The Time of Generations

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ABSTRACT. This article develops a discursive-pragmatic concept from Mannheim’s theory of generation, especially from his idea of generation as an actuality which emphasizes the collective cognitive background or horizon of a generation. The author also discusses the emergence of such a cognitive background as dependent on a coincidence of different time perspectives, which are biographical, historical, and generational times. To explicate the discursive practice of generations the concepts of ‘historical time’ (Robinson), ‘historical semantics’ (Luhmann), and ‘cultural circles’ are introduced. The author works out an understanding of the ‘problem of generation’ that should lead to empirical investigations on this topic by using interpretive and reconstructive research methods.

KEY WORDS • cultural circles • discursive practice • generational background • historical semantics • historical time

Introduction

The topic of generation has experienced a renaissance in the last five to ten years. The most important reason for this development is the crisis of collective identities, which is due to a number of circumstances and conditions. First of these is the ‘individualization’ process (Beck, 1997) in developed societies, characterized by their ‘reflexive modernisation’ (Beck et al., 1994). This is the process whereby categories such as social origin have become less relevant in the explanation of collective identities, milieus, and social movements. A second reason is the disappearance of the central social conflicts that divided societies into antagonistic strata, e.g. classes. A third related reason is the end of socialism as an alternative model for modernization, with accompanying claims about the ‘end of ideology’ or the ‘end of history’. So, if the ‘old’ collective identities have disappeared, are there new or alternative identities that can...
replace the old ones? In this connection, generations and age seem to be new classification markers. First, age is in any case an important structuration concept for individual lifetime and life history. In effect this means that, assuming standardized life courses, birth cohorts are collective aggregates of socially structured life histories. Second, age can serve as a marker of social differentiation, and thereby of social conflicts – the new ‘generational conflict’ in an ‘ageing society’. However, it is important to recall that the ‘generation gap’ has a long tradition in the social (cultural) sciences and philosophy, and that it is also used with a wide range of meanings in everyday life. I will therefore concentrate here on the problem of the historical constitution of generations as collective identities.

The following sections deal with this issue in six steps. In a short overview, in the first section I try to classify the different concepts of generation to clarify the relation between the question of historical generations which is focused on in this article and other problems of research on the topic. The second section deals with Karl Mannheim’s classical solution of the ‘sociological problem of generation’ (Mannheim, 1952 [1928]). On the one hand, Mannheim distinguishes three levels at which generations can be formed, and on the other hand he works out the interplay of these levels in his explanation of the ‘unifying factors’ of generations. As Jane Pilcher (1994) has emphasized in a recent article, Mannheim’s work is still an ‘undervalued legacy’. In the third section, I try to demonstrate this by comparing two different approaches – the cohort design and the milieu design. The comparison focuses in particular on the time perspective and socialization concepts that underlie Mannheim’s solution. I explain this by using Joan Robinson’s (1963, 1979) notion of ‘historical time’ and by making more precise Mannheim’s concept of ‘experience’ and its consequences for a socialization theory. In the fourth section I discuss and supplement Mannheim’s solution, which has certain limitations due to his ‘sociology of knowledge’ viewpoint. For this purpose, following C.W. Mills (1963), Tim Dant (1991), and Jane Pilcher (1994), I introduce the relevance of ‘discursive practice’ as the social dimension on which socio-cognitive phenomena can be located and identified. With Luhmann’s (1980) and Koselleck’s (1969) concept of ‘historical semantics’, I can transform Mannheim’s idea of ‘generational construction principles’ into the discourse model. But – in contrast to Luhmann’s system theory of communication – I maintain an action-based concept of discursive practice, emphasizing the ‘social circles’ or ‘personal networks’ as carriers of semantics. Using some of the arguments of modernization theorists, I point out the time of adolescence as the biographical phase where the social circles of generational discourse crystallize – from one generation of youth to the next. Through these stages the endogenous process of the crystallization of generations is reconstructed. However, this gives rise to three important questions which are discussed in the fifth section of this article.
(a) How are generations limited in time? In other words, why are some people born too early or too late to belong to a specific generation?

(b) What is the relevance of relationships between different generations and relationships between specific groups in the same generation?

(c) How can the collective ageing of a generation be explained?

These questions will be answered by integrating each of the problems mentioned into the concept of generational discourse. In the final, sixth section I will debate how the concept presented solves the problems left open in Mannheim’s classical approach. It will be emphasized that the concept offers a theoretical framework supporting an approach to empirical research on the discourses of generations.

