

# **The sociology of generations and youth studies**

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## **Introduction**

A focus on social generations has recently re-emerged in youth studies. This chapter introduces this approach, concentrating on the formative work of Karl Mannheim, traces its marginalization in youth studies, and proposes reasons for its resurgence. Using my own work as an example, I suggest that the concept is returning to prominence as it provides a framework for theorizing and researching the intersection of changing youth transitions and cultural forms with broader social transformations.

There remain important unanswered questions about the value of the concept of social generations for youth studies. It has been criticized in particular for conceptual fuzziness, for obscuring intra-generational differences and inequalities, particularly by class, and ignoring intergenerational solidarities. As an undervalued legacy, ambivalences and issues evident in Mannheim's early formulation and its subsequent applications are yet to receive the critical attention they deserve. It is the nature of the sociological project that many such questions are unlikely to be definitively settled. I do, however, argue that tentative answers can be put forward to most of the challenges raised, and that the charge of obscuring inequalities is incorrect. Instead the sociology of generations prompts researchers to ask reflexive questions about how class, race, gender, sexuality, and ability come to shape young lives in changing times.

### **The concept of social generations:**

The first sustained formalized sociological theorizing of generations emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The academic study of youth was emerging at this time, drawing on recently developed theories of adolescence, in particular the work of G. Stanley Hall (1905). For Hall adolescence was a universal experience of 'storm and stress', replaying the evolutionary history of the human race. This psychological view of youth was soon challenged from other social scientists. While the anthropologist Margaret Mead (1928) was showing that youth could vary from place to place, European scholars of generation were showing that it could vary over time, with effects for the future life course of individuals and the future of the societies of which they were part

(Ortega y Gasset 1961 [1923]; Mannheim, 1952 [1927]; Mentré 1928). A major catalyst for this theorising of age and social change was the impact of World War 1, which left a ‘lost generation’ in its wake (Burnett, 2010).

The most influential of these early theorizations came from Karl Mannheim. He aimed to understand the way different cohorts of German youth contested the ideas inherited from their parents’ generation, and how these groups could become the source of new values and new political movements (1952). His theory of social generations had three elements. Firstly, a generation had a ‘site’ or ‘location’, the social conditions in which a new generation could emerge. A generation is more than simply a group of people born around the same time; they must share, at least to a significant degree, experiences and challenges (Mannheim, 1952: 297). For Mannheim, young people in Prussia and China did not share such a generational location. A new generational location emerges when the ways of life pursued by the previous generation in the same culture are no valued or no longer realistic.

Secondly, this location will shape the modes of action, expression and feeling of those who grow up within it. Generation shapes subjectivity, but not in a mechanical way. It delimits the range of possible beliefs and actions (Mannheim, 1952). A new set of social structures demands novel modes of action and expression, potentially providing the catalyst for new social movements, aware of themselves as driving a generational change within a culture. He called such movements a generation in ‘actuality’ (Mannheim, 1952: 303).

This subjective dimension of a generation does not mean that all young people share the same beliefs or values. Using the romantic-conservative and the liberal movements of his time in Germany as an example, Mannheim argued that members of a generation could have ‘polar’ responses to a shared generational location (Mannheim, 1952: 304, see also Ortega y Gasset 1961). Even beneath the ‘violent opposition’ between groups within a generation (Ortega y Gasset 1931: 15), a new political, social or cultural generation emerges when there is a shared investment in new political or cultural stakes. These different groups within a generation Mannheim labelled generational ‘units’ (Mannheim, 1952: 306-307).

## **The marginalization of ‘generation’ in youth studies**

Mannheim’s (1952) work on generations appeared in English in the 1950s. By this time, another way of speaking about generational differences was shaping sociological thinking about youth. Given the diversity of sociological approaches today, it can be difficult to imagine one approach being the orthodoxy. Mid last century however, Parsonian structural-functionalism came close. Writers in this tradition argued that a generation gap (represented by a general youth culture in opposition to the parent culture) had emerged. This gap was shaped by the functional need in modern societies for mass schooling, and the concurrent cultural dysfunction created by separating young people from the rest of society (Parsons, 1942; Eisenstadt, 1956; Coleman, 1961; Musgrove, 1964; Nuttall, 1968).

A critique of this functionalist account of youth culture provided the foundation for the ‘subcultural’ approach that emerged from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. This approach would come to be one of the dominant strands of youth research from the 1970s onward. For these scholars, the significant youth cultural forms of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century did not represent a generation, but we subgroupings of larger class cultures. In other words, the spectacular appearance and behavior of punks and other youth cultural groups was primarily a response to class-based material inequality. They saw functionalist accounts of a distinctive post-war youth culture as a politically nefarious claim that generational belonging was central and that class was marginal (see for example Musgrove, 1964). Against arguments that generation defined youth, they highlighted the ‘refusal of class...to disappear as a major dimension and dynamic of the social structure’, most significantly in the creation of youth groupings (Clarke et al., 2006[1976]: 17).

