS is also historically understood as an actor that restored social order in France after the general strike and factory occupations of 1936. With military origins, the word *cadres* was therefore initially extended to all senior positions in the working world and subsequently to engineers as well. The latter had their own trade union movement and joined the PMS in 1944, leading to the founding of the *Confédération générale des Cadres* (CGC). The CGC was a union of the middle class. It contributed greatly in the fifties and sixties to the establishment of “cadres” in the workplace (wage scales, statistical categories), their unification and enforcing their social weight. Since the early eighties, the research on PMS has pointed to their increasing diversity and differentiation (Groux, 1983). Since this time, French researchers have directed their attention to the basis of the social status of the PMS. For some social scientists, this has led to the question of whether there is in fact a social group of cadres, or whether the term alone has survived with all its meanings even when reality indicates the end of a “social figure” (Bouffartigue, 2001). For other researchers, the diversity of PMS and their existence as a group remains a

puzzle to be analyzed through sociology (Gadéa, 2003). The general conclusions stress its heterogeneity/fragmentation based on gender differences, generations, careers, relationship to work, lifestyle, cultural practices and political convictions (Bouffartigue, Gadéa, and Pochic, 2011). However, little has been said about the boundaries of this socio-professional category. Moreover, no precise definition of the noted fragmentation has been elaborated. This is the aim of our article. We would like to develop the idea of a multiplicity of PMS worlds in France based on the experiences of employees themselves. After describing our research methods and theoretical approach, we will present three different worlds coexisting within this socio-professional category that emerged from our analyses. Finally, we will discuss the implications of this typology for further analysis.

## **Theory and methods**

### **PMS and the theory of social regulation**

In the past, PMS were considered a social elite largely protected from economic and job-related difficulties. However, in the last decade, numerous studies have indicated that working conditions have deteriorated. Increasing uncertainty in the employment situation and changing job content are weakening the self-confidence of PMS (Cousin, 2004). The European survey on PMS's working time and workload painted quite a clear picture of this situation, well before the global economic crisis of 2008 (Eurocadres, 2005): the requirement to work in various locations and more than 44 hours per week (on average, working time is 4.3 hours longer than that of other employees); between a third and a half of these employees are required to be reachable outside normal working time; between 73% and 95% consider their workload to be very heavy or excessive; a large proportion receives no compensation for overtime and would prefer compensation in time off rather than in pay. Lack of recognition for professional achievement, stress, and health problems are increasingly affecting everyday life (Salengro, 2005). Uncertainties multiply in the face of rising unemployment and ubiquitous competition, especially for older PMS who are being excluded from the labour market (Pichon, 2008). The holding of key functions and personnel management are perceived as increasingly difficult, especially the supervision of employees in the context of changing management practices, stress and harassment (Mispelblom Beyer, 2010). This leads some PMS to end their careers early. The situation indicates a trend of PMS opposing or rebelling against a system that no longer guarantees satisfactory living conditions (Courpasson and Thoenig, 2008). The deterioration of working conditions could be seen "negatively" as a common ground for the cohesion of PMS. However, we question this general evolution of the large socio-professional category of PMS.

In underlining the studies on the PMS in France, we hope to deepen the general analysis and go beyond the thesis that the PMS social category is heterogeneous. Our goal is to show that the differences and difficulties experienced by this group hint at different worlds, each with their own values and rules. Our goal is to understand why and how these different worlds coexist as social systems within professional and private life. From our standpoint, the worlds of PMS are non-functional social systems that come about through social regulations. This theory derives from industrial relations and applies to the analysis of social rules (Reynaud, 1980, 1983). The term “social system” refers here to a minimal framework, where the “autonomous” regulation meets the “control” regulation. The main idea, linked to PMS, is that different groups are defined by different rules and visions of work. In the theory of social regulation (De Terssac, 2003a), the system does not define the “actors,” but is instead itself created by action, arrangements and collective bargaining between the actors themselves. The system refers to the worlds in which such common rules arise (Thoemmes, 2011). Social domination, resistance and vulnerability are seen more as a result rather than as a premise of social regulation. In this perspective the social “world” is not necessarily to be equated with certain companies or sectors. As we demonstrate later, since multiple social worlds of the PMS may exist in the same company, it must be assumed that different systems affect both social rules and the individual differences experienced in working life. Various rules exist for the PMS from one work situation to another. Our main objective is to identify such groups and characterize them by the diversity of rules governing their working lives and the common vision each group shares regarding its professional situation. These objective and subjective rules will be observed in different areas: working conditions, such as working-time; income; employment security; work content; economic competition; health; but also private and family life, and collective bargaining. The basis of our analysis will be the workplace-recorded discourse of PMS.<sup>6</sup>

### **Statistical analysis of qualitative data**

We chose a hybrid method that utilizes extensive interviews and a statistical approach to typology (Ghiglione and Landré, 1998). The first step was to select the composition of the group of 100 PMS that we interviewed for this research. These PMS come from seven companies in different areas in the public and private sector; we labelled these organizations as follows: Insurance (private, I), Electronics (private, E), Telecommunications (private, T), City council (public, C), Air transportation (private, A), Social services (public, S) and Urban transport (private, U).<sup>7</sup> To select employees, we took into account the diversity of functions, hierarchical positions and skills (linked to diploma and/or work experience). The largest proportion of PMS were between 40 and 50 years old (48%); there were