1. Generation: A Concept with Multiple Meanings

The huge mass of sociological work on the topic of generation is difficult to survey. It takes different theoretical approaches and covers a wide range of subject areas – from anthropology through family, political and cultural sociology, to studies of social inequality. This article does not aim to give an exact account of the different generation concepts. The focus consists rather in the theoretical setting of the phenomenon of historical or ‘political generations’ (Preston, 1927; Rintala, 1962). To clarify the specific feature of this problem, I will distinguish between three categories of the topic of generation.

First, conceptions of generations in terms of succession go back to the Latin origin of the word which meant ‘fathering’. Etymologically it derives from the Greek word ‘genesis’. It refers to genealogies as lines of descent. The sequence of generations is therefore based on the biological fact of birth and death. It is connected to the problem of social and cultural reproduction (Ryder, 1980) ‘from generation to generation’ (Eisenstadt, 1956). This is where I locate the studies which define generations as (relational) lines of descent, but also the investigations of social reproduction (Coleman, 1995) and intergenerational social mobility (Rolf Becker, 1994). In this perspective, socialization can also be seen as a matter of social heritage – as handing down norms and values from parents to children, even negatively in such cases as an ‘intergenerational cycle of child maltreatment’ (Zuravin et al., 1996). The succession-reproduction topic can be generalized from family lineage to the question of social descent lines in general, e.g. the generational succession of certain professionals like ‘second generation sociologists’ (Morgan, 1994), of immigrants (Hill and Moreno, 1996), or, as recently done during the last chancellor’s election in Germany, of political leaders. These fields may be investigated on both dimensions: the structural reproduction process of replacing a social position and the cultural reproduction process as the handing down and/or modifying norms and values.
Second, simultaneous existence of different generations (age-groups) in one society implies contemporary intergenerational relationships. This raises two further issues. One is the question of interdependencies between the age-groups, related to questions of exchange, solidarity (Henk A. Becker, 1993), and the contract between generations (Kohli, 1996); the second is that of different perspectives on social life and time depending on different points in the life history, which are evident in generational gaps (Van-Wel, 1994), conflicts, and concurrency.

Third, speaking of successions and relationships between generations, we imply that generations exist as specific collective identities. If this were not the case, it would be possible to replace the term ‘generation’ by ‘age-group’ or something similar. We can therefore return to the question of how it is possible to define generations as collectives in the process of history, or to put it another way, historical generations. Traditionally collective identities have been defined through succession, e.g. ‘political generations’. The idea of historical generations refers to a more general question. How do people who have been born and who have been brought up in the same period of time come to a common understanding of their experience? This problem has recently been examined under the rubric of ‘collective memory’ (Bodnar, 1996; Braungart and Braungart, 1986; Lang et al., 1993; Schuman and Scott, 1989) and the persistence of political or ideological collective convictions (Alwin et al., 1991; Schuman et al., 1997). Therefore the concept of historical generations refers to social time. Generations share a picture of ‘their time’ or a script of the drama of their collective development in the course of ‘their’ historical phase.

This article will concentrate on the third question. Historical generations can be examined in two ways. The concept conceives generations mainly as a technical term, for empirical investigations. To this end it is defined in a minimalist sense, excluding assumptions that are to be proved in the course of the investigations. In this sense, the ‘cohort’ concept (Ryder 1965; Glenn 1977) is often used to replace the category of generation. In the cohort concept, units of birth year groups are investigated with regard to the features which they have in common. These qualities can be objective social indicators such as level of education, professional position, marital status, or income. But subjective features like attitudes, value convictions, preferences, or motives can be included in the same way for birth cohorts. This allows the comparison between different birth cohorts at the same times in their lives and as well as between features in the (collective) life course. Therefore the cohort concept is used by some authors as a replacement for the generation concept since it offers a clearer delimitation of the various implications of the latter term (Ryder, 1965; Glenn, 1977; Kertzer, 1983; Van den Broek, 1994).

The second strategy develops an emphatic definition of the term ‘generation’. The aim of such theorizing is to reconstruct the sense of social circumstance as
it is found in the phenomena of everyday culture. This strategy understands generation not merely as a construction of sociologists but as a construction of social, or better, of ‘institutional facts’ (Searle, 1995). According to this approach the members of a generation are not simply defined by sociologically revealed regulation. Their collectively shared assumption of a common life experience, and of a common time frame, turns into a social fact of itself.

