



CRESC Working Paper Series

Working Paper No. 117

**Concepts of generation and their empirical application:
from social formations to narratives – a critical appraisal and
some suggestions**

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November 2012

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the empirical application of the concept of generation and suggests solutions to some problematic issues. By describing generations first as social formations of the present, and second as rooted in a shared past, some assumptions of research on generations, which are often only implicit (such as what defines a generation, or about the existence of a formative period in life), are made explicit and discussed. For the purpose of a clear separation of the concepts of cohort and generation, a strict notion of generations as social formations with a shared world view and a generational consciousness is favoured. Furthermore, the relation of generations as social formations to generations as narratives and discursive constructs is unpacked; these two approaches overlap but are not identical. Exemplifying different sociological perspectives on the social world, they can be put into a fruitful dialogue with each other.

Concepts of generation and their empirical application: from social formations to narratives – a critical appraisal and some suggestions

1. Introduction

The concept of generation has become ubiquitous in sociological research.¹ Yet, in many cases, what the term refers to remains vague, with each publication defining its own version of it. In general terms, the concept of (social, historical or political) generations links socio-historical change with the fact that individuals in all societies are born, live for a certain time, and then die. The concept can be seen as an answer to the question of how historical time and individual time are integrated, as well as how social change comes about.² It thus connects micro- and macro levels of sociological analysis (Hardy & Waite 1997; Kohli & Szydlik 2000). In empirically oriented applications, the reference to generations is mostly aimed at explaining why specific subgroups of a population, which are usually defined by their similar age, think or behave differently to others, and how this contributes to social or cultural change.

The reference to generations is one way of analysing how change ‘happens’ exactly. Generational explanations compete with other accounts of socio-cultural change, and can be contrasted with theories of socio-cultural reproduction. These deal with aspects of the social and cultural order that are reproduced over generations i.e. that only change very slowly.³ The most important focus of related research is on families, where cultural or economic resources are transmitted between genealogical generations (see for example Bertaux & Thompson 1997, Scherger & Savage 2011).

This article critically examines how the concept of generation is used in sociological research, with the focus on historical or social generations defined by their temporal position in history. This meaning of ‘generation’ is not to be confused with the one referring to genealogical or family generations which denotes positions in lines of descent within families.⁴ However, family generations are connected to historical generations and will, therefore, also be mentioned. I will identify contentious issues in empirically oriented research on generations and gaps that need to be filled if the concept is to be applied precisely and cogently. Furthermore, I also suggest possible solutions to these issues, in particular a strict notion of generation which is clearly separated from that of cohorts, and a separation of ‘generation’ as a social formation on the one hand, and a discursive construct on the other.

In the subsequent two sections, the concept of generation is analysed in more detail by focusing on two central aspects: generations as social formations of the present and generations as social formations comprising members who have a shared historical-biographical past. Section two discusses the different kinds of social facts that are seen as defining generations as formations of the present, and how these different approaches relate to Mannheim’s classical view on the problem of generations. Section three examines generations as social formations whose members are connected because they have had the same formative biographical-historical experiences and thus share a past. The assumption of a single formative period in individual life is questioned and relativised, and further underlying assumptions are made explicit and discussed. Section four tackles the problem of how the notion of generation can be delineated from that of cohort since both are often used in similar contexts and with overlapping meanings. A rigorous and narrow notion of generation is advocated, in order to distinguish clearly between the terms cohort and generation. Section five introduces another concept of generation, different from that proposed so far: generations as discursive constructs which fulfil the communicative function of dealing with the fact that people living at the same time have experienced different historical pasts and, based on this,

interpret the present differently. I will argue that the previously outlined notion of generations as social formations and the idea of generations as narratives do not exclude each other but are, rather, interdependent and overlapping with regard to the objects they refer to. Section six concludes the article with a list of questions and issues every empirical research project on generations should seek to answer.

2. Generations as social formations of the present

In its empirical applications, particularly those based on quantitative methods, the concept of generation usually consists of at least two parts: first, 'generation' is a category to describe part of the social structure of the present or any other time of observation, and implies similarities or a connection between the members of a generation. Second, the similarities or the connection originate in a shared past experience which is linked to the members being born and having grown up at around the same time, as well as being the same age in relation to historical time. Both aspects contain several ambiguities.

The mere fact of having been born and growing up at around the same time and in the same geographical⁵ sphere is not enough to exhaust the concept of generation. Beyond this least common denominator, answers to the question of what a generation actually *is* range from it being a concrete social formation to a primarily analytical category. The majority of empirical studies on generations use further individual characteristics beyond the time of birth to define the term, always implying that these characteristics can be causally derived from having been born and growing up at the same time. These characteristics relate to the time of observation and they encompass the following:

- (1) the same or similar material living conditions (Chauvel 2006, 2009), sometimes condensed as a similar position in the structure of social inequality,
- (2) the same or similar behaviours in different areas such as politics, lifestyle, or consumption (Chauvel 2006, 2009; Higgs et al. 2009; Jones et al. 2009; Biggs & Phillipson 2007; Gilleard & Higgs 2002, 2005; Edmunds & Turner 2002; Kolb 2001; Weymann 2000),
- (3) the same or similar values, attitudes and interpretations, or a similar world view (Vincent 2005; Gilleard & Higgs 2002, 2005; Inglehart 1971, 1990; Sackmann & Weymann 1991; Krull & Kobayashi 2009; Edmunds & Turner 2002), and
- (4) a consciousness of belonging to a specific generation, i.e. a generational identity (Ben-Ze'ev & Lomsky-Feder 2009, Bude 2000).