58 men and 42 women. Sixty-two respondents reported that they were married, 12 lived with a partner without being married, 16 were divorced or separated and 6 were single.<sup>8</sup> Eighty-six had dependent children. Eighty-nine PMS had at least one parent who was still living. The PMS surveyed were mostly university graduates. Only 12 held no more than a high school degree. Seventy respondents stated that, as “managers,” they were in charge of one or more employees, and 50 reported that they had undertaken at least one geographic move during their careers. Participation in the interviews was voluntary. On average, 15 PMS were interviewed from each company (insurance: 16; electronics: 15; telecommunications: 17; city council: 15; air transportation: 13; social services: 12; urban transport: 12). The choice of a particular company for investigation was made in discussion with a trade union organization (CFDT).<sup>9</sup> The company management accepted our approach in each of these cases. The purpose of the survey was to investigate the practices and values of PMS on the basis of two main criteria: time and labour. To enable us to conduct semi-structured interviews (at least 90 minutes per person, recorded and fully transcribed), we designed a five-column grid (career and working hours, working space and social time, environmental and labour relations, working career and well-being) with a total of 26 topics, each of which was the object of several questions. In addition, we identified the respondent's gender, age, education, marital status, and geographic mobility, and a potential management function. However, these objective variables could not be included in the statistical discourse analysis.

This was followed by a textual analysis of the full transcript of the interviews, which amounted to some 600,000 words. We analyzed the discourse (using Tropes software) and used a correspondence analysis (SPAD), which, together, made it possible to delineate PMS groups and areas. We thus came up with a semantic scenario based on the keywords used by our interviewees. The keywords were chosen on the basis of the frequency of their occurrence in the talks, and then united/tagged into single variables.

Variables were decided upon while reading the interview scripts, based on the frequency of keywords and potential associations among them. The objective was both to find a meaning common to different keywords, and to reduce the number of words by grouping keywords under common variables. Each keyword used by our interviewees was exclusively linked to one variable. In a few cases, a keyword could have meant two different things and was accordingly changed into two distinct keywords. We then summarized the results of the entire statistical analysis. We obtained a set of three groups of points: one for each of the three factorial axes (76 variables and 100 individuals). The rules for determining the best represented individuals, variables and their ranking (Table 1) rely on a set of three coefficients, namely: a- the absolute value of the coordinates of the points

(each point exclusively representing a variable or an individual); b- the value of the contribution of the point to the construction of the axes; and, c- the quality of the representation of points on the axis, measured by the cosine value.

The correspondence analysis brought out three axes: axis 1, representing the employee's "well-being," distinguishes two major oppositions (protected world-precarious world); axis 2, representing "working time," opposes PMS's classic and new time frame; axis 3, representing "labour rules," differentiates between individualized and collective rules. The sociological interpretation based on variables and individuals brought out three types of PMS (individualized, serene, resistant).<sup>10</sup>

This approach, based on the position of variables and individuals in the three-dimensional space (Figure 1), required us to return to sections of the interviews. After identifying a particular variable in Figure 1, we looked for the underlying keywords in the interview scripts in order to check the meaning of entire sentences and paragraphs spoken by the individuals. These sentences and paragraphs are presented in the course of the article as interview excerpts and are related exclusively to the variables of the correspondence analysis. Therefore, each excerpt contains the following information: personal information; company identification and number of interviewed employees (e.g. T15); the variable selected in the correspondence analysis (in brackets, Table 1); and the key words of our

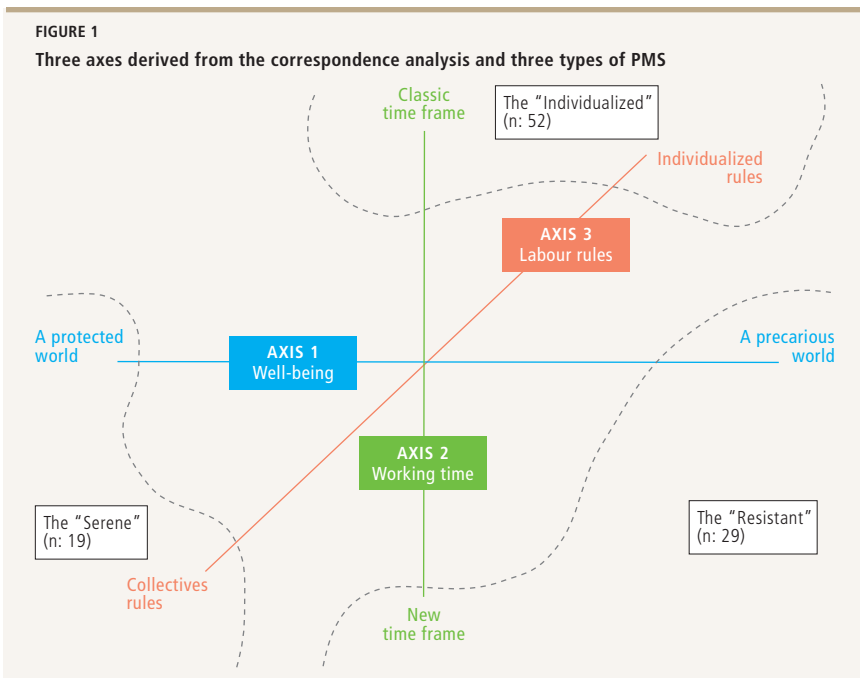


TABLE 1

**Three worlds of professional and managerial staff  
(title, number of employees, discourse variables sorted by importance)**

**The "Serene" (19)**

Company: Urban Transport

Company: City Council

Civil servant status

Top management

Organization

Law and work rules

Scheduling of working

Unions and staff representatives

Closing hours (late)