2. Mannheim’s Legacy

Mannheim’s attempt at sociology of knowledge treats the dimension of generation-specific experience in a special way. Indeed, although seen as the classical solution to the ‘problem of generations’, Mannheim’s contribution to this topic has frequently been discussed as a kind of exception to his wider writings (Kettler et al., 1984; Matthes, 1985; Longhurst, 1989). This impression is confirmed if we look at the development of Mannheim’s work. In his early phase we find a variety of essays and uncompleted manuscripts dealing with topics of cultural philosophy and the sociology of knowledge. In the 1930s and 1940s, with ‘Ideology and Utopia’ (1929) and ‘Man and Society in the Age of Reconstruction’ (1941), he produced extensive studies reflecting on the cultural and political developments of modern society in general. The rediscovery of the early manuscripts during the 1980s and the ensuing discussion (Kettler et al., 1984; Matthes, 1985) foregrounded his sociology of knowledge. The conclusion of these debates was that Mannheim examined the different forms in which people produce collectively corresponding knowledge, looking for the specific constellations under which social knowledge arises. In this respect generation represents such a constellation which leads to the formation of a special manner of collectively shared knowledge. In this way he connected the examinations of French positivists with the ideas of German romantics, where French positivists stood for the analysis of objective factors and courses of events and the German romantics for an emphasis on attitudes of mind and collective feelings.

According to Mannheim, the collective cohesion of a generation showed up on three levels. First the term ‘generational site’, with which Mannheim characterizes the socio-structural, objective mode of generation, is analogous to classes. In the German tradition of the 1920s, he understood social site as fate (Schicksal), following Weber’s notion of Klassenschicksal or Heidegger’s general use of the term Schicksal to mean the determination of individual existence by socio-historical conditions. In a merely definitional sense, ‘generational site’ embraces all the people who are born in a certain period in a geographically limited space. But Mannheim’s reference to the concept of social site is not focused on the distribution of chances or resources – it is concentrated on a structure of opportunity. Two kinds of selectivity characterize the gener-
ational site. On the one hand, people born in the same time-period experience events that occur in the same historical phase in the same specific biographical phase; they experience earlier or later historical events in a different specific biographical phase. For example, people who were born in Germany in 1940 experienced the Second World War in early childhood, whereas the early childhood experience of people born 10 years later was the period of reconstruction and returning prosperity. On the other hand, people born in the same time-period experience historical events in a certain sequence in their own lifetime. So, for instance, all those born in 1940 experienced war during their childhood, reconstruction in their youth, prosperity in early adulthood, and a stagnation crisis in middle age.

Second, Mannheim then distinguishes between this structure of experiences and the ‘generational actuality’; that is, the way in which the experiences of a generation are connected by interpretation. Whereas generational site focuses on how something specific has been experienced, generational context concentrates on how a collective arranges its experiences. Generational context thus comprises certain basic shared orientations, namely, the majority of people of the same age; Mannheim calls these orientations ‘Grundintentionen’ (basic intentions) and ‘Gestaltungsprinzipien’ (principles of construction). In this sense, Helmut Schelsky (1963) characterized the people born around 1929 as the ‘sceptical generation’ and Bude (1995) described the 60s movement as ‘melancholy’.

Third, Mannheim identifies concrete groups of people of the same age, who not only define their situation in a similar way but also develop similar ways of (re)acting in response to their generational problems, as ‘generational units’. In this way, an intra-differentiation of one generational context into several possibly hostile or rival generational units emerges. Taking the example of the 60s movement, we can distinguish ‘Rockers’, ‘Hippies’, ‘politfreaks’, and others as concrete groups.

The central feature of Mannheim’s differential view of generations becomes clear when we look at how he solves the problem of the emergence of a background of generational experience in terms of the specificity of circumstances under which this kind of social knowledge can emerge. Here two assumptions develop into key arguments. The first is the constitutional priority of the generational context. The second is the relevance of the biographical phase of youth – or, as I will elaborate later, of adolescence:

Youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems may be said to be part of the same actual generation. (Mannheim, 1952: 304)

Generational site – the synchronic experience by the same cohort of a simultaneous sequence of life passages and historical periods – is viewed as the basic structure of the ‘mental opportunities’ of a birth cohort. But the connection
between these people’s experience only becomes real from the moment when they share certain ‘basic intentions’ and/or ‘principles of construction’ which serve as a framework of orientation toward their collective opportunity structure of experienced events. For this reason, Mannheim expects that there will be birth cohorts that do not construct or develop a shared framework (or order) of experience.

3. The Specific Perspective in Reconstructing ‘Generation as an Actuality’

If we now compare Mannheim’s solution with relevant accounts in recent sociological research on generations – the cohort concept (Ryder, 1965; Glenn, 1977; Kertzer, 1983) and the milieu concept (Matthes, 1985; Bohnsack, 1997) – we find that, for different reasons, neither of these approaches follows Mannheim’s legacy. Neither of them takes into account the constitutional priority of the problem of how a generationally shared arrangement of experiences can be formed collectively.

