SOCIAL GENERATION CONCEPT IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to show that the social generation concept, when accurately formulated, is an important tool, empirically as well as in theory, for academics who seek a richer, more methodical data of how and why societies are transformed through cohort substitution. Scholars, mostly outside the United States, have begun describing how the social generation as a cultural concept, provides new insights into the process of social change caused by cohort replacement. While theoretically compelling, these arguments still suffer from a lack of empirical evidence to support them, as did the older formulations of the generation concept. This illustrates the cultural resonance and power of the word generation because its meaning and usage have been almost entirely unaffected by academic efforts to dictate its appropriate boundaries. Academic and popular books on generations perpetuate the problems that have plagued the generation concept: the multiple definitions of the term, the theoretical richness of the concept combined with the lack of empirical evidence to support it, and the perpetuation of stereotypes based on a selective representative of facts. Academic works on generations are frequently focused on what Mannheim called generation units rather than any large or representative section of a cohort of people, as the word generation implies. I, therefore try to build on these efforts to theorize the "social generation" by defining the concept in light of Mannheim's seminal essay in the sociology of generations. This definition then offers the chance to empirically evaluate this theory of social generational change.

Keywords: Social change, generation, cohort, social generation, social structures, social reproduction.

HISTORY OF THE GENERATION CONCEPT IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

The concept of generation in the social sciences has a perturbing history. Since the initial formularization of the concept and its social implication in the early 20th Century, the generation concept has been plagued by a continual problem: it has always been more theoretically suggestive than analytically practical. Despite how essential the concept is in understandings of how societies change over time, minimally through the demographic metabolism of dying elders being replaced by newborn youth, empirically measuring generations and their effects has been extremely difficult. Perhaps because of the continuous, slow, and complex nature of this mechanism of social change, the phenomenon has been highly resistant to empirical verification or analysis using available research methods.

Seems that the intellectual history of the generation notion illustrates three ways that this dilemma manifests itself. The concept of generation is theoretically rich and the word has been used in academic and accepted discourses to imply a number of distinct things. In other words, the term has so many definitions that it has been difficult to develop a coherent body of theory and research around the concept.

In addition, empirical studies that were conducted explicitly on generations frequently failed to support the broad theory of generational change. Most scholarly research on generations has used survey techniques and methods of quantitative analysis to assess evidence of differences between generations and generational change over time. Patterns of generational

differences are frequently explained by these other variables instead, and thus interpreted as evidence against a theory of generational change. The narratives of generational differences in both popular and academic works are driven by stereotypes, in which social diversity is leveled and all people are assumed to think and act like the culturally leading group (usually middle-class people whose traits have been assumed to be typical in mainstream historical narratives about the periods in question). Scholars have tremendous incentives to marginalize the distinct experiences and worldviews of subordinated groups because they openly disagree with the presumed generational differences and destabilize the argument of generational change.

In the intellectual history of the generation concept, all three of these symptoms are persistent and intertwined, and I will not attempt to disentangle them in the pages that follow. Taken together, they help account for the marginal status of the concept in the social sciences in the late 20th Century. As I will argue, because of these problems, the large, socio-cultural generation concept was abandoned by scholars in the mid-1980s in favor of a narrower, more specific concepts. Despite the relative absence of social research and theorizing about this broad generation concept, the term has persisted in other popular and academic treatises on the subject. As a result, the stereotyped and caricatured conception of generations and generational change promoted by popular culture has gone accepted and is even supported by scholars. In recent years, the cultural turn in the social sciences has provided researchers with new hypothetical tools and new methods for studying the broad socio-cultural generation concept in ways that overcome some of its problems.

Poly-vocal Generation Concept of Karl Mannheim

Karl Mannheim's 1952 (1928) essay "The Problem of Generations" is broadly attributed to him as seminal work on the generation concept The importance of Mannheim's formulation lies in his distinction between the generation location, the generation as an actuality and the generation entity. Drawing from the Marxist theory, Mannheim uses the class as an analogy when talks about "generation." The social implication of a class rely upon further than sharing an ordinary location in the class configuration with others and it also depends upon the recognition of these individuals with one another, that is class awareness.

