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Beyond Mannheim: Conceptualising how people ‘talk’ and ‘do’ generations in contemporary society



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ABSTRACT

In the 1920s, Karl Mannheim developed the concept of generation in a treatise entitled *The Problem of Generations* (1952/1928). His conceptualisation pertained to what Pilcher (1994) calls ‘social generations’, that is, cohort members who have similar attitudes, worldview and beliefs grounded in their shared context and experiences accumulated over time. It is often argued that social generation has been hollowed out as a sociological concept, yet it continues to feature prominently in policy debates, media, academic literature and everyday talk. This article develops a grounded conceptual framework of how the notion of ‘generation’ is employed by ‘ordinary people’. We induct the meaning of ‘generation’ from how people use the term and the meaning they attribute to it. We contribute to the current scholarship engaging with Mannheim to explore how people’s portrayals of their ‘performance’ of generation can help to develop further the concept of social generation. We draw on qualitative primary data collected in the *Changing Generations* project, a Grounded Theory study of intergenerational relations in Ireland. Far from outdated or redundant, generation emerges as a still-relevant concept that reflects perceptions of how material resources, period effects and the welfare state context shape lives in contemporary societies. Generation is a conceptual device used to ‘perform’ several tasks: to apportion blame, to express pity, concern and solidarity, to highlight unfairness and inequity, and to depict differential degrees of agency. Because the concept performs such a wide range of important communicative and symbolic functions, sociologists should approach generations (as discursive formations) as a concept and practice that calls for deeper understanding, not least because powerful political actors have been quicker than sociologists to recognise the potential of the concept to generate new societal cleavages.

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1. Concepts of generation

The concept of generation endures in both popular and academic discourses, yet it is typically used without a clear definition. Scherger (2012) distinguishes between generation as a social formation on the one hand, and as a discursive construct on the other hand. *Generations as*

social formations consist of people who ‘have a shared historical-biographical past’, from which ‘a shared world view and a generational consciousness’ have arisen (Scherger, 2012, pp. 2–3). Kohli’s (2015) definition of social generations is similar to Scherger’s understanding of generations as social formations, but his is to a greater extent based on inequalities arising from the timing and maturing of welfare state interventions, which lead him to argue that ‘one may “opt out” of one’s generation in terms of attitudes and behaviour, but one cannot opt out in terms of public obligations and entitlements’ (forthcoming

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publication, no page numbers yet). We share Kohli's (2015) concern that 'emphasizing the generational conflict as the new basic cleavage in society tends to downplay other inequalities...[and] may function as a way to divert attention from the still existing problems of poverty and exclusion *within* generations'. This is because 'generations are internally differentiated with regard to class, religion, ethnicity and gender, which undermines any attempt to establish a feeling of "being in the same boat"' (Kohli, 2015). Despite the growing potential for intergenerational conflict (due to demographic development and economic insecurity caused by recession and welfare state retrenchment), Kohli argues that 'the age-integrative effects of family solidarity...and political organisations' are currently preventing the emergence of large-scale generational conflict. While Kohli is reporting on empirical findings based largely on quantitative data on Germany, similar conclusions and theorising have arisen from mixed-methods studies of generational consciousness and difference in the Netherlands (Diepstraten et al., 1999) and from recent qualitative research in Ireland (Virpi, Catherine, Thomas, & Gemma, 2013; Carney, Scharf, Timonen, & Conlon, 2014).

Generations as discursive constructs arise from narratives that strive to 'make sense of the contemporaneity of, and conflicts between, people born at different historical times' (Scherger, 2012, p. 11): in this understanding, the concept of generation is based on interpretive processes aimed at understanding similarities and differences between cohorts. As Pilcher (1994) points out, the notion of generation is 'widespread in everyday language as a way of understanding differences between age groups and as a means of locating individuals and groups within historical time' (p. 481). Generations as social constructs are therefore 'live' social constructs, maintained and refreshed by people in and over time. Aboim and Vasconcelos (2014) propose conceptualisation of 'social generations' within the poststructuralist paradigm and contend that generations are better conceived of as discursive formations in the Foucauldian sense. They argue that only such an approach can 'account for more than diffuse cultural similarities between cohorts, as generational labels are produced by the overall struggles for naming in the symbolic field' (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014, p. 167). Combining agency and 'the discursive character of generational affinities' conceptually gives way to 'social generations...culturally constructed by specific rules of formation and carried forward by active social agents who, within their respective structural constraints, reiterate inter-generational differences' (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014, pp. 179–180).

Notwithstanding the usefulness of more contemporary conceptual clarifications, any attempt to progress and clarify the concept of generation has to make extensive reference to the original introduction of this concept to sociological vocabulary, namely Karl Mannheim and his *Problem of Generations* (1952/1928). According to Mannheim, generation location is an actuality that arises from the 'biological rhythm in human existence – the factors of life and death, a limited span of life, and ageing' (1952, p. 290). Everyone inhabits a generation location by virtue of

sharing their year of birth with others, with whom they share 'a common location in the historical dimension of the social process' (Mannheim, 1952). Moreover, generational location is defined by 'historical and cultural region', and this location limits people 'to a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action' (p. 291); a logical extension of this for the contemporary context would be 'location' in the globalised world. Mannheim attributes special significance to early adulthood experiences because 'early impressions tend to coalesce into a *natural view* of the world' and 'later experiences then tend to receive their meaning from this original set' (p. 298; emphasis in the original).

Mannheim draws a distinction between generation *location* and generation *actuality*, the latter involving 'more than mere co-presence in... a historical and social region' i.e. '*participation in the common destiny* of this historical and social unit' (p. 303; emphasis in the original). Generation as an actuality only arises 'where a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic de-stabilization'. The global economic crisis that started in 2008 would qualify as such a process of dynamic de-stabilization, and hence it is particularly interesting to reflect on Mannheim's theorising against data collected in Ireland, one of the countries worst affected by the crisis.

Mannheim acknowledges that there can be '*polar forms* of the intellectual and social response to an historical stimulus experienced by all in common' and consequently separate 'generation units' within a generation represent 'a much more concrete bond'. He argues that young people experiencing the same historical problems and hence part of the same actual generation, are differentiated into 'generation units' by how they '*work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways*' (p. 304; emphasis in the original). This argument resonates with our insights into how experience (in this case, of the recession in Ireland) is differentiated by social class position and resources (Carney et al., 2014; Conlon, Timonen, Carney, & Scharf, 2014).

Contemporary sociologists are not inclined to accept Mannheim's argumentation regarding 'generation units' characterised by 'the great similarity in the [mental] data making up the consciousness of its members' which in turn 'cause the individuals sharing them to form one group [as] they have a socializing effect' (p. 304). We are also not inclined to think that the 'fundamental integrative attitudes and formative principles' shared by a generation unit 'are the primary socializing forces in the history of society [that are] necessary...really to participate in collective life' (p. 305). However, Mannheim's critics have often been insufficiently attuned to the subtlety of some aspects of his argument. He does not argue for homogeneity within generations but rather draws attention to the stratification of experience within generational locations: '[Members of an actual generation] participate in the characteristic social and intellectual currents of their society and period, and...have an *active or passive*

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