Hours of work: 35 hours per week

Human Resources

Evaluation interview

Negotiations and agreements

Skills and education

Private life

**The "Resistant" (29)**

Company: Social Services

Non-PMS

Company: Insurance

Overtime

Colleague

Personnel management

Measurement of working time

in hours

Collective work

Absence due to illness

High travel time to work

Origin of negative stress

Annual leave

Family (core)

Weekly working time: 37 - 39 hours

37 to 39 hours

Negative stress related to time

Positive behaviour

Arrival: between 8:00 and 10:00

Quality of life

Leisure time

Time Management

Stress and manifestations

Favourable working conditions

**The "Individualized" (52)**

Company: Electronics

Company: Air Transportation

Business (in general)

Company: Telecommunications

Economic and market

Motivation and commitment

Engineer

Part-time

Occupational mobility

Contacts and business travel

Lay-offs and Employment

Non-civil servant status

Individual work and achievements

Arrival in the morning (early)

Communication

Computer science

Technicians

Holiday, working time account

Income

Measurement of working time in days

Positive stress

Number of employees

Environment

Career

Daily working hours: from 1 to 8 hours

Professional work at home

Meeting

Breaks and lunch

Lower PMS

Email and phone

Weekly working time: more than 50 hours

Daily working time: more than 8 hours

Leave and working time reduction

Extended family

Professional life



interlocutor (in bold type). This information makes it possible to provide our interpretation of the correspondence analysis and submit it for discussion. Table 1 gives an overview of the groups of variables and individuals leading to the development of the three axes. As said, being in the same group was linked to the value of the coordinates (variables and individuals), the quality of the representation and the importance of the contribution to the three axes (Fig.1). Consequently, we associated variables and individuals, differentiating three groups of PMS: the serene, the individualized and the resistant. We indicated the number of PMS for each group and classified the variables characterizing each group. The position of each variable in the table reflects its importance for the group.

### Three worlds for professional and managerial staff

This method allowed us to address the question of how PMS assess their living and working conditions in the context of rules and values. Three different worlds emerged from our analyses. As explained above, these worlds are differentiated both by the number of PMS and by the variables for each group. They point to the existence of very different rules governing each social system.

#### The “serene”

The claim that PMS are “happy” at work runs rather against the current of recent sociological literature, even though this sentiment is quite frequently mentioned in opinion polls.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the results of a sociological study among 6,000 employees show that, in general, work still offers more reasons for satisfaction than dissatisfaction. The higher one rises on the social scale, the greater the extent to which «happiness» at work increases: 70% of PMS are satisfied with their work situation (Baudelot and Gollac, 2003). When we substitute the term “happiness” for that of “serenity,” this attitude corresponds well to the first group of PMS revealed by our correspondence analysis. The main companies related to this group were the city council (C) and a private urban transport company (U). First, these PMS have a working week of 35 hours, which neither includes nor measures existing overtime. They are comfortable with their performance evaluation in individual discussions with their supervisors. These employees benefit from training and education initiatives that boost their careers. They believe themselves to live in a protected world. The strong emphasis put on the fundamental role of collective bargaining and negotiated rules characterizes the organization of their work. The connection between a protected professional and personal life, and negotiated work rules is very significant here.

## A protected world

The first dimension of the world of “serene” PMS is that of a protected space in which the employees receive a series of guarantees that allow them to practice professional life under “peaceful” conditions. Working hours are not a problem, even though they occasionally exceed the specified number of working hours per week. The possibility of access to skills and training, job security and the existence of periodic evaluations enable such employees to feel secure in their positions.

“The management of the city undergoes no formal overtime, because there is a flat-rate benefit system that includes all overtime beyond 35 hours,<sup>12</sup> which I consider as normal.” (C-15, Hours of work: 35 hours per week)<sup>13</sup> Male, 31 to 35 years, divorced or separated, 1 child.

Working hours are not considered to be problematic, and a positive attitude in relation to the evaluation of their work shows that these PMS feel secure. The archetype of this protected world in our research appears to be located in the realm of public service. For example, approximately half (8/15) of the officers of a town hall in southwest France live in a world of protection and wellbeing. However, the other half of these public officials (7/15) are not “serene.” They belong to the group of the “individualized,” which we will introduce later. For us, this is an indication that at least two social worlds can coexist within a single organization. Social regulations, conventions and forms of coordination are not only based on objectified rules, but also on variables of subjective work experiences, as Table 1 clearly shows. These discourses show that at least a portion of the PMS feel they are protected from the dangers of slipping into unemployment or diminished status.

“Compared to the private sector, labour is not as well paid here at City Hall, but we have job protection and they cannot show us the door.” C-10 (Civil servant status) Male, 36 to 40 years, unmarried couple, no children.

These “serene” employees work in an environment where access to employment is regulated through a public competition (entrance examinations). The employees also pay special attention to the relationship with their superiors, which they wish to be “positive.” This aspect is demonstrated by the fact that professional relationships are based on an informal familiar mode. Of course, it may seem problematic to some PMS that the concept of hierarchy should be subordinated to personal relationships. Yet, despite this risk, these employees enjoy a positive working environment, built up over a long period of time, which allows them to consider their future career with “serenity.”

## Collective rules

The other aspect of the serenity enjoyed by the first group of PMS is grounded in social rules that apply to their work. Rules are seen as resulting from the collab-

orative work of a community. Incidentally, it goes both ways, and the very existence of this community also materializes through this common rule (De Terssac, 2003b). The plurality of worlds of PMS appears to translate into several different views of the effective rules. In their discourses on rules, the “serene” PMS stick to collectively negotiated agreements with the employer, or to the *Labour Code* (law). These collective rules are opposed to one-on-one negotiations over working conditions. This can be seen in the case of an urban transport company in a large French city: trade unions and collective agreements constitute the core elements of a clearly defined and regulated working life.