Location of generation is about the biological and sequential reality of being born in a particular place at a particular moment, whereas generation as an actuality refers to a concrete connection that is formed between members of a generation. This concrete connection does not refer to face-to-face relations, but rather to a type of collective approach that is due to the reality that this group came of age in the similar socio-historical setting. It refers to their sharing in the common destiny of this historical and social entity. The actual generation may then be more subdivided into generation entities groups inside the generation who proceed the material of their widespread experiences in different ways. Generation entities are similar to the mobilized groups of a specific class, because they are interacting social groups who share common courses in society and because they have reacted alike to their shared temporally and socially encounter with the social configuration.

Two of Mannheim's meanings are easy to determine, while the generation as an actuality is more complicated. What Mannheim termed the location of generation is what we nowadays call a cohort. What Mannheim termed the generation entities, is distinguishable social group of people who think and act in related ways, like a movement of a social group. Generation as an actuality of Mannheim refers to the ways that people of a particular cohort, in a particular

social setting, develop a characteristic cultural understanding of society based on their particular defined come across with it as the youth coming of age. Even though not each person in a generation as an actuality will have the same attitudes (that would be a generation entity), they may have related ways of "perception" of society.

Ideas of Mannheim's provides the essential distinctions for studying the implication of generations sociologically and a rationalization for why the concept has been used in such various and complicated ways. When someone uses the term generation, they might use the term in a number of ways. Especially regarding the generation as an actuality, distinctions of Mannheim are to some degree unclear and abstract. The generation as an actuality does not refer to an existing social group, nor is it simply defined temporally. It is this category of generation as an actuality that is the cause of much confusion.

Analysis of Social Generation Through 1985

The 1960s rapid social change appears to have encouraged scholars to explore on generational politics and generational analysis was a flourishing area of research in the 1960s and 1970s. Mannheim's essay provided scholars with rich theoretical basis on which to conduct empirical studies of social movements of the time. Reviews of the literature from that period (Braungart and Braungart, 1986) demonstrate important advances in theorizing the relationships among cohorts, aging, politics, and social change, but also pointed out persistent difficulties. For example, how to define the boundaries of generations, how to distinguish between cohorts and generations, and how to disentangle cohort or generational effects from other types of effects were questions that posed significant problems for empirical study.

With the exception of studies finding the generation entities concept useful, experimental studies of generational transform failed to generate results reliable with the theory. Even the generation unit concept appeared to fit comfortably in the burgeoning field of social movement research. When David I. Kertzer, in an important (1983) review essay on the generation concept, reiterated Ryder's (1965) argument that the term generation should be restricted to a narrow parent-child relations, the critique appears to have stuck. Kertzer argued that the perturbation of social science research on generations from 1970 to 1982 was related to the fact that the term was used in four different but related ways, signifying the principle of family background, differences among cohorts, stages in the course of life, and the influence of unique historical periods. According to Kertzer's view, the conceptual confusion was an impediment to further academic understanding of generational processes defined broadly. Importantly, in arguing that the meaning of generation should be restricted, he insisted that the distinction is merely terminological, required for greater analytical precision, and that it should in no way be viewed as a limit on sociological inquiry.

Kertzer's argument appears to have resonated, at least to a degree, because academic interest in generations as a socio-cultural occurrence largely vanished only a few years later, with a few important exceptions (Scott, 2000). Association to argue for integrating the insights of aging, life course, cohort succession, and structural change in a single theory of the sociological significance of aging, the large theoretical ground covered by the generation concept was not the subject of much scholarly research (Riley and Riley Jr., 1999). The generation concept after 1985 was used predominantly by scholars of aging and the life course (Hareven, 1994). Studies of how society changed over time because of different attitudes, values, and orientations of successive cohorts were carried out under the rubric of

cohort analysis, not generational analysis. Scholars used quantitative techniques in increasingly sophisticated ways to distinguish among the various types of age, cohort, and period effects. In each of these fields of research, greater achievements have been made in our understanding of how society changes over time, and prescription of Kertzer appears to have been successful.

Other Studies of Generations

Despite the relative dearth of social research on the broad, socio-cultural generation concept, scholars in different disciplines and public intellectuals continued to publish books on generations and generational change, using the broad, socio-cultural meaning of the word. Indeed, outside the domain of peer-reviewed research, discourse and writing about generations to indicate how different cohorts appear to think and act differently as a result of how society changes over time continued unabated. The terminological clarification that appeared to be so productive in the certain disciplines had no effect on how the word "generation" was used in popular culture. Even scholars themselves continue to use the word "generation" in its broad, socio-cultural sense in informal contexts.