3.1 Background of generational experience vs similarities in units of birth cohorts

At first sight there are similarities both between the cohort concept and Mannheim’s notion of ‘generational site’ and between the milieu concept and his idea of ‘generational units’. Birth cohorts and generational site are defined, technically speaking, as people for whom a certain event – here, being born – occurred at the same point in time. However, as a more consistent technical approach, the concept of birth cohorts does not make any further assumptions about the specific form of generational experience. The cohort concept enables the researcher to distinguish certain groups as measured on various dimensions. It is therefore primarily a tool to observe, to describe, and sometimes to explain social change.

In such a design it could be sufficient simply to state the differences between birth cohorts regarding ‘objective indicators’ such as educational level, occupational status, marriage and divorce rates and so forth, measured at certain points in their lives. For instance, it can be observed that the younger birth cohorts in Europe are leaving school, starting work, leaving the parental home, marrying, having their first child and so forth, at a later age. However, the ‘objective’ approach to life ‘event history analysis’ (Blossfeld and Rohwer, 1995) would have to treat socialization processes as a black box. Especially in retrospective designs, where subjective data concerning the attitudes, interpretations, or value orientations of the members of a cohort cannot be collected, it is not possible to
meet Mannheim’s demand to reconstruct the ‘stratification of experience’ (Erhebungsschichtung) as an opportunity structure of experiences shared by a generational location. In such a design one cannot refer to the ‘inner’, subjective, biographical time perspective, or to the experience of people belonging to one generation and the contours of their specific past, present, and future horizons. Further, individuals’ ways of dealing with relevant transitions in life could only be analysed in so far as they are manifested in an objective, chronological location in time. This deficiency could be overcome by choosing a strictly longitudinal approach, in which the people in one birth cohort are asked about their attitudes to and interpretations and evaluations of biographical and experienced historical events, and about their views of the past, present and future.4

3.2 Logical vs historical time

Even a strategy like this remains captive to a more technical concept of generation, mostly because of the consequences of its implied theory of time. Since people are born at any time of the year, day and hour, that is, continuously, there is no systematic reason to distinguish between birth cohorts or age-groups. Therefore, in a cohort design one would select age-groups either by following mathematical principles according to a chronological model of time, e.g. sets of age-groups including equal numbers of successive birth years (1940–9, 1950–9, etc.), or by choosing successive age-groups at regular intervals (1939–41, 1949–51, etc.). It seems meaningful at this point to clarify the reference to the conceptualization of time. The starting point is formed by the distinction between ‘logical time’ and ‘historical time’ introduced by Joan Robinson (1963: 23–9; 1979) in her discussion of the neo-classical model of economic growth. The concept of a ‘logical time’ consists in the outline of a linear progress of time-points distinctly succeeding one another. Any time locked into such a model is regarded as an event of a condition to be examined, in the case of economic development as the condition of equilibrium. For Joan Robinson it was a ‘mortal security’ that the real historical development (of economies) would not follow such a linear scheme. ‘States of equilibrium’ are realized in irregular intervals if they arrive at all.

This argument can be translated to the case of the fulfilment of a generational background of experience. The procedure of the cohort design described above starts out from an idea which corresponds to the model of ‘logical time’ as explained by Joan Robinson. In a cohort design qualities are measured which belong to groups of persons that were aggregated because of their membership to certain birth years. However, such qualities of aggregated birth cohorts measured at regular intervals of time do not necessarily imply the existence of generation-specific backgrounds of experience. This issue was already taken into account by representatives of the cohort approach. They remarked that the
qualities measured for birth cohorts at particular times could also be effects which were caused by age of the persons, by cultural fashions, or by socio-economic conditions of the periods under observation. Therefore, the distinctions between age effects, period effects, and cohort effects were integrated into the research design (Glenn, 1977: 14, 49). But does this distinction really help if we want to follow Robinson’s demand that the formation of definite (collective) developments presupposes thinking in ‘historical time’?

Three concepts, which Robinson herself does not fully explain, play an important role in her discussion of ‘historical time’: emergence, complexity and self-reference.

**Emergence** If we pursue concrete historical developments, we are frequently confronted with qualitative leaps appearing irregularly. In Robinson’s work this is visible in her discussion of the problem of first accumulation. If we transfer the notion of emergence to the case of generations it presumes the contingent occurrence of generations as historically formed collectives. This means that generations are a result of coincidence and that they appear irregularly in chronological time. For this reason, a theory of generation has to provide us with basic categories and with a conceptual scheme that makes visible (imaginable) how a generation is developed in a historical process and, at the same time, marks the content and relevance of a historical period.