“I think that in our company today, there is a good compromise between working conditions and compensation.” U-10 (Negotiations and agreements) Male, 41-45 years old, married, 3 children.

Collective agreements are understood here as rules that protect these employees. Business planning and work organization are part of this world in the hands of the negotiating groups. Work activities are determined through the processes of conflict and compromise. Although voices that are critical of the functioning of the social dialogue are sometimes heard, it is clear how much this dialogue contributes to the structure of this work (Thoemmes, 2013). The term “service to the public” dominates the discourse and gives meaning to the work activity, as underscored by the recurrence of these variables in the correspondence analysis (Table 1). This particular PMS world largely ignores the increasing difficulties that we have preliminarily discussed. The “serene” have a professional environment that is “familiar and friendly.” They can work and conceive of the future in the best light. Various forms of solidarity and companionship shelter them in their work. These characteristics are clearly missing from the second world of the PMS.

### **The “individualized”**

Individualism and/or individualization appear to be either features or social processes of modern societies (Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2001). The question of identity plays a central role in this process (Dubar, 2000) and the view that any society produces given types of individuals is widely discussed (Lallement, 2007). The individualization of PMS is primarily a historical characteristic of this group. Presumably, this is due to their special position PMS between the employer and workers in non-managerial positions. It is also, however, the result of the individual efforts of in-house PMS. These employees have not gained their status by diploma; they were recruited as low-level employees and moved up to their current positions through in-house career advancement PMS. The efforts to achieve such status go hand in hand with important sacrifices made in their private lives (Boltanski, 1982). Individualization is, in this case, the result of an

increase in competition and the valuing of individual skills and performance; it is also a result of merit systems and individual rewards. The second PMS type in our research appears to largely accept this “individualistic” attitude: it is neither criticized nor praised. For these PMS, individualism appears to be “natural” in the framework of an economy that encourages individual commitment and competition.

The language used by these employees is infused with references to the products, the market and their company, especially in electronic (E), air transportation (A) and telecom companies (T). Here, the individual is the acting subject and the recipient of rules. Individual work and performance, and all aspects that relate to professional life are discussed: career, time spent on various activities, “positive” stress, pay and free time. In this group, the reference to the private sector is very strong. The discourses on labour mobility and employment are dominant. However, this individualization is also accompanied by significant constraints on the individual’s professional future: forced mobility, problematic experiences with part-time work leading to marginalization from full-time staff, downsizing, restructuring, and threats related to employment.

### **The classic working time regime of the individualized**

The world of “individualized” employees is as homogeneous in relation to social rules as that of their “serene” counterparts. This traditional model of the PMS distinguishes itself by different rules. Working time is measured in the number of days per year, such that a considerable amount of time autonomy is created for the individual. However, this autonomy is often characterized by particularly long working hours (more than 50 hours per week). This group includes not only, for example, engineers, technical managers and computer specialists, but also technicians and employees without managerial functions. The “individualized” employees live in a world of personal commitment and availability, which brings with it long daily working hours.

“I’m usually in at 7:00 or 7:30 in the morning and look through my e-mails when I have not seen to this the day before. Then it will depend whether it is the first week of the month and there are reports to write. In this case, and in general, I just eat a sandwich for lunch. In the evenings I leave work at 8 pm.” E-11 (Arrival in the morning: early)  
Female, 46-50 years old, married, 2 children.

In this world, modern management approaches currently focus on autonomy, which means also being available for customers and frequent overtime (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Mayer-Ahuja and Wolf, 2007). These employees are in a competitive situation and in an ongoing relationship with the customer. They praise the products and services of their company.

“But today we are increasingly in competition with other companies and our customers make this very clear to us.” E-1 (Economic and Market) Male, 36-40 years old, single, no children.

The question of motivation and personal commitment, as well as travel and external contacts, which are important for performing their duties, are often mentioned by the “individualized.” These PMS do not hesitate to put family relationships and recreational activities on the backburner for the benefit of their professional lives. Of all social activities, work occupies first place.

“My work comes first, and I’m not made for anything else. I love my job, even at the expense of my personal time.” A-1 (Motivation and commitment) Female, 46 to 50 years, divorced or separated, 1 child.

References relating to computer specialists and technical personnel, as well as professional work at home, completes the picture of a world that coincides entirely with the stereotype of PMS and especially engineers (Kunda, 2006). They are experts in their field; they are stimulated by their company and its products and by professional exchanges with colleagues outside the company; and they do not hesitate to dedicate themselves to professional responsibilities at the expense of their private lives. The values of limitless work and performance are prioritized in these discourses (Peticca-Harris, Weststar, and McKenna, 2015). It is not surprising that this type of employee carries out his/her daily activities in adherence to entirely different rules. From the working time regime to other social activities, the individual is encouraged to be the principle regulator of his/her own daily routine.

### **Individualized rules**

“Individualized” employees describe a worldview in which the person is the acting subject. The PMS are responsible for their own career path. They regret the time they “waste” in meetings or processing correspondence or email. They are subject to a constant evaluation of their work and individual performance, and have ambitious plans for their careers, even if their rise hurts others.

“I know what I need to do to get promoted, which among the PMS sometimes means stepping on your neighbour’s toes.” T-6 (Career) Male, 36-40 years old, married with 4 children.