In one sense, this illustrates the cultural resonance and power of the word "generation" because its meaning and usage have been almost entirely unaffected by academic efforts to dictate its appropriate boundaries. In another sense, this illustrates the unintended consequences of the broad generation concept's disappearance from sociological research. Far from solving the problem, the elimination of the socio-cultural meaning of generation from social research may have exacerbated it, because the term continues to be used in the absence of rigorous scrutiny by the group of people best situated to make the term theoretically valid and analytically useful: social scientists.

First, academic works on generations are frequently focused on what Mannheim called "generation entities" rather than any large or representative section of a cohort of people, as the word "generation" implies. Wohl's (1979) study of "the generation of 1914" is a study of a handful of European intellectuals whose writings were influenced by World War I. Similarly, Wyatt's (1993) study of "the Vietnam generation" is a work of literary criticism of writers whose works bear the imprint of the turmoil of the late 1960s. Sociologists Whalen and Flacks (1989) have produced a detailed account of how the lives and attitudes of countercultural activists from the 1960s evolved over time is misleading about the scope of the book and about people's experiences of the 1960s. While the books have merit in their own right, they perpetuate a common problem of generational analysis in that they stereotype a much larger cohort of people by focusing only on a small section of that cohort. To draw any conclusions about the "actual generation" from the experiences of these generation units would be unwarranted.

The second type of scholarly and popular works about generations have been written about cohorts that span 15-25 year periods. Premised on the understanding that generations are defined by the birth years of people during roughly fixed intervals of time, this type of study attempts to define the collective personality of each generation/cohort that distinguishes it from the past and future generations/cohorts. These works also tend to result in the stereotyping and caricaturing of large groups of people according to a small sub-section of each cohort, because the authors use some combination of logical fallacies to make inappropriate generalizations of the entire cohort based on a handful of isolated observations.

Taken together, these academic and popular books on generations perpetuate the problems that have plagued the generation concept throughout the Twentieth Century: the multiple definitions of the term, the theoretical richness of the concept combined with the lack of empirical evidence to support it, and the continuation of misrepresenting based on selective information. If these works were mere promotion strategies, they would not be cause for considerations, but they are produced by professors and sold to the public as non-fiction rather than science-fiction (they are, after all, mostly fantastical imaginations of a society grounded loosely in a handful of scientific facts). In the lack of rigorous research on the broad generation concept, such works hold on the mantle of valid research on generations, while at the same time spreading misleading and potentially damaging stereotypes of whole cohorts of people. If the generation concept is ever to be successfully theorized and integrated into legitimate social science, improved scholarly engagement with generational theory and its constant problems is necessary.

Cultural Turn in Generational Theory

In the last two decades, there has been a revival in generational theorizing by a handful of scholars outside the United States. Inspired by the cultural turn in the social sciences, these scholars have brought a more explicit perspective to bear on Mannheim's original formulation of "The Problem of Generations". Scholars have therefore begun to theorize the generation concept in Bourdieuian terms and his influence can be seen when they describe the generation as "a mode of distinction" and as a distinct, temporally located cultural field within which individuals participate as generational agents. Drawing from discursive theory, Corsten (1999) describes generations in terms age-groups that share regulations and vocabularies to interpret and articulate their observation of social actuality.

Taken together, this theoretical revisioning is essentially an updating of Mannheim's generation as an actuality in the language of social research. If a generation as an actuality is constituted when similarly social groups participate in a common destiny and in the ideas which are in some way bound up with its describing. Cultural sociologists might interpret this that this group of people shares a general cultural structure of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1980), deriving from their shared temporal and social location. To engage the same actual generation means that members are part of the same cohort and also have similar positions in the social configuration, such that they develop common cultural repertoires. Those common repertoires appear next in particular attitudes and beliefs, discourses, practices and collective memories. Like actual generation of Mannheim, to demonstrate such widespread cultural practices does not mean that the individuals all know each other or that they all have the same opinion with each other; but they occupy comparable temporal and social positions and their cultural repertoires are likewise formed.

To distinguish this cultural notion of generations from the kinship-descent definition of generation and from cohort I follow the terminology of Esler (1984) and Pilcher (1994), who describe this as the "social generation" concept. I define the social generation as *the cultural and social psychological process through which groups of people, defined intersectionally by cohort and social location, encounter a particular configuration of social structures and in turn, typically in young adulthood, develop a particular cultural repertoire that they use in the further elaboration of attitudes and actions*.