While the points at the top of the list, such as living conditions, income, assets, and class, can easily be observed using standard instruments of survey research, the operationalisation of the other common characteristics of a generation is increasingly complex further down the list. A shared world view (which can be seen as an integrated set of values and attitudes determining an individual's interpretive perspective) and a generational consciousness as a whole can only with difficulty be observed using solely quantitative methods. Hence, in research using the more complex notions of generation, the use of qualitative methods is more predominant than in studies which restrict their observations to the first two points in the above list. However, even if studies are limited to one of the points on the list, they often make implicit or explicit assumptions about the relationship between this and other outcomes. For example, they draw conclusions by referring to behaviours as indicators of similar values, attitudes and world views, which is more plausible in some cases (such as voting behaviour) and less plausible in others (such as consumption). The extrapolation from what are the objects of empirical observation (e. g. behaviours or similar living conditions) to what is seen as defining a generation (e.g. similar values and attitudes) should not be taken for granted, rather it should

be made explicit and discussed. Otherwise there is the danger of researchers creating generations at their desks, as Rosenthal remarks (2000: 163).

The more challenging idea at the bottom of the list of generational ‘outcomes’, generations as social formations consisting of members who are conscious of their generational belonging, is closely connected to Karl Mannheim’s (1952/1928) fundamental study on “The problem of generations”. For him, generations are potential collective actors who share a common generational location. This common generational location cannot be reduced to contemporaneity, but implies participation in “the same historical and social circumstances” which, in Mannheim’s time at least, coincides with a life in the same “historical and cultural region” (Mannheim 1952/1928: 298, 303). However, participating in the same historical and social circumstances does not necessarily lead to the formation of a generation: a “common destiny” and “concrete bond” between those in the same generational location, arising from the experience of the “same concrete historical problems” (Mannheim 1952/1928: 303-304), is needed for them to form an actual generation. Actual generations define and interpret their shared biographical-historical location in the same way. Within these actual generations, which only appear under certain historical circumstances such as quick historical and social change, different generational units (re)act differently or even antagonistically to each other and their shared interpretation of the world (see also Corsten 1999: 254). In Mannheim’s view, a generational unit does not need to be a group in which every member is in direct interaction with each other. However, the generational unit has its origin in such a concrete small group “which has developed the most essential new conceptions which are subsequently developed by the unit” (Mannheim 1952/1928: 307).

Mannheim’s concept of generation has strongly influenced sociological thinking about generations (for more detail see Pilcher 1994; Attias-Donfut 1988: 58-66). As for the application of the concept within empirical research, some confusion has arisen from Mannheim’s distinction between actual generations and generational units. Only very few empirical studies refer to “generational units” (see Ben-Ze’ev & Lomsky-Feder 2009). The simple and most frequently used notion of generation can refer to both actual generations and generational units in Mannheim’s terminology. Not dissimilar to Mannheim’s generational units, Edmunds and Turner (2002: 17) suggest “strategic generations” to define those generations which “can create a potent generational consciousness or ideology of political change that is sufficient to bring about significant social change”.⁶ Many studies, concerning the defining criterion of a generation, oscillate between the participation “in a common destiny” and the “identity of responses” to the shared experience (Mannheim 1952/1928: 306).⁷

Another problem associated with the above approaches to generations as formations of the present is intragenerational variation (Kohli 1996: 7). As in research on other social formations which are not clearly defined in social life and whose conceptualisation serves analytical purposes, empirical research on generations must be able to deal with intragenerational variation and to stipulate how uniform the attitudes of an age group must be to call them a generation (see Edmunds & Turner 2002: 19f). Coupled with the problem of intragenerational variation, the relationship of a generation to other socio-structural categories, in particular gender, class⁸ and ethnicity (see Alwin & McCommon 2007: 227; Edmunds & Turner 2002: 19f; for an example see Inglehart 1971⁹) must be qualified. In many cases, some kind of interaction can be expected. Certain generational formations are closely connected to or “nested into” (Vincent 2005: 584) one of these categories (think of student movements, generations of feminists or immigrants). It clearly makes sense to retain Mannheim’s notion of the generational unit when a generation consists of several clearly definable subgroups based on the same historical-biographical experience but reacting to this in different ways. These different generational units can then be closely related to class membership, for example (Laufer & Bengtson 1974).

Moreover, defining the boundaries of a generation is not possible without referring to people who are born earlier or later than the given generation. In this sense, every use of the term is relational; a specific generation can be economically privileged, show innovative behaviour, attitudes, or a generational consciousness only in comparison to another generation or cohort (see Marshall 1984: 210, Corsten 1999: 267). Conflicts and struggles over economic, social and cultural resources and positions are an important way in which generations form (Edmunds & Turner 2002: 19; Vincent 2005; Kohli 1996: 2; Giesen 2004: 36), and they always take place between two or more generations. Accordingly, to define a generation not only implies qualifying it from within, but also determining its outside boundaries with other generations (see also Kohli 1996: 7). This delineation of generations will rarely be exact and more often a matter of qualifying differences rather than quantifying members and non-members, and the relating temporal boundaries will be blurry¹⁰ (Alwin & McCammon 2003: 41; Marshall 1984: 215). There are members of a birth cohort at the core of a generational unit and others outside of it. Moreover, there may be people who are born earlier or later than the generation in question but who nonetheless belong to that generation, as forerunners or laggards (Mannheim 1952/1928: 308). To continue the discussion of what qualifies a generation from within, I will now move on to consider the second part of a generational explanation of age differences: a shared past.