**Complexity** A linear concept of time is often associated with a notion of a homogenous development. But the emergence of a generational background of experience is dependent on the interaction between several heterogeneous dynamics. We have to consider the interplay between three processes that cannot be reduced to each other. First, there is the sequence of historical events that takes place on a societal level. Second, the biographical development of individuals runs parallel to this within their own lifetimes. The third process that we have to reconstruct is the coalescence into a generation of groups of the same age but perhaps different in other aspects. Let us consider the example of the 60s movement. Not all young adults will have come into contact with this movement at exactly the same time and at the same age. Nor will all young people have given the same attention to the movement. For some it will have been meaningful for a long time, for others for a short but perhaps very intensive time, for others again, for short and superficial time. All these combinations depend on how the development of individuals in these age-groups is connected to the formation of their contemporaries as a collective. In addition, the coherence between these developments cannot be looked at without regard to the process of the socio-historical events of this period, from the Kennedy assassination to the Woodstock festival. But these three processes – of the generation, of the historical period, and of the individual’s life – are not only sequences of events, they are also streams of experiences; and, not least, they are also stories.
of generations, of the historical process of particular periods, of single biographies. With regard to the question of how a generation emerges as carrier of a collective experience all these processes are inter-connected.

Self-reference This means that a process is structured or influenced by the expectations that people have concerning the possible ways the process could go on. Social or economic processes are of this type. People who carry out processes influence them by their expectations. In a similar way, a generation is formed by the sense that the members of a generation have of the criteria for belonging. The German sociologist Heinz Bude (1997) has called this the ‘We-Sense’ of a generation. Therefore, members of a generation do not simply share assumptions of a background of experience. They also share a sense that the other members of the same generation share similar background assumptions. They do not only have something in common, they have also a (common) sense for (a kind of knowledge about) the fact that they have something in common. This more intuitive reflection upon the common sense of a generation is part of the sense of sharing a collective time – the sense that converts my time to our time or to the times of my generation. Thus, time is not only a sequence of events, or of mere time points, it is also the perspective of time, held by individuals and/or collectives.

3.3 The specific notion of socialization through generational experience

Now, the question should be: how can this contingent emergence of a complex and self-referent collective time and self perspective of a generation be represented in social reality? Where does such a form of collective self-identification (by assuming the background of a similar experienced time) actually take place? Some recent works by German sociologists (Bohnsack, 1997; Matthes, 1985; Sackmann, 1991), taking this problem into account, have suggested analysing the emergence of youth milieus as expressions of ‘generational units’. Youth cultures as milieus are considered as ‘spheres of conjunctive experience’ (konjunktiver Erfahrungsraum), as in the earlier writings of Karl Mannheim (1980 [1922]). Here it is very important to clearly confront the differences between Mannheim’s concepts of experience; these are located on at least three levels, which can be seen as parallel to the three dimensions on which generations are constituted as collective phenomena.

1. The strata of experience as an opportunity structure of a generational location – only people born and growing up at the same time have the opportunity to experience certain events and their succession simultaneously.
2. The correspondence in certain formative and interpretative principles or schemes of experience of people who are members (participants) of a generation as actuality.
The sphere of conjunctive experience, shared only by those people who have experienced ‘existential bondage’, which is only valid for those who were actually present at events. ‘This sphere of experience is . . . closed outward’ and based on the concrete encounter of people.

In this definition, the ‘cool places’ of concrete, physically experienced youth cultures have to be distinguished from schemes of experiences shared by the generation as an actuality:

The social importance of these formative and interpretative principles is that they form a link between spatially separated individuals who may never come into personal contact at all. Whereas mere common location in a generation is of only potential significance, a generation as an actuality is constituted when similarly located contemporaries participate in a common destiny and in the ideas and concepts which are in some way bound up with its unfolding. (Mannheim, 1952: 306)

A generational framework of experience surpasses the ‘spheres of conjunctive experience’ shared by concrete groups within generational units. Such people, while not sharing a concrete life experience, are similar because they are familiar with certain interpretative and formative principles relating to their biographical and historical horizon. This means that the milieu sociologist works with a very narrow concept of socialization. But then the concept of a ‘generation as an actuality’ has to work out a model of socialization that shows how this familiarity among contemporaries can emerge without referring to the conjunctive experience transmitted in concrete groups. In section 4.2 I will try to explain this transmission of a background of experience by referring to cultural circles of generational discourse.