The individualized employee is a “self-made person,” and therefore subject to the risk of being left unprotected when economic problems occur. The flip side of this situation thus appears clear. The PMS remain alone with their problems, mainly in connection with employment, and they can only rely on their own skills to solve them or to renegotiate a difficult work situation. Reflection on the threat of dismissal or on the general employment situation in the com-

pany is carried out in an individual and subjective manner. One would have thought the issue of restructuring and dismissal would be addressed in the correspondence analysis by the previously mentioned collective rules, negotiations and agreements. But this is not the case: the PMS regard these threats as directed against themselves as individuals. The possibility of seeking collective solutions for these problems is not envisaged. The unions appear to play no role here.

“The other problem is that there is a difficult employment situation in the telecommunications sector, so that people are seeing store closures and restructuring every six months. They are alone and pay no attention to the others. They want to save their own skin. I don’t know what to do.” T-10 (Layoffs and Employment) Female, 41 to 45 years old, married, 2 children.

The individualization of the PMS refers to a conception of the rule as being neither the result of collective action nor of negotiations between representative organizations. This can be seen as a result of the lack of industrial relations (Reynaud, 1997). Individualization here is a value shared by the community of PMS and thus is also a common principle. The traditional rule, for example, that the PMS do not measure their working hours still prevails here. The value of “work” remains strong. The internal and external competition for a promotion, a customer or a market is elemental in the structure of the discourse. Regarding the employment situation, individualization leads to isolation. The PMS are in this sense destitute, because they can hardly influence the course of events without any collective protection. Given these weaknesses of individualization, the third and last group of PMS have decided “to stop playing the game” and go beyond the traditional borders of the PMS.

### **The PMS in resistance**

The view that PMS can defy their working conditions is not new. First, fundamental research has shown that the movement of white-collar employees emerged in the 1930s as an expression of opposition to both capitalism and collectivism (Mills, 1951; Boltanski, 1982). The proposal for a third way for the middle class was, in France, a contributing factor in the invention of the social category of PMS. Recent studies show a new tendency for this kind of criticism, indicating that more and more managers are in a state of rebellion, with a variety of forms of opposition ranging from withdrawal and resignation to ordinary protest and collective mobilization. There are diverse reasons behind this rebellion (Courpasson and Thoenig, 2008): management approaches defining unrealistic performance targets, dilution of identity in international companies, dissolution of hierarchies, negation of privacy and non-recognition of professional accomplishments by the company.

What are the contours of this opposition in our case studies? Against whom or against what is it intended? In order to explain our results, we use the term 'resistance' to describe the existence of opposition against a system. This resistance is based on objective and subjective rules expressed in the interviews.

The world of the resisting PMS (29 out of 100 respondents) is found in companies related to social security (S) and insurance (I), which give these employees the same working-time regime as non-PMS employees. In this environment, we also find employees who are struggling with difficult working conditions. On the one hand, this group demands the accurate accounting of hours worked. The resisting PMS decry unpaid overtime and criticize high travel time to work. Their world is characterized by strong internal solidarity, which fosters horizontal cooperation and collective and cooperative behaviour, while great importance is attached to the family. On the other hand, this group appears to be particularly susceptible to various sources of psychological and physiological stress: unrealistic time constraints and technical constraints that are very difficult to implement often lead to problematic relationships with superiors or colleagues, as well as difficult relationships with subordinates, and stress in their private lives.

### **The professional difficulties of the resisting PMS**

These employees are striving to achieve a certain standard of living and working conditions, not least as a way to overcome the negative effects of daily work. Their resistance is directed against a system that demands the devotion of their lives to work, with a workweek that exceeds 50 hours, and features strong competition amongst PMS to win internal promotions. In particular, reports of "stress" at work are numerous. In our approach, we did not start from a pre-determined definition of "stress." In the interviews, we asked whether this term had meaning for the employees. Based on these observations, we then distinguished in the correspondence analysis between positive and negative stress, and between the origins and manifestations of stress. For example, in the context of our question concerning the existence of stress, the response including the keyword "deadline" refers systematically to unease (negative stress related to time, Table 1). Of course, deadlines are quite widespread, but only negatively impacted PMS mention them in relation to stress.

"Yes, I have to consider a lot of deadlines. We have sophisticated and precisely quantified targets for March and December." S-8 (Negative stress related to time) Female, 51-55 years, single, no children.

"But the stress also hits me physically. I feel a pressure in my chest." S-9 (Stress and manifestations) Male, 41 to 45 years, divorced or separated, no children.

A particular problem arises when the resisting individual has other employees under his/her responsibility. This responsibility can be problematic when personal relationships suffer because of the hierarchy gap, when the pressure that has to be exerted in terms of performance objectives affects interpersonal relations and relationships with customers, and finally, when competence problems occur. The interviews show that employees in middle management are particularly vulnerable. It is therefore not surprising that the presence of managers with supervisory functions is particularly significant in this group. Individualized and serene PMS appear to be less concerned by this problem, not only because management activities are less widespread, but because when they do exist, constraints appear to be less severe, individual professional skills are recognized and horizontal relations prevail over hierarchical relations.

Leading a group of employees is indeed perceived here to be equated with a heavy workload, and the lack of appropriate strategies is criticized. Indeed, our research confirms the results of other studies highlighting the difficulties of daily management activities: overwork and limited autonomy with regard to decision making (Bolduc and Baril-Gingras, 2010; Mispelblom Beyer, 2010). The pressure stemming from their intermediate position differentiates them from other PMS. Our discussions revealed that management activities were often perceived as a source of stress and as receiving little recognition from upper management.