3. Generations as social formations whose members share a past

Observing a number of people who are born at the same time and who show similarities in behaviour, attitudes or generational consciousness can only be a starting point when applying the concept of generation and putting forward an explanation of these similarities. Implicitly or explicitly, speaking of a generation involves explaining these similarities by reference to the contemporaneous lives of its members. Being born and then growing up at around the same historical time means experiencing the same historical events and circumstances at a similar age which, in turn, leads to similar living conditions, behaviours, attitudes, world views and a generational consciousness – this is the shortest and most general version of a theory of generational formation. Of particular importance here are the “formative years” when, in the words of Mannheim (1928/1952: 296-298), a “natural view” of the world is developed and this brings about a similar “stratification of experience” in all members of an actual generation. For Mannheim, these formative years end at around the age of 17, although he never insists on concrete age boundaries and cites findings which set the end of the formative phase at around 25 years of age.

This outline of a theory of generations contains a number of implicit assumptions which need to be unpacked and questioned despite, or perhaps because of, the everyday plausibility of the general idea. Two minor points to begin with: first, the nature of formative experiences in youth and early adulthood is not completely clear. Corsten’s remark (2001: 39) that formative impressions are only provided by those influences which affect the individual’s daily practice is plausible, but remains to be demonstrated empirically. The research on generations frequently concentrates on single and particularly traumatic historical events, which offer the advantage of being clear, convenient references. Indeed, the formation of an actual generation is more probable in times of quick historical change which implies several successive or incisive events (Mannheim 1928/1952: 311), and these events may serve as anchors of individual and collective memory. However, less dramatic changes or experiences, which cannot be reduced to single events, may have similar formative effects (see Attias-Donfut 1988: 169; also Rosenthal 2000: 165). In contrast to an area of empirical quantitative enquiry very much oriented towards single defining events (see for example Schuman & Scott 1989), most of Mannheim’s examples refer to the history of ideas which is much less defined by single events. It seems productive to assume that formative influences can take different forms, whether single events, a chain of events, or even slower developments. Furthermore, these can occur in very different social spheres such as politics, culture and economy (which

is the reason why Kohli & Szydlik (2000) distinguish between political, cultural and economic generations).

A second assumption implicit in the concept of generation relates to the cognitive impression produced by formative influences. Given that Mannheim's idea of a generation is developed as part of his sociology of knowledge which deals with the relationship between individual cognition and socially constructed ideas, this dimension is crucial to his approach (see for example Sackmann & Weymann 1991, Attias-Donfut 1988: 210ff). How the individual stratification of experience is built up through socio-historical impressions remains to be spelled out. Here, the recourse to evidence from developmental psychology (see Attias-Donfut 1988: 210) and to research on collective memories (see for example Maurice Halbwachs 1950) will be useful.

This leads to the third underlying presupposition of generational explanations to be discussed: the assumption of a formative period in an individual life. By referring to generations, the replacement of cohorts is prioritised in the explanation of (some areas of) social change (see Bengtson et al. 1974). It is assumed that cohorts or generations retain some stable features, so that change occurs when cohorts who die are replaced by new ones. This explanation of change is based on individual stability, and it is complemented by competing assumptions suggesting that individuals change during their life time, either because they age or go through socially defined life stages, or due to socio-historical change, which affects them regardless of their age or date of birth. The latter is commonly called a period effect (Alwin & McCammon 2003, 2007; Bengtson et al. 1974¹¹). On closer inspection, the assumption of a formative phase or "impressionable years" (Alwin & McCammon 2003: 34) is rather bold and can be contested. The least problematic aspect is the varying definition of when exactly the 'formative years' of an individual occur. More importantly, individual stability after a formative phase and throughout the life course may only apply to some fields of observation, like deep-seated beliefs and attitudes. There may be times of developmental stability in adult life, and other periods when individual attitudes and beliefs are restructured, for example due to a change in social roles, traumatic experiences, or geographical moves (Alwin & McCammon 2003: 34-39; also Attias-Donfut 1988: 222). Empirical evidence from socialisation research, for instance, demonstrates ongoing socialisation processes in adult life (Settersten 2002, Settersten & Owens 2002, Hagestad 1987), and research on cognitive development finds lifelong learning in some areas at least (Baltes & Staudinger 1996). Likewise, individual cognitive or developmental stability and openness are probably not completely fixed but dependent on socio-historical circumstances and on the socially structured life course (Attias-Donfut 1988: 144-157; Ryder 1965: 859). This can be considered a hitherto neglected interaction between ageing and life course effects on one hand, and cohort on the other. Recent debates surrounding lifelong learning and the capabilities of older employees exemplify this interaction (Usher & Edwards 2007). Against this backdrop, the statistical separation of cohort, period and ageing (or life course) effects is not only a challenging task (Glenn 2003), but can also be seen as somewhat artificial (Attias-Donfut 1988: 155-6). Despite this, there is evidence for persisting cohort effects in some fields (Alwin & McCammon 2003: 40-41, Brim & Kagan 1980), and the argument for lasting consequences of formative phases cannot generally be discounted.¹² Thus, every generational argument must specify both the field and kind of observation it is related to, giving associated empirical confirmation. This would ideally include competing evidence of potential period, ageing or life course influences. Some generational arguments will, of course, fail this test (see for example Twigg & Majima 2010). In many cases, a generational argument will typically be about the relatively strong, but not comprehensive, impact of a formative phase.