The target of the subcultures school was not directly the Mannheimian sociology of generations, which is rarely mentioned. When it is, primarily by Murdock and McCron (2006[1976]), the CCCS acknowledged that those working with a Mannheimian framework ‘do acknowledge the importance of class’, even if highlighting the impact of age and social change (Murdock and McCron 2006: 169; see also Braungart 1974). In fact despite some efforts to interpret Mannheim as a proto-functionalist, he was clearly in agreement with the CCCS on the failings of this form of generationalism.

Mannheim (1952) devotes considerable attention to distinguishing the sociology of generations from a crude generationalism that treated members of a generation as alike, sharing a single value or dispositional set. Such uses of generations continue to appear in public and policy debate today, and occasionally in academic work. Such approaches tend to frame a generation as either ‘heroes’ who will save society (Howe and Strauss 2000) or as pathological, for example Twenge’s (2014) writing on the ‘Narcissistic Generation’. Insisting that such approaches miss the ‘real’ sociological problem of generation, Mannheim devotes much of his writing on generations to discussing intra-generational divisions. While he was primarily interested in different political groupings, Mannheim understood these differences as emerging through social factors. A generational location was only one of the social locations that shaped the concrete experience of a group of people; class and ethnicity for example are other such social locations mentioned in Mannheim’s essay.

As well as acknowledging the nuances of a Mannheimian approach to social generations, Murdock and McCron acknowledge another equal danger to ignoring class in the study of young people’s cultural forms: ‘[r]ecent studies of class consciousness...are equally lopsided however, in that they ignore questions of generational consciousness completely (2006: 169). Yet despite this warning, for three decades after the emergence of the subcultures approach, the concept of generations fell out of favor in youth studies, seemingly tainted by association with the critique of generationalism within functionalist sociology, making only the occasional appearance in the literature (for example in Jones and Wallace 1992: 10), particularly in English speaking sociology. As discussion of generation waned, the field came to be dominated by a subcultural (and post-subcultural) approach on the one hand, and the study of transitions to adulthood on the other.

### **The reemergence of generations**

In the past decade generations has returned as a central category in youth studies as the field grapples with how to conceptualize the impact of social change on the experience of youth (Edmunds and Turner 2005, Gerhart 2006, Wyn and Woodman 2006; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2009, Possamai 2009, Furlong and Cartmel 2011, Roberts 2012, Woodman and Wyn 2015). My own work, with Johanna Wyn and others, using data from the Life Patterns longitudinal study (drawing on earlier work by Peter Dwyer), has argued that a long generation began in Australia

with the cohorts leaving school in the 1990s. This generational location is shaped primarily by economic change and new educational patterns. Alongside economic liberalization and a deep recession in the early 1990s came a crisis in the youth labor market that is yet to be resolved. The pathways from secondary school into the type of careers that were available to many of their parents have largely disappeared for young people today.

The Australian Government responded to this crisis of youth employment by encouraging even mandating young people to stay in education. Young women in Australia who finished school in the 1990s were the group that most embraced this call, quickly overtaking young men in their educational attainment (ABS, 2013). The young women in our study, often with a tertiary qualification, told us in their early 20s they were committed to achieving commensurate career outcomes with young men, and that this was one of their most important aims for the future. Yet by their late 20s, these highly educated and ambitious young women were beginning to drift into part-time work and out of employment altogether, demoralized by the barriers to employment security, career progression and to mixing paid work and family demands. It was not only that these barriers to career success remained as they were despite young women's educational achievements, but that some of these challenges became greater or were new (Andres and Wyn 2010; Cuervo et al. 2012; Woodman and Wyn 2015).

This generation of young women in Australia faces the personal responsibility to manage incompatible structural demands. They are stuck between two incompatible structures. On the one hand a labor market where young women have greater access but career success and employment security is deferred for young workers, if not indefinitely at least well into the third and even fourth decade of life, even for those with high 'human capital'. On the other hand are their hope of having children, which are coupled with an under resourced maternity leave and childcare sector (Woodman and Leccardi 2015: 65).

Similarly I have argued that this growing employment insecurity gives a new significance to social and cultural capital, and creates new challenges for building and maintaining the relationships that can provide such resources (Woodman and Wyn, 2015: Chapter 7). The spread of precarious work up the class structure among young people does not diminish the impact of 'class' in young lives but refigures its workings in significant ways (Woodman, 2010). Alongside others, I am aiming to trace the twists and turns of the dynamics of social inequality of

inequality in young lives, using the concept of generations to guard against reducing inequalities in young lives to a mechanical reproduction of existing social positions.

Largely youth scholars that are now drawing on the concept of generation do so to add attention greater explicit attention to generational processes into youth studies, alongside and not to replace or diminish attention to gender, race, sexuality, disability and class. The aim is to avoid the lopsidedness identified by Murdock and McRon (2006). The best work goes beyond ‘adding’ generation into the mix, but looks at the intersection of generational and other social locations. Asking how class, gender and race (and related structuring of inequalities) are being made in the lives of young people in contemporary conditions (Woodman 2013, 1.2).