The inner differentiation of a generation into generational units focuses attention on problems such as the following. By analysing different milieus of youth cultures, can one succeed in reconstructing the comparable schemes of interpretation that are valid for the typical background (framework) of experience of youth ‘as a whole’? Is it not risky to try to establish the laws and structures of social inequalities by finding out the differences within the same age-group that are due to strata, sex, functional or cultural placement? That means we have to give up the notion of generation as a homogeneous age-group. If we speak about a generational background of experience, we assume that different age-groups or specific ‘generational units’ can be included therein. But Mannheim’s explanation of the formative principles that constitute generations as an actuality does not go far enough. In general, he clarifies that the more ‘open’ formative principles are more functional for application to social processes, and that their collective mediation takes place in youth, yet he does not show how or in what kind of processes they are crystallized.
4. Institutionalized Life Course, Discursive Practice, and the Cultural Circles of Adolescence

I want to develop three lines of argument that should help to clarify how members of the same birth cohort come to comparable interpretations of the horizon of their historical situation. First, I will develop the argument that a generation builds up such comparable interpretations by establishing a dominant semantic order (order of meanings) in its discursive practices (4.1). Second, I put forward the action-theoretical proposition that in the life period of adolescence, ‘social circles’ that carry the semantic order are generated (4.2). Third, I try to give reasons for this, by reconstructing adolescence as a socially defined stage in the institutionalized life course which includes standardized periods of transition.

4.1 Generational semantics as an order of meanings kept together by shared criteria for interpretation and expression

Let us start with the discourse-theoretical foundation of Mannheim’s concept of basic intentions and formative principles. His basic argument was as follows.

Fundamental integrative attitudes [Grundintentionen, i.e. basic intentions] and formative principles are also all-important in the handing down of every tradition, firstly because they alone can bind groups together [denn nur diese wirken wahrhaft vergesellschaftend] and secondly, perhaps even more importantly, because they alone are really capable of becoming the basis of continuing practice. (Mannheim, 1952: 305; original German in brackets)

Mannheim does not make more explicit what he means by ‘practice’. His main point on this is that formative principles are more general and therefore more efficient at, or more capable of, being applied to further social activities. Here we seem to have reached the limits of Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge. Jane Pilcher (1994) has pointed to this restriction, using arguments from C.W. Mills (1963) and Tim Dant (1991) which refer to the socio-psychological connection between knowledge, language, and discourse. Mills’s critique (1963) of most sociologies of knowledge, including Mannheim’s, points to an inadequate conceptualization of the connection between socio-cognitive processes and social conditions. Here, an example of this weakness is the relationship between the location of generations as the experiential opportunity structure and the formative principles. Mills introduces two bridging arguments. First is Mead’s concept of the ‘generalized other’. If we assume that actors are able to assume the attitude of a ‘generalized other’, the formative principles can be viewed as expectations of the assumed perspective or attitude of the generational ‘generalized other’. Thus the basic intentions or formative principles would be
criteria of validation that are shared (or similarly anticipated as dominant expectations) by the collective of a generation. Second, Mills discerns an overlapping of the social dimension of language with the basic relevance of language for experience and thought, for cognitive processes in general. Summarizing his arguments, he concludes that we can reconstruct how people or collectives think, in the ways they use their vocabularies, including how they express nuances (see also Rorty, 1989).

In the collective use of signs and language we have found a mediating level between 'social location' and 'social experiences'. However, as yet we have no explanation of the process whereby certain collective uses of signs/language gain acceptance rather than others. To tackle this problem, Tim Dant suggests introducing 'discourses' as the empirical place of (social) knowledge, 'since discursive practice involves social action that can be identified in time and place' (Dant, 1991: 31). This point is instructive in two ways. On the one hand, it opens up the possibility for the social sciences to identify knowledge, experience, patterns of thought and interpretation – something like Mannheim’s 'basic intentions' and 'formative principles'. On the other hand, it makes it clear that the identification of patterns of interpretation and validation in social processes is dependent on their localization in discursive practice. Now we can give an initial general answer to the basic question of how it is possible for generations as collectives to identify and locate themselves in the historical process, namely, by self-thematization, by identifying their patterns of interpretation and validation of collective experience in discourses.