That many, or even most, processes of generational 'imprinting' take place in youth and early adulthood is very plausible and corroborated by research on the development of personal identities in adolescence (see Corsten 1999: 263). The structure of modern educational institutions, which facilitate peer group contact, substantiates the importance of youth and

early adulthood (Corsten 1999: 261). To put this argument into a more general frame, it is the relatively standardised, ‘normal’ life course, prevailing in modern societies (see Kohli 1986), which provides an important background to the formation of generations; the similar age in which the members of a generation experience important events only becomes meaningful because it is closely linked to similar transitions and related biographical challenges (Corsten 2001). This is why the formation of generations seems to be a particular feature of modern societies. Because of the institutional framing of momentous educational and occupational transitions, the degree of age-related standardisation is higher in the first 25 or 30 years of individual life. Nevertheless, the general argument ought to be opened up to include the possibility of formative phases taking place later in later life (see Rosenthal 2000: 164). The fall of the wall in Germany and the consequent dissolution of the German Democratic Republic, for example, led to the formation of a generation of former GDR citizens who had lost their jobs in their 50s and experienced an enforced early retirement. For this ‘lost’ generation, it is not (primarily) their youth in the early years of the GDR, but the shared experience of their premature retirement and the devaluation of their careers which determines their worldview (see Wolf 1991).

In summary, contending that similar characteristics, behaviours, attitudes or world views within birth cohorts, and differences between such cohorts, can be attributed to their membership in a generation, is merely the starting point of a substantive explanation, which only provides an idea of the underlying influences and their temporal structure. This must be substantiated by qualifying the supposed formative historical experience it stems from, and by answering how and why this experience has affected the cohort in question, rather than its younger and older contemporaries.¹³ As Hardy and Waite (1997: 15) argue, explaining the exact causes of cohort, period and age effects is the “ultimate goal”. If one had complete information on all relevant influences, cohort or generational categories (or that of age and period) could be replaced by substantive variables measuring the underlying causes.

4. Generations and cohorts

The discussion above testifies to the vagueness of what exactly qualifies a generation. A definite answer to the question of what the concept actually relates to, and which of the aforementioned criteria is the “right” or appropriate one, is first and foremost a matter of convention; such convention, though, would help the respective research to become more easily comparable. This, alongside other pragmatic reasons, can help to establish which meaning of ‘generation’ is most useful, in that it is viable in empirical research and provides a conceptual instrument which contributes to a better understanding of social change.

To define a concept literally implies determining its boundaries in relation to other ideas, so the relation of ‘generation’ to other concepts is essential. A competing notion is that of (birth) cohorts¹⁴ which is often used in similar ways to the term generation. Because of its confusingly multiple uses, Kertzer (1983) argues that ‘generation’ should be limited to contexts of family descent. Ryder (1965: 853) advocates the abandonment of the multi-faceted concept of generation and its replacement by ‘cohort’, and some researchers follow his suggestion (see for example Elder, Jonson & Crosnoe 2003). However, what Ryder (1965) presents as cohorts in his classical text, is, in its breadth, far beyond what is usually referred to as generations. The notion of cohort can accommodate every kind of phenomenon related to the fact of cohort members being born and growing up at around the same time. This includes all of the points aforementioned, such as economic position, living conditions, behaviours, attitudes and world views.¹⁵ Most empirical research on cohorts deals with quantitative observation of unequal living conditions, behaviours and attitudes. One focus is on how transitions in youth and early adulthood, and their institutional conditions, shape the subsequent lives of different cohorts. The supply of training positions, university places, and posts for those entering the job market varies historically, and this can have long lasting

consequences for those cohorts entering the education system or the labour market. This is particularly true when they enter these systems under especially favourable or unfavourable conditions, such as economic crises or upswings, or the size of the birth cohort itself (Ryder 1965: 845; Easterlin 1980; White 1992; Sackmann 1998: 89-149) which corresponds to a higher or lower degree of competition for jobs or student places. A current related discussion revolves around the effects of cutbacks in welfare state provision, particularly old age security, on different birth cohorts (see Leisering 2000). However, the permanency of “scarring effects” (Chauvel 2006, 2009) or cohort advantages, and whether they can be compensated later on, depends on many factors. These effects on the life chances of cohorts do not only occur in youth and adulthood. Nonetheless, in most modern societies it is in youth and early adulthood when the course of the individual’s occupational career is set.¹⁶

If the cohort concept has led to so much fruitful research then why not follow Ryder’s advice and give up the term generation with its confusing ambiguities? What exactly will be lost if we renounce the notion of generation in favour of the more neutral term cohort? I would like to contend that it is productive and conducive to empirical research to adhere to a strict definition of generations as groups sharing a similar culture, worldview and identity. Only such a strict and reduced definition ensures that the concept of generation and that of cohort are clearly delimited from each other (see Sackmann & Weymann 1991: 251; Kohli & Szydlik 2000: 9; Edmunds & Turner 2002: 6f; Alwin & McCommon 2003, 2007; for a slightly different perspective, see Marshall 1984). Alwin and McCommon, for example, argue that it is a richer concept than that of cohorts: it adds something to our understanding of change which cannot adequately be placed into the same category as other cohort effects.