### **A new working time regime for the resisting PMS**

Stress accompanies the working lives of these employees. The PMS in resistance hint at a new way of experiencing work, namely, with new rules that treat the PMS as any other employee. Time autonomy, including the ability to organize one's own working hours at the discretion of tasks, regardless of hierarchical control, does not characterize this group. In contrast to the other two groups (serene and individualized), the time-management approach for resisting PMS is defined by a strict time regime. It refers to the 1998 law in France where PMS are distinguished by time measurement: whereas the individualized and serene are largely submitted to the count of work days in a year without a strict reference to hours, the resistant count each hour of their work. For this reason, the individualized frequently experience long working hours, as shown by the variable "working longer than 50 hours" a week (Table 1). This is definitely not the case for the resistant.

However, these rules are not exempt from potential abuse: for example, some PMS stamp their cards in the time recording machine at the end of the working day, but then return to their desks to perform tasks considered to be "urgent." Part of the employee's working time is thus made invisible, as it is not recorded on timesheets. These practices are sometimes tacitly tolerated or penalized by the



management. In the latter case, it turns out that the exact recording of working time is of high importance.

“We have a time clock; in the morning we clock in on arriving. We clock out when we go to lunch or leave the premises, we clock in again after lunch and in the evening. And for smokers, we clock out the time we go outside to smoke. That’s new. But some people don’t do it. We can also record the time on the computer.” I-6 (Measurement of working time in hours) Female, 31 to 35, divorced or separated, 2 children.

In our discussions with these managers, we often heard mention of the refusal of “too much” work. The term “too much” indicates a clear break with the traditional perception of the PMS. In contrast, the resisting PMS count their working hours like non-managerial employees. Modern time and attendance systems allow working hours to be measured accurately. Mention of the existence of “invisible work” recurs frequently. The reference to unpaid overtime and hours that “disappear” from the meter confirms this interpretation. In addition, we frequently observe that many of these managers no longer feel devoted to their work.

“To be honest, 37 hours and 30 minutes is too much, I am bored, that’s too long.” I-4 (Weekly working time 37 to 39 hours) Male, 46 to 50 years, married, one child.

This group follows a common rule: working time is strictly organized and measured in hours and minutes. Resistance is made obvious by the general recognition of the legitimacy of this working-time rule. This time regime openly contradicts the traditional picture of the PMS. The objective and subjective conditions of work go against the traditional representation, since it consists of little autonomy and motivation, together with a labour input that is measured and limited. Just as for the working class (Touraine 1964), strong internal solidarity is characteristic of this group, which includes both technicians and professionals. Being considered as low-level PMS, these employees experience objective rules in the form of internal cohesion and values linked to mutual aid. These PMS place great emphasis on the “positive behaviour” of employees in general. Collegial behaviour and cohesion are keys to this discourse. In opposition to the individualized, who are not embedded in collective action, the resistant extend this value to the outside, to the family (keywords: spouse and children), and its importance to daily life and work-life balance (Tremblay, 2008). Interpersonal relations are more important than individual work performance. For this reason, a collaborative attitude in the workplace and strong attachment to family are key variables of this discourse.

“I’m always there for my team. I’m always listening, and my door is always open.” I-11 (Positive behaviour) Female, 56-60 years old, married, 2 children.

“If I had the choice (between work and family), I would always choose family.” I-2 (Family: core) Male, 51-55 years old, married, 2 children.

This group of PMS sees a levelling of social differences with non-PMS employees. Work is not appreciated because of its content, but because of the social relationships provided by the workplace. In this sense, resistance is not individual or uncontrolled. It means the rejection of an employee's world in which one invests boundless time and effort even at the expense of a private life. It indicates a common project against the top management that favours individual performance and the deprioritization of an employee's private life in favour of professional activities.

## Discussion and conclusions

Different types of social rules govern the three worlds of PMS. These rules can be considered to be the result of social regulation (Reynaud, 1983) between each of the three figures of PMS and the top management of the company. Differences appear in the way work is conceived, and in the role of collective bargaining within each of these social systems. Objective work conditions and subjective perceptions of working lives go hand in hand. Our discourse and correspondence analysis allow us to describe these PMS types.

"Serene" employees perceive their professional lives as being free from major problems. Their career trajectories go up, leading to senior positions in the organization. Training opportunities are used and personal assessment by supervisors is seen as a favourable orientation. This world is stabilized by law or by collectively negotiated agreements. The reference to "service to the public" characterizing a city council and private transportation company, together with a strong guarantee of employment, make it easier to ignore existing wage differentials with other private companies. This type of PMS is characterized by autonomy and concern for the common good, which are the basis of their beliefs.

The second case refers to the "individualized" employee, as it corresponds to existing stereotypes and prejudices. This PMS figure is a "self-made person." They consider themselves to be responsible for their own success and to be the architects of their careers. They put in countless hours of service, arriving early in the morning and going home late in the evening. They prioritize work over family. They aim to be active in highly competitive markets. Individual accomplishment is their starting point. Their world is characterized by the technical complexity of products; of which they are experts. These PMS have everything they need to be "happy," except that work leaves them very little time for their private lives. In addition, these employees fear threats to job security and to their careers. In this second case, union action is missing and collective bargaining out of reach.

The third case describes resistance to the traditional PMS world. Since 1998, the working time of these employees has been strictly measured in hours and

minutes, and in accordance with the standards applicable to non-PMS employees. Unpaid overtime is refused. This strict regulation of working time is nevertheless accompanied by a considerable workload. Deadlines are difficult to respect. Manifestations of stress and heavy responsibilities in personnel management lead the resisting employee to a negative view of work. This negative attitude is linked to the working conditions and to the work itself, but it is compensated for by a positive view of colleagues and friendly horizontal relationships. The importance of sociability in and outside of work compensates for the loss of the traditional prestige of these PMS.