### **Contemporary critiques**

As an ‘undervalued legacy’ (Pilcher 1994) that is now achieving greater recognition, the concept of generations has not received the same development and critical attention as some other key concepts in youth studies. Several recent critiques from within youth studies have questioned the value of efforts to return to and build on this legacy. Some are simple reproductions of earlier criticisms leveled at functionalist approaches for dismissing inequality and difference, particularly based on class (Pollock 2008; France and Roberts 2015). These are misdirected now as they were misdirected in the past when they were applied to the sociology of generations. However, important questions have been raised about the way the temporal and spatial range of a generation is conceptualized, the criteria for identifying generational shifts, and the way relationships across generations are understood (Goodwin and O’Connor 2009; France and Roberts 2015).

Mannheim was critical of any approach to generations that claimed generations emerged like clockwork at regular intervals (whether due to biological or historical factors). Instead a social generation emerges from variant sociological processes interacting with the life course, and was hence non-uniform and place specific, relying on the ‘trigger action of social and cultural processes’ (Mannheim, 1952: 310). He did not, however, give detail on what these trigger actions were and since this time no clear and widely accepted criteria have emerged. Different authors emphasize different criteria (economic, political, cultural, or demographic) or a particular mix of criteria that they see as decisive in generational shifts, or for distinguishing generational

units. It seems unlikely that shared and uncontested guidelines on how to define the emergence of a generation will emerge. Those in search of clear definitions will probably prefer more precise, if arguably less theoretically rich concept of ‘cohort’, such as the ‘class of 1999’ or the ‘birth cohort of 1980’, which is used particularly in quantitative research on the life course (Ryder 1965). Despite lack of agreement on what exactly marks out the emergence of a new generation or when it begins, descriptions of the current generation in much of the Global North and sometimes even in the South tend to share salient features. These include the experience of precarious employment, higher levels of education, digital communications facilitating wider cultural flows and new attitudes towards relationships and career.

This has led to proposals that we are witnessing the rise of a global generation (Edmunds and Turner 2005; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2009). Yet there remain vast differences and vast inequalities within and between different parts of the world and place remains important to designating generational change. The concept of a global generation is meaningful in at least one sense; there is more of significance in young lives than ever before that ignores established borders. Across the great diversity and inequality, contemporary young lives do in very many cases look different to their parents’ lives at the same point, as previous ways of living become impossible or too costly for them to pursue, even if they desire to do so. Young people are responding by reimagining work, family and mobility, and indeed they become one of the forces driving social change by doing so (see Woodman and Wyn 2015: Chapter 8).

This global social change does not necessarily diminish intergenerational relationships or solidarity. Goodwin and O’Connor (2009: 23) highlight that the concept of generations will impoverish youth studies if it leads scholars to ignore the conflicts and solidarities within families and across generations. However, accounting for generational change can also support a deeper understanding of these relationships. Young people will face a different set of experiences and challenges to those faced by the previous generation at a similar life point, even in cases where they share other social locations. This creates new challenges for educating and supporting young people. The challenge is not insurmountable, because social change is never so fundamental that one generation becomes so alien to the previous that communication becomes impossible. In the context of generational change Mannheim notes that different generations can

learn from each other, '[n]ot only does the teacher educate his pupil, but the pupil educates his teacher too' (Mannheim, 1952: 301).

While such intergenerational learning and solidarity is often of great value to young people in general, it also provides the mechanism through which social advantage and inequality is produced. There will be greater complexity, anxiety and indeterminacy in this process of recreating social position when a new social generation emerges as even well-resourced parents (and their children) will face greater uncertainty about how to invest these resources in their children as circumstances change. Yet in such conditions some are better equipped to take advantage of the possibilities afforded by change (Bourdieu 1984: 357–8). Cultural capital is 'inherited' but, most sharply in periods of more substantial social change, it has to be creatively put to use (Snee and Devine 2014). The sociology of generations is not seeking to replace the study of class, gender – or even those central pillars of youth studies, cultures and transitions – but to provide a lens that avoids the conflation of class and gender inequality with stability. In my work I use generations to ask how advantages pass across the generations in times of change (Woodman, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Conceptualizing youth in terms of transitions, culture or citizenship is now well established. Less established, despite a long history, is a social generational approach to thinking about youth. My work (with others, particularly Johanna Wyn) has explored and aimed to develop such an approach. Changing patterns of work, study, living arrangements and cultural flows point to new socio-historical economic and policy formation that are doing more than changing transitions or youth culture. Instead, social change and young people's role in creating this change has reshaped the types of adulthoods to which they can reasonably aspire.

The concept of generations needs further debate and development, as is the fate of all sociological concepts that are useful. It is worth doing so because it provides a way to integrate the study of social change, increasingly global in nature, with the experience of the socially shaped life course, including youth and young adulthood. While some attention to the broader contextual conditions of youth is, by definition, part of all sociological approaches to youth studies, the sociology of generations arguably provides the framework that most explicitly links

social change, youth and the life course. Its central claim is that at particular points in time young people will face conditions different enough from those that faced the previous generation in their youth that many of the rules for making a life become uncertain and in substantive ways have to be rewritten, in ways that will have consequences in youth and across the life course.

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