The social generation concept is therefore similar to other collective concepts that brought the relationship among the social world in which a person lives and their cultural repertoire, the

ways in which social structures and cultures in which a person moves contour their worldviews. In particular, the idea of the social generation calls our attention to the additional ways that time and historical period shapes social structures and experiences of individuals within them.

Empirical research drawing on this cultural view of generations shows that the social generation concept is useful for analyzing age-related differences in collective memories, identities, and perceptions of society. For example, research in collective memories shows that people of all ages, when asked to name important events in the past 50 years, tended to name events that occurred during adolescence or early adulthood and that were especially important in the area of the country in which they lived (Schuman and Scott, 1989). Other works have shown that people's memories and understanding of the past are shaped by both their subjective experiences and the social context of the present (Roberts and Lang, 1985; Schwartz, 1996). Several types of political and collective identities have also been shown to be affected by prominent events or societal trends that occurred during people's formatives years, and that those identities remain fairly stable over time (Alwin and Krosnick, 1991; Hout and Fischer, 2002; Weil, 1987).

The cultural turn in sociology, methodologically, has provided new ways of utilizing qualitative analysis to show how views and practices are indicators of the ways that personal worldviews are shaped by social structures. Qualitative interviewing allow to analyze the participant's understanding of the world in the course of life, values, beliefs, attitudes and experiences. For instance, Swidler (2001) used qualitative interviews to explain how people draw from different cultural understandings of affection according to different situations. In the same way, Lamont (1992) compared interviews of American and French upper-middle class individuals to show how symbolic restrictions are constructed in different societies. Focus group interviewing has also been used effectively to gain insight into the shared values and cultural understandings of a group because they approximate the communicative contexts of people's everyday lives. Gamson (1992), for example, used focus groups to show the different cognitive resources such as experiential knowledge, common sense, and media discourse, that people used to make sense of social issues.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The cultural turn in social sciences has breathed new life into the generation concept, both theoretically and methodologically. But can a reformulated social generation concept overcome the persistent difficulties associated with generational analysis? In particular, does the social generation concept provide the analytic insight into empirical data that can match its broad theoretical appeal? A strong empirical test of the social generation concept is warranted to determine whether the concept should be rescued from or relegated to the archives of social science research. Does the social generation concept add to or detract from our ability to analyze and understand social reproduction and social change? That is the ultimate theoretical significance of this article.

Social generation concept can be analytically useful for helping scholars explain cohort effects and social change if the concept is conceptualized and operationalized in ways that are consistent with Mannheim's notion of "generation as an actuality". First, social generational analysis must not use simple cohort measures, juxtaposed with other competing variables, like educational attainment. Rather, social generational analysis must be intersectional, taking into account how people's cultural repertoires are shaped simultaneously by cohort location

and social location within the cohort. Comparisons of a dependent variable must be made simultaneously across and between cohorts in order to accurately measure the ways in which repertoires are shaped by a person's encounter with historically-specific social structures.

This final definition of the social generation concept overcomes constant difficulties related with generational analysis because building meeting points into the concept limits the risk of stereotyping an entire cohort based on one small group of the cohort and it does not treat factors other than "cohort" as competing factors. Analysis of social generation must be relational, not only because distinct social generational patterns must constantly derive their distinction with other social groups, but also since the concept implies a dialectical relationship between social structural change connected with historical periods and experiences of individuals and constructions of those changes. This formulation of the social generation concept requires that we take into account relationality at the macro level of analysis (how social structures change in different historical periods), at the micro level of analysis (how the cultural repertoires and practices of some social groups are different from those of other groups), and at the exchange between macro and micro levels of analysis (how micro-level repertoires and practices both reflect and create macro-level social structural change).

Finally, the social generation must be understood as a process or collection of processes rather than as a social group. One of the continuing shortcomings in both generational and cohort research has been the inadequate differentiation between the groups of people and the cultural and social psychological processes that are presumed to account for cohort differences among those groups. By concentrating the analysis on the social generational processes of the formation and articulation of cultural repertoires, rather than on cohorts or on subgroups of cohorts, we gain both theoretical and analytical precision on the relationship between individuals and their social contexts that has too often been simply taken for granted.

By operationalizing the social generation concept in this way, I have builded on Mannheim's "generation as an actuality" and the cultural turn in social sciences in order to demonstrate empirically the analytic power of social generational processes in explaining patterns of social reproduction and social change. While the theory has always been central to our sociological understandings of cohorts, aging and the life course, and political dynamics, its empirical application has typically failed to meet expectations.

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