These different examples of PMS show that each world has its own social system limited to a variety of actions, rules and values that differ across the studied areas: working time regimes, division between private life and professional life, and the position of individuals and groups in the workplace. Further research could pay attention to how these three worlds correspond to the social stratification of PMS (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1969). The group of the resisting PMS suffers mainly from stress and its subsequent manifestations, which could lead to a demotion to the lower rank of non-PMS. However, according to our results, this portion of the workforce is also entrusted with essential management tasks. Thus, this is not only an issue of class or of the levelling of living conditions, but is also linked to the specific context of the supervision of other employees. In addition, we observe the problem of the weakening protective status of the PMS, as lower-skilled employees can perform more and more of their tasks. The other two worlds of PMS (serene and individualized) comprise the majority of the interviewees. For them, the professional path always goes up, never down. In their discourses, a levelling of living conditions between PMS and non-PMS will not take place. These individuals assert their (perceived) independence and neither want to be confused with the non-PMS, nor share their working conditions. Interestingly, no fundamental (Bourdieuian) class struggle<sup>14</sup> between management staff and professionals (Noordegraaf and Schinkel, 2011) is reflected in our research typology. This argument could lead to the assumption that these two main components of the social category of PMS do not represent potential break lines.

Further research into the three worlds could tackle the mostly “gender-blind” discourses of PMS. This does not mean that gender differences do not exist, but only that our interlocutors assess them as non-decisive. The women, who make up 42% of the interviewed PMS, do not see themselves as different or as disadvantaged in their professional lives. Neither the reconciliation of their professional and private lives, nor the possibility of a professional career is distinguished in male and female discourses. Although our study did not validate this approach, we can in our research qualitatively maintain the hypothesis of

a gendered world, to the extent that the composition of the various groups of high-skilled individuals differs greatly one from the other. While the “serene” group includes relatively few women (6 of 19), and the same can be noted in the “individualized” group (18 of 52), women are strongly represented in the resisting group (18 of 29). Although the small number of total interviewees (100) and the choice of interlocutors call for caution here, the hypothesis of an over-representation of women in the world of resistance represents a salient issue for future research. The often-noted gender differential of higher professions could be reintroduced into the analysis (Crompton and Feuvre, 1996). Future research could clarify this, and refine the analysis of the three worlds through a systematic integration of discourse analysis and objective variables. Here, the indication of the exact position of the PMS in professional and social space, as well as what their characteristics are (age, gender, education, type of work, career), would be suitable for a methodological comparison.

## Notes

- 1 Quebec Board of the French Language [http://www.granddictionnaire.com/ficheOqlf.aspx?Id\\_Fiche=8350894](http://www.granddictionnaire.com/ficheOqlf.aspx?Id_Fiche=8350894). Note: The definition of the term employee (*salarié*) in the *Labour Code* (Quebec) excludes “cadres.” In contrast, in the *Labour Standards Act*, “cadres” are considered as employees. However, senior managers are excluded from the application of this law, except for certain provisions.
- 2 Insee - Nomenclatures - PCS 2003 - 3 - Cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures [http://www.insee.fr/fr/methodes/default.asp?page=nomenclatures/pcs2003/n1\\_3.htm](http://www.insee.fr/fr/methodes/default.asp?page=nomenclatures/pcs2003/n1_3.htm)
- 3 Source: Insee (2015). [http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/tableau.asp?reg\\_id=0&ref\\_id=NATnon03173](http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/tableau.asp?reg_id=0&ref_id=NATnon03173)
- 4 Our sample of PMS accounts for approximately 70% of “managers.” In the total French population, only 49% of all female and 62% of all male PMS can be considered to be managers, source: DARES 2010. <http://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2010-082-2.pdf>.
- 5 ILO- <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/isco88/>
- 6 The research was financed between 2008-2011 by the French National Agency of Research (ANR) through its program: Companies and Forms of Economic Organization: Issues and Mutations. We would like to thank Michel Escarboutel and Ryad Kanzari for their participation in the fieldwork and analysis.
- 7 We maintain strict confidentiality of corporate identity because it was a condition of access to the fieldwork. Therefore, the number of employees, location and specific activities of each company cannot be revealed.
- 8 Four respondents did not answer this question.
- 9 *Confédération française démocratique du travail*.
- 10 The total inertia in terms of the Pearson chi-square statistic is 32.65% (Axis 1: 12.55%, axis 2: 11.71%, axis 3: 8.38%). All concepts are examined later in this paper.
- 11 For example, in spring 2010, a large majority of PMS said they were “happy at work” (87%), *Baromètre des Cadres*, ViaVoice.

- 12 Keyword (as explained above)
- 13 Variable (combination of several keywords, see Table1)
- 14 In Bourdieu's theory, classes and class fractions are explained by the combination of the social, economic, and cultural capital of their members (Bourdieu, 1986).

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## SUMMARY

### Three Worlds of Professional and Managerial Staff in France

Changes in the work of professional and managerial staff (PMS, *cadres*) in France were studied in a research project based on 100 interviews, conducted in seven private and public companies. Through a discourse and correspondence analysis—of a corpus amounting to some 600,000 words—, this study concludes that this particular French employment group can be seen neither as a homogeneous entity, nor as a totally fragmented socio-professional category. Rather, reflecting on working life experiences, it describes three groups that correspond to a horizontal division of professional and managerial staff: the serene, the individualized and the resistant.