4.2 Generational semantics and the cultural circle of generation

But this answer provokes further questions. Where, in which discursive practices is the collective self-identification developed? How does this collective self-identification work as collective self-thematization? In order to bring more precision into the process of collective validation of 'formative principles' and 'basic intentions', I want to introduce Niklas Luhmann’s (1980) and Reinhard Koselleck’s (1969) concept of historical semantics. This means the preservation of themes or topics in communication by highlighting them, and by using ‘sets of rules’ which include instructions on how to deal with the highlighted topics in communication. From a more hermeneutical and also from a view of linguistic pragmatics, historical semantics can be defined as meaningfully connected criteria for interpreting and articulating topics in communication. From a more system-theoretical approach, I retain an action-theoretical explanation of communication and of historical semantics. Therefore, I have to denote ‘carriers’ of historical semantics who assert selected criteria for interpretation and articulation within a collective context by communicative action. In the case of generations these actors come from the collective of limited birth cohorts, but
it is important to recognize how the causation of this process is conceptualized. I have shown that birth cohorts as generational locations cannot explain the emergence of a generation as actuality. As Marx (1973 [1857–8]) pointed out, we have to reconstruct historical development by starting with the emergence of the historically developed form. This means that semantics, the collectively established criteria for interpreting and articulating certain topics, indicate a process of historical crystallization – not only of causation or coincidence. The collectivity representing the majority of a birth-year group establishes a set of meaningfully connected criteria for the interpretation and articulation of their topics. However, by the crystallization of collectively shared criteria, the specific limitation of the collective has been established for the first time. In this way, communicating on certain topics, introducing in the process of communication criteria for interpreting and articulating them, functions as a contraction of specific age-groups – as a form of binding them together. I call this process the historical contraction of the social circle or, in our case, the 'cultural circle' of a generation.

The concept of 'cultural circle' should be distinguished from concrete groups. 'Cultural circles' are defined here as people who spontaneously observe that other people use certain criteria for interpreting and articulating topics in a similar manner to themselves, even though they have just perhaps met for the first time. In the case of generationally developed 'cultural circles', this means that there is a higher probability that people who belong to the same age-group will be identified as using criteria for interpreting and articulating certain topics in the same manner. This can be explained by the higher probability that people who belong to the same age-groups maintain comparable standpoints and perspectives in the discursive practices in which they are involved. These perspectives are marked and structured socially by age, due to the social standardization of the life course. One decisive element here is that people in the life phase of adolescence can meet generationally equally located people with similar discursive standpoints in several, sometimes almost all, of the social contexts in which they are involved. Therefore, age is a socially marked distinction that makes a difference. In the transition from youth to adulthood, adolescents encounter other adolescents: when they leave school to start work, or when they leave their parents' home and set up a place of their own, or when dating and establishing their own close relationships, such as friendships and love affairs. The temporal and coincidental encounters between people of the same age in different social contexts is viewed as the 'cultural circle' of a generation, which is first crystallized in the life transition phase of adolescence. This cultural circle of simultaneous and succeeding encounters is the carrier of generational semantics.
4.3 The modern construction of adolescence

The argument so far has concretized Mannheim’s view of generations as actuality. But it remains to be explained why the ‘age’ of adolescence is so important for the crystallization of generational self-thematization. To this end, I introduce the concept of the social construction of the institutionalized and standardized modern life course (Kohli, 1985; Meyer, 1986). The ‘institutionalization of the life course’ takes places at two levels. The first level refers to the probability that specific transitions in the lifetime will occur at certain ages and in a standard sequence. The standardization of life transition is largely due to government regulations regarding education and occupation, but also to the laws which establish age rules (legal adulthood, minimum age for sexual intercourse, marriage, visiting a public house or discotheque, staying out at night, etc.; see also Mayer and Schöpflin, 1989). At the second level, the life periods are marked by cultural definitions of age, such as sets of expectations and conventions applied to people of certain ages. In the following discussion, I will assume two general theses regarding modern societies, namely (a) a rough distinction is made between three life stages: childhood, adulthood, old age, (b) there are different, age-related degrees of (individual) self-responsibility.

On the basis of these assumptions I can define adolescence as the biographical period of late youth (end of childhood) and early adulthood. This means that for the biographical period of adolescence, the experiential form of taking self-responsibility, trying to work out formative principles of experience and active articulation, becomes fundamental. Erikson (1980) has defined this specific pattern of self-demands as a ‘moratorium’. Adolescence, as this basic expectation structure, can be seen as a test of how far the modern demand on the self – to produce identity primarily as a personally worked out self-definition – is fulfilled. This demand structure is based on the distinction between social and personal identity. Socially established conventional ways of defining the self, such as role expectations, are insufficient in relation to the central demand made of the modern self, to form one’s own image of one’s personality. Ralph Turner (1976) has spoken of the search for the ‘real self’ as a code of authenticity that he interprets as a historical process ‘from institution to impulse’. But to what extent do such processes of personal self-definition fall back upon socially accepted criteria of validation? That is, if the distinction between personal and social identity is in fact modulated in communication, it implies that there are criteria for validation in the case of an actor who has resolved her or his own self-interpretation from conventional pictures of individuality. Such socially accepted or presumed validation criteria do not prescribe the specific form or content of the individual actor’s self-construction, but the weight of the ‘burden’ of a successful self-interpretation that she or he has to bear. This means that we can be sure that not every required self-definition will be socially accepted.
Therefore, the criteria for interpretation and articulation that have been developed in generational discourses can work as collectively self-organized clues for the reconciliation between personal and social identity. These discourses within youth cultures also include connections to the actual historical experiences and the biographical time perspective of the adolescents. Generational semantics, for these reasons, offer guiding criteria for the interpretation and articulation of two problem areas during the biographical time of adolescence:

1. the life-period specific expectation that one’s own personal identity will be developed;
2. the establishment of a firm connection between this self-definition and the actual content and interpretation of the concrete biographical and socio-historical background.