Giving up the notion of generation would, on one hand, mix very different phenomena: in some cases ‘cohort’ would refer to groups with shared identities and a consciousness of their common biographical-historical experience, in others it would only relate to people of the same age and with similar material living conditions or combinations of resources which can be traced back to some common objective circumstances in their earlier lives. On the other hand, using ‘generation’ to define phenomena already embraced by the notion of cohort, such as people with similar economic resources or consumption patterns, would mean using a complex concept for something that can be denominated more parsimoniously as a cohort (effect). The concept of cohorts is analytically precise because, in contrast to ‘generation’, it is purely analytical and comes without any underlying assumptions (see Corsten 1999: 252; also Marshall 1984: 208), which is also why it is much more popular in large-scale empirical research.

Whereas the concept of cohort is determined by the breadth of the easily quantifiable phenomena it denotes, the reverse is true for the concept of generation: strictly defined it refers to a special case of the formation of a collectively shared worldview and identity, originating in similar and similarly interpreted biographical-historical experience. Inherent in this restricted notion is the idea of generations as agents of social change and as “a matter of quality” (Alwin & McCommon 2003: 42-44; see also Marshall 1984). These qualifying features are much less accessible through quantification, and they are based on relatively stable individual characteristics. In such a rigorous approach, similar behaviour alone would not be enough to define a generation, it can only be an indication (and a presupposition) of a shared culture, worldview and identity. This link would, however, have to be supported by strong arguments or empirical evidence. Demonstrating the existence of a generation with a shared worldview and identity is a methodologically challenging task which, in quantitative-statistical enquiries, would require complex measures.¹⁷ Different access to a generational worldview is possible through investigating qualitative data material and reconstructing of a specific generational identity. Over and above direct qualitative and quantitative evidence, contextual information from other sources can also make the existence of a generation plausible. Ideally, all of these methods should be combined when investigating generational formations (Corsten 2001).

To sum up, this concept of generation and its relation to that of cohorts can be characterised as follows: generations and generational units are based on cohort phenomena and only form under special circumstances. They constitute potential collective agents and concrete social groups of people who share a distinctive culture, worldview or identity because they have lived through the same socio-historical events or circumstances at around the same time in their lives (see Alwin & McCammon 2003: 41). Research on cohorts can provide the backdrop to studies on the formation of generations, since the shared experience of generations can build upon similar objective conditions while growing up, and their lasting consequences. Such objective living conditions, though, do not necessarily lead to a shared worldview. Only sometimes permanent advantages or disadvantages are taken up by the affected individual actors and thus lead to the formation of a generation, and only sometimes they result in struggles over these resources between clearly defined generations.¹⁸ In comparison to cohort phenomena, which are a central dimension of social change, generational phenomena appear less often and are more complex to depict. The following section will highlight the interpretive dimension of generations from a different perspective.

5. Generations as discursive constructs and narratives

The weaknesses and missing links in a strict notion of generation imbued by the ideas of Mannheim cannot be overlooked. Matthes (1985) criticises the “group sociological” layout of Mannheim and his followers’ concept of generation. In his view, Mannheim does not think through the connection of the formation of generations to his own sociology of knowledge due to his focus on concrete social groups (see also Corsten 1999; Attias-Donfut 1988: 176ff). Hence, Matthes advocates a concept of generation which centres around generations as discursive constructs. Similar propositions are presented by Corsten (1999, 2001) and Attias-Donfut (1988; for examples see Bude 2000; Rosenthal 1998, 2000). Following these scholars, generations as discursive constructs form part of the cultural regulation of temporality (Matthes 1985: 367, Attias-Donfut 1992). As a predominantly cultural phenomenon, generations are sets of rules guiding one’s perception of the world and dealing with the problem that people living in the same historical period were born at different times and have, therefore, had different historical-biographical experiences.

Corsten (1999, 2001) sets out to describe this discursive construction of generations in more detail. In his discourse-based model of generations, groups of young people of the same age develop “generational semantics”. As a special kind of historical semantics¹⁹ which comprises “order[s] of meanings kept together by shared criteria for interpretation and expression” (Corsten 1999: 260), the development of generational semantics is facilitated by the institutionalised and standardised life course of modern societies, in which intense peer group contact in the education system facilitates the creation of “cultural circles” of adolescence (see also Attias-Donfut 1992: 428). The shared criteria for interpretation, articulation and self-thematisation which can emerge in these cultural circles enable adolescents to reconcile their social and personal identities; generational “we-groups” give a sense of belonging and location (Bude 2000). Generational identities and typifications are essentially relational in that they always relate to a context of several generations: defining the boundary to other generations is key to the self-thematisation of a generation. Although historical and familial generations must not be confused, the self-identification of an historical generation will, in many cases, take the parents of its members as reference even if the parents of a certain group do not form a generation due to widely differing ages. Thus families are among the communicative contexts in which generational self-thematisation and typification are negotiated (see Rosenthal 1998, 2000). Furthermore, genealogical generations and their relations are connected to welfare generations which can form as a result of cohort patterns in welfare redistribution (Kohli & Szydlik 2000: 16-17, Kohli 1996). In the discursive concept of generation, the collective interpretation of this redistribution, or of important events or periods, is essential.