“Serene” PMS perceive their professional lives as being free of major problems. Their career trajectories go up, leading to senior positions in the organization. Training opportunities are used and personal assessment by supervisors is seen as a favourable orientation. This world is stabilized by law or by collectively negotiated agreements and characterized by autonomy and concern for the common good, which are the basis of their beliefs.

“Individualized” PMS consider themselves to be responsible for their own success and to be the architects of their careers. They put in countless hours of service, arriving early in the morning and going home late in the evening. They prioritize work over family and aim to be active in highly competitive markets. The individualized have everything they need to be “happy,” except that work leaves them very little time for their private lives. In addition, these employees fear threats to job security and to their careers.

“Resistant” PMS’s working time is measured in hours and minutes. Unpaid overtime is refused. This strict regulation of working time is nevertheless accompanied by a considerable workload. Deadlines are difficult to respect. Manifestations of stress and responsibilities in personnel management lead the resisting employee to a negative view of work. The importance of sociability in and outside of work compensates for the loss of the traditional prestige of these PMS.

KEYWORDS: professionals, management, rules, work, discourse analysis.

## RÉSUMÉ

### Trois mondes parmi les professionnels et les cadres en France

Les changements dans le travail des professionnels et du management (cadres) en France ont été étudiés dans le cadre d’un projet de recherche sur la base de 100 entretiens, menés dans sept entreprises privées et publiques. Une analyse du discours et une analyse factorielle des correspondances basée sur un corpus de 600 000 mots montre que cette catégorie professionnelle ne peut être considérée ni comme une entité homogène, ni comme totalement fragmenté. En partant

des expériences de vie au travail des employés, nous décrivons trois groupes, correspondant à une division horizontale des cadres : les sereins, les individualisés et les résistants.

Les « sereins » perçoivent leur vie professionnelle comme étant exempt de problèmes majeurs. Leur trajectoire de carrière est montante, conduisant à des postes de direction dans l'organisation. Les possibilités de formation sont pleinement utilisées et l'évaluation personnelle par les superviseurs est considérée avec bienveillance. Ce monde est stabilisé par la loi ou par des accords négociés collectivement. Il est caractérisé par l'autonomie et par le souci du bien commun, qui sont la base de leurs croyances.

Les « individualisés » se considèrent responsables de leur propre succès et ils estiment être les architectes de leur carrière. Ils consacrent d'innombrables heures de service, en arrivant tôt le matin et en rentrant à la maison tard dans la soirée. Ils privilégient le travail à la famille et voudraient être actifs dans des marchés hautement concurrentiels. Les individualisés ont tout pour être « heureux », sauf que le travail ne leur laisse que très peu de temps pour leur vie privée. En outre, ces employés craignent les menaces sur la sécurité de leur emploi et de leur carrière.

Le temps de travail des « résistants » se mesure en heures et minutes. Des heures supplémentaires non rémunérées sont refusées. Cette réglementation stricte du temps de travail est néanmoins accompagnée d'une charge de travail considérable. Les délais sont difficiles à respecter. Les manifestations de stress et les responsabilités dans la gestion du personnel conduisent les résistants à une vision négative du travail. L'importance de la sociabilité dans et en dehors du travail compense ici la perte du prestige traditionnel des cadres.

MOTS CLÉS : management, cadres, règles, travail, analyse du discours.

## RESUMEN

### Tres mundos de profesionales y directores en Francia

Los cambios en el trabajo de los profesionales y directores en Francia son estudiados en un proyecto de investigación basado en 100 entrevistas realizadas en siete compañías privadas y públicas. Mediante un análisis del discurso y un análisis de correspondencia – un corpus de alrededor de 600,000 palabras-, este estudio llega a la conclusión que este grupo particular de empleados franceses no puede ser visto ni como una entidad homogénea, ni como una categoría totalmente fragmentada. Reflejando sus respectivas experiencias de vida en el trabajo, se describen tres grupos que corresponden a una división horizontal de dichos profesionales y directores: los serenos, los individualizados y los resistentes.

El grupo de profesionales y directores « serenos » perciben su vida profesional como libre de problemas mayores. Sus trayectorias de carrera avanzan, conduciéndoles a las posiciones con más ancianidad en la organización. Las oportunidades de formación son utilizadas y la evaluación del personal por los supervisores es



vista de manera favorable. La estabilidad de este mundo está regida por la ley o por los acuerdos negociados colectivamente, los cuales reflejan la autonomía y el interés por el bien común que constituyen la base de sus creencias.

El grupo de « individualizados » se consideran responsables de su propio éxito y se perciben como arquitectos de sus carreras. Ellos consagran innumerables horas de servicio, llegan temprano en la mañana y regresan a sus hogares tarde en la noche. Priorizan el trabajo por encima de la familia y buscan a ser activos en los mercados altamente competitivos. Los individualizados tienen todo lo que ellos necesitan para ser « felices », excepto que el trabajo les deja muy poco tiempo para sus vidas privadas. Además, estos empleados temen las amenazas a la seguridad del empleo y a sus carreras.

Los « resistentes » miden su tiempo de trabajo en horas y minutos. El sobretiem-  
po no pagado es rechazado. Su regulación estricta del tiempo de trabajo está sin embargo acompañada de una carga de trabajo considerable. Los plazos son difícilmente respetados. Las manifestaciones de stress y las responsabilidades en la gestión del personal conducen al empleado resistente a una visión negativa del trabajo. La importancia de sociabilidad dentro y fuera del trabajo compensa por las pérdidas del tradicional prestigio de este tipo de profesional.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** profesionales, dirección, reglas, trabajo, análisis de discurso.