Even if Corsten (1999, 2001) provides good reasons for why adolescence is particularly important for the self-thematisation of a generation, there is no reason to restrict the observation of these discursive processes crucial for constructing generations to this period of life. As Rosenthal (2000: 165-166) argues, the interpretation and reinterpretation of a generation's shared biographical-historical experiences does not stop at the age of 25 but continues, although a permanent reinterpretation does not seem plausible either. Instead, there will always be times and occasions when prevailing interpretations are re-structured, and these occasions will be closely linked to historical events and processes. These possible later re-structurations do not contradict the assumption of individual stability, implying a rearrangement of shared interpretation patterns which as such are relatively stable, rather than an arbitrary change. Furthermore, this re-arrangement is collectively negotiated and still based on the temporally stratified experiences of a birth cohort. Matthes (1985) and Attias-Donfut (1988, 1992: 430) also describe the discursive construction of generations as an ongoing process which is not only affected by the historical period, but also by the ageing of a generation and the passing through different roles for members of the generation during the course of their lives.²⁰ Thus, in the "stream of experience" and the "stories" of the members of a generation, ageing, life course, period and cohort or generational effects cannot be separated (Corsten 1999: 257-258). This indicates a different meaning of time in the concepts of cohort and generation, respectively. The broad cohort concept corresponds to a solely analytical approach which is able to dissect time. The underlying time concept is that of "logical time" (Corsten 1999: 256), which in other contexts might be called linear, abstract or quantitative time. In contrast, the discursive construction of a generation takes place in "historical time" (Corsten 1999: 256), which can also be called imagined, social or qualitative time.

From a more general perspective, generations as discursive constructs display the same characteristics as other kinds of narratives, and can be analysed using the three aspects of narratives described by Elliott (2005: 7-12): first, they have a temporal aspect, often expressed by the sequence in which events are presented and sometimes tied to assumptions about their underlying causality; second, they contain some kind of meaning that is communicated; and third, they incorporate a social aspect that relates to the target audience and its relation to the participants of a discourse. The temporal aspect of generational narratives just discussed is closely connected to their meaning, with generational discourses making sense of the contemporaneity of, and conflicts between, people born at different historical times. Frequently, an idea of causality is generated by linking the meaning of generational narratives and the temporal order of emerging generations: different generations are seen to hold different world views because they have grown up in different historical times. This implicit theory of daily life is very close to the sociological construction of generations, and the latter can be seen as second order narrative (Elliott 2005: 13; Marshall 1984: 216). Finally, the social aspect of generational narratives refers to the importance of the producer of a generational narrative or the participants of a generational discourse. In particular, constructions from within a generation, i.e. from people who see themselves as members of the generation discussed, can be discerned from external constructions.

Some of the authors focusing on the idea of generations as discursive constructs are in favour of abandoning the predominantly "group sociological" concept of generation discussed earlier. Both Matthes (1985) and Attias-Donfut (1988, 1992) advocate the transformation of the "group sociological" and "social structural" notion of generations (Matthes 1985: 369) into one that solely belongs to the field of cultural sociology. Generational relations move into focus and replace the notion of concrete single generations to the extent that the idea of concrete social groups is given up. There is indeed a tension, if not a conflict, between the sociological construction of generations (as discussed in the first four sections of this article) and the idea of a discursive construction of generations which has just been outlined. From a radical constructivist perspective, the sociological construction cannot necessarily claim more validity than the everyday construction of generations in discourses. Vice versa, many of the generations discursively constructed in daily life do not comply with the rather strict

sociological criteria for defining generations which were outlined in section four. This becomes very clear when looking at how fashionable generational labels are in the media (such as Generation X, Y, Z, generation me, generation online, or generation green), where they are coined on an almost daily basis.

Where a strict sociological generational concept which primarily views generations as potential collective actors sharing a worldview is not conceivable without these generations being constructed discursively, at least within themselves and as part of their self-identification process, discursively constructed generations as such need not be sociological generations in the sense outlined above, i.e. self-conscious groups whose members show similarities in attitudes and world views. Despite their differences, these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive, but overlap, and many of the cited authors use elements of both. Yet, these two approaches to the notion of generation tend to go together with different epistemological approaches to the social world, focusing either on structures in the form of groups, social action, their causal explanation and consequences, and very often capturing these by quantitative-statistical methods, or on narratives and discourses producing meaning and identification.²¹ Mannheim's classical contribution indirectly stresses the importance of interpretative processes. This points to the exciting potential of the concept of generation: namely to think these two perspectives of generations together, as two aspects of dealing with the problem that different birth cohorts living at the same time have different temporal perspectives and, connected to this, are confronted with different life chances. Generational discourses on one hand and generational formations on the other can both be shown to be part of the socio-cultural regulation of time, not different approaches that need to be 'bridged'. Hence, empirically there will be a large overlap between discursively constructed generations and 'sociological' generations as social actors. Narrative approaches and methods focusing on groups, social structures and their explanation are not in opposition but rather depend on each other, to use a more general argument advanced by Elliott (2005: 114). However, the two approaches to generations cannot be equated because the narrative construction of generations is much more flexible and fluid and allows for multiple, changing, and chronologically overlapping generational identities. Only some of these will be expressed in the concrete formation of individuals into generations with similar world views and the potential of collective agency. In order for this to happen, the economic, cultural or political similarities between individuals must be relatively persistent and more than a transient fashion (Kohli & Szydlik 2000: 9) – they must shape their lives permanently.

The spelling out of the relationship between generational discourses and constructions on the one hand, and generations as groups and potential collective actors with a shared consciousness on the other, can be considered in the light of the useful proposals made by Corsten (1999, 2001). He rightly notes that an individual social actor as "carrier" of generational semantics is indispensable in the idea of these semantics and thus insists on an "action-theoretical explanation of communication" (Corsten 1999: 261-2). Or, in Elliott's (2005) more general perspective on narratives, their social aspect is crucial for connecting the narratives with the socio-structural (group) processes resulting from them. If generational discourses are anchored in shared biographical-historical experiences of individual actors and if they contribute to the formation of a generational group with a shared identity and tendency to become a collective actor, the *communicative* construction of a shared experience turns into a *social* fact (Corsten 1999: 253) having structural consequences. How generational labels come to have 'hard' consequences, for example in gatekeeping processes and in the allocation of resources, remains to be studied. However, this will not be the case for every generational discourse. Concrete groups of generations with a shared identity only have "indicative" character for generational discourses (Matthes 1985: 369), meaning they only hint at selected parts of the interpretation and identification processes that are part of the discursive construction of generations. In turn, these groups can influence the spread of certain generational discourses. The existence and form of the interaction between concrete generational formations and generational discourses and constructions is thus contingent.

Questions about how generational discourses spread and come to have socio-structural consequences, and how social formations influence generational patterns of interpretation, highlight important missing links in generational research. Corsten's (1999, 2001) suggestions are instructive in that they concretise two points: first where and when generational discourses can have the chance to crystallise into shared views and a generational identity, namely in the networks of adolescence which are fostered particularly by educational institutions; and second how shared patterns of generational interpretation and evaluation are interwoven with individual identification processes and every day practice. These are important blind spots of research on generations. In consideration of the critique outlined above, Corsten's suggestions must be expanded, for example to include the possibility of the formation of generations based on experiences in adult life. Here, revitalised connections to the sociology of knowledge would be fruitful, as would be connections to theory and research on social networks and social movements; generations in the strict sociological sense outlined above can be seen as special cases of social movements. How attitudes, worldviews and a generational consciousness spread not only in time, but also across social strata and in space, are important related questions. To complete the description and explanation of the formation of a generation, more information is required to answer the question of "how generations acquire social solidarity as a consequence of shared experiences and the emergence of a collective world-view", i.e. how they become potential collective actors (Edmunds and Turner 2002: 10).

Finally, it has become obvious that such a multi-level understanding of 'generation' can only be empirically applied by using a variety of methods, including both statistical ('quantitative') and reconstructive-interpretive ('qualitative') methods. How methodically-challenging it is to take the concept of generation seriously is demonstrated by Corsten (2001) who spells out the necessary steps for proving the existence of a generation, identifying its origin and its narrative.

6. Conclusion

This article has shown that empirical research on generations can only be precise and verifiable if it explicitly answers a number of questions, or at least discusses related assumptions, concerning this complex concept. The following points summarise the most important specifications to be made, if generations are understood as social formations with a shared worldview and generational consciousness, as outlined in section four. Generations as discursive constructs and narratives are not the starting point here and will require additional and in part different guiding questions.

First, the characteristics (resources, behaviours, attitudes etc.) used to prove the existence of a generation have to be specified, and their relationship to unobserved features of the generation has to be debated. It has to be clarified, for instance, whether and why a shared worldview and a generational identity can be derived from similar patterns of consumption or similar amounts of economic or cultural resources. Second, intragenerational variation and diversity have to be looked at, how the generation studied is connected to socio-structural categories such as class, gender or ethnicity, and whether there are discernable generational units. Third, the shared experience leading to the formation of the generation studied should be characterised; when and how it had its formative impact, which subgroups were particularly affected, and which were less so, and, finally, which shared and persisting world views have arisen from it. In other words, the underlying cohort effects have to be specified, and competing explanations, in particular of a different temporal patterning (such as period and/or life course effects) have to be examined and considered. Fourth, the form which the narrative self-construction of the generation studied takes, what its narrative is and how it relates discursively to other generations, should be explored. In doing so, more can be learned about the interaction of generational discourses and the formation of generational groups. If the

discursive construction of a generation is to be examined in more detail, generational typifications from inside and out, and their relation to each other, the “carriers” of generational semantics, and the participants (and non-participants) of generational discourses are important topics. Fifth, it must be questioned whether and, if so, how families play a role in the context of the discursive construction of a generation, or if there are other important social contexts of this construction. Finally, research on generations should investigate how generational world views and identifications spread socially, temporally and spatially, and how they connect the individual members of a generation in a way that leads the generation to become a potential collective actor. Answering these questions empirically via the employment of a variety of methods has the potential to bring forward research on generations as social formations forged by past biographical-historical experience, yet acting in the present.

¹ I am grateful to Mike Savage, Louis Chauvel, Lucy Gibson, Paul Higgs, Andrew Miles, Julia Twigg and the participants of the workshop “Ageing, generation and participation” which took place at the ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC), Manchester, in June 2010, for their valuable comments and rewarding debates. I would also like to thank Leanne Dawson for her excellent editing work, and Karen Ho, Steffen Hagemann, Janosik Herder and Benjamin Finger for final layout and corrections.

² One origin of the reasoning in terms of generations is to be found in the historical sciences of the 19th century (see for example Attias-Donfut 1988: 17-43). The classical text of Mannheim (1952/1928) on the subject compares and contrasts a positivist concept of generation (Hume, Comte, Mentré) with a romantic-historical one (Dilthey, Heidegger, Pinder) and seeks a kind of conceptual compromise avoiding the shortcomings of both approaches. For the American discussion of generations until the mid-70s see Bengtson et al. (1974).

³ Explanations of cultural change and of cultural reproduction do not necessarily compete with each other: reproduction and change always coexist, as Mannheim’s thought experiment on the replacement of generations demonstrates (1952/1928: 293, see also McLeod & Thomson 2009: 113). However, the degree of stability and change, respectively, varies for different areas of enquiry. It is this degree which can be contentious, and researchers investigating change and reproduction, correspondingly, tend to stress the greater relevance of their perspective.

⁴ See Kertzer (1983). For extensive material on family generations, especially in ethnological literature, see Attias-Donfut (1988: 83-99), Kohli & Szydlik (2000: 11).

⁵ Edmunds and Turner (2005) put forward the notion that with the rise of global communication it is necessary to open up the concept to the possibility of global generations. These global generations experience and react to traumatic events in the same way, mediated through electronic media. Although they are right to criticise the traditional way of sociological thinking in ‘national containers’, their evidence of global generations remains vague.

⁶ In their concept, strategic generations are a special case of “active” generations which, in contrast to passive generations, make some kind of “generative contribution to a social community or polity rather than passively accept a given culture” (Edmunds & Turner 2002: 17-18).

⁷ Furthermore, it is unclear what the “concrete bond created by being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms”, which links member of an actual generation (Mannheim 1952/1928: 303), consists of.

⁸ Edmunds and Turner (2002: 3, 115) unconvincingly argue that generational dynamics have become more important than class dynamics, and that class analysis can therefore be neglected in favour of generational analysis. This claim is misleading because class and generation are not mutually exclusive as useful analytical tools; on the contrary, they are complementary.

⁹ Although Inglehart’s argument is well laid out and uses many elements of a generational argument (for example the idea of a formative phase), it remains unclear whether he merely refers to a pattern of change across cohorts or the idea of a specific generation (or several ones) driving the value changes he describes. Therefore his argument will not be discussed in more detail here.

10 See also Mannheim's critique of the attempt to find a universal generational rhythm which characterises the positivist formulation of the problem of generations (Mannheim 1928/1952) and its mechanistic view of history.

11 For research focussing on youth movements in the context of generational formations, the crucial question is whether the world views and collective identities of such youth movements is persistent into the adult lives of their members – as Bengtson et al. (1974) show.

12 In spite of his theoretically insightful and ambitious approach, Vincent (2005) does not mention this aspect of the concept of generation. He does not clearly discern between the effects of history on all age groups and on people in specific times in their lives. It is for this reason that his own empirical example comprises a somewhat arbitrarily and vaguely defined "war generation" (the members of which may have experienced the Second World War at a variety of ages).

13 A well known example of a potential generational explanation in the field of social and political participation, Putnam's "Bowling Alone" (2000), can serve to illustrate this: For Putnam, the decline in civic engagement and social capital is the result of generational change and a number of period effects, such as TV, work pressures and sprawl (2000: 284). Well aware that generational change is only one step on the way to explaining the changes, he tries to work out why the generation before the (American) baby boomers was engaged in civic and social activities to such a high extent, in comparison to their 'disengaged' children. According to him, the most important reason was the Second World War, which led to a boost in all forms of civic engagement and organisations (Putnam 2000: 267). This explanation is speculative insofar as there is no direct confirmation of it. However, most of the contextual information Putnam discusses fits his interpretation of the data well.

14 Cohorts which are defined by events other than birth, such as school leaving cohorts or marriage cohorts, will not be discussed here. In the following, 'cohort' always refers to the most general sense of birth cohorts (see Ryder 1965: 845).

15 Sometimes, though, there is no related theory which is discussed, and the inclusion of birth cohorts rather appears as an empiricist move which allows year of birth to be fitted into a concrete quantitative empirical analysis.

16 The degree of openness (and thus the chances for individuals to 'change track') varies between different societies, depending on how structured the educational and occupational system is (see for example the research on varieties of capitalism and welfare systems).

17 Furthermore, longitudinal data would ideally be necessary to allow for the separation of cohort, period, ageing and life course effects. In this area, significant methodological progress has been made through the growing supply of longitudinal data covering several birth cohorts on one hand, and through increasingly sophisticated methods of analysing this data (for example by using event history analysis or sequence analysis), on the other.

18 Vice versa, not every generational formation can be traced back to economic imbalances as has been claimed (Vincent 2005), although with a broad enough concept of resources, most will display some economic aspect. Kohli (1996: 10) suggests that political struggles which have shaped the relations between generations in the 1960s have today been superseded by conflicts dominated by economic issues.

19 Corsten borrows the concept of historical semantics from Niklas Luhmann. However, he does not use it in a purely system-theoretical sense but rather adds an action-theoretical dimension (Corsten 1999: 262).

20 One example of this is the potential formation of a generation based on 'scarring effects' linked to a difficult entry into the labour market. Similarly, a particular shaped retirement experience may foster a generational consciousness, as the example of early retirees after the end of the German Democratic Republic might illustrate (Wolf 1991).

21 This is, of course, a crude differentiation (which may be viewed as incorrect), and it is not the aim of this article to go into the details of the underlying discussion on what is even more crudely called the difference between micro and macro perspectives or between quantitative and qualitative methods. This article aims at acknowledging the realities of both social discourses and social structures which cannot be reduced to each other, respectively.

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