Within this discursive framework, certain criteria for interpretation and articulation will gain acceptance during adolescence, because (a) they can be recognized in different contexts of adolescents’ lives, and (b) they can become a continuing pattern of orientation in the changing situations by which (c) the members of a (youth) generation can recognize their own typical way of life.

Consider one example. In European social research on generations, the birth cohorts from 1955 to 1967 (centrally 1957–64) – in Germany the so-called ‘youth of ’78’ (Mohr, 1992) – have been labelled the ‘postponed’ generation (Becker, 1992, 1993; Mayer, 1993), referring to their transition pattern from youth to adulthood. The diagnosis of postponement is accompanied by sensitivity to risk, a basic generational type of interpretation and articulation which can be identified in various contexts of their lives. One of these contexts is a concern about issues of global risk, for example the use or abuse of nuclear power, ecological crises or the disproportionately increasing world population, including the moral scandal of starving children; that is, the generational discourse concerning the general historical background of this birth cohort. A second context is an increased sensitivity to specific biographical risks, such as making early commitments in their occupational career or forming close relationships, which has provoked Ulrich Oevermann (1988) to give the diagnosis of a Verweigerung der Lebenspraxis (refusal to take practical responsibility for one’s own life).

The notion of the ‘real self’ (Turner, 1976) that has emerged here is one of ‘attentiveness’ towards one’s own operations in so far as they relate to biographical and historical processes that are interpreted as being long-term and bringing the danger of latent side-effects. This specific self-attentiveness can be seen as the code of personal identity of the ‘anxiety communicating’ (Luhmann, 1989) generation in the ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992); it could be identified by the way the members of this generation interpret and articulate their own and others’ moves in discursive practice.
With this theoretical bridge we can see how a generational semantic is developed in the cultural circles of age-groups of adolescents. The basic elements of such semantics are criteria for the discursive treatment of topics which gain the force of interpretative validation ('vigencias') in the communication contexts of a generation. This first step explicates the historical constitution of a generation as an endogenous process.

5. The Endogenous Time of the Generational Discourse

5.1 Historical duration and size of generations

By explicating how generations can identify themselves as collectives in discourse we do not establish a criterion to explain the time demarcation of historically succeeding generations. How can the size of the age-groups be explained? Why are some individuals too young and some too old, some born too early and some too late, to belong to a certain generation? We can consider the following two types of explanation: first, the demarcation of a generation could be explained exogenously by the occurrence of single historical events (assassinations, stock market crashes, 'black Fridays') or by certain historical developments (wars, prosperity, cultural liberalization); second, the time limitations of a generation could be explained endogenously by the concrete reconstruction of its genesis.

Both types of explanation, taken alone, are weak. For this reason I suggest that causes such as exogenous historical events or temporary developments should be regarded as interwoven with the endogenous dynamics of the genesis of a historical generation. This becomes evident when we consider generational location as an opportunity structure of experiencing historical processes in a certain biographical period. Only specific age-groups can experience a certain historical event or development during their adolescence; other age-groups are too old or too young. But this coincidence cannot be regarded as the mere 'accident' that historical moment and biographical time overlap. Both the coinciding facts are the 'result' of social processes of collective interpretation: certain events or developments had to be emphasized as historically relevant, and the temporal extension of these events and developments is limited by the interpretations and conventions of the actors or collectives involved; then periods of the individual biography have to be validly socially interpreted as 'adolescence', as the phase in which personal identity has to be found. Both of these are dependent on interpretation in the cultural circles of collective actors. This means that if a generation ignores a relevant topic in a certain historical development, this attribution is at the same time a result of its own self-thematization as a generation, since the collective self-definition takes place by
emphasizing the historical background. We are confronted with an interwoven dynamic of two selective processes:

1. a specific period (events, developments) has to be interpreted de facto as relevant historical time, with a certain temporal demarcation;
2. a specific bundle of age-groups has to be attributed (and/or to attribute themselves) de facto as being in transition from youth to adulthood.

The discursive constitution of a generation depends on both these processes having taken place. Furthermore, the discursive constitution of a generation, by emphasizing the topic of a certain historical development, is a process that itself takes (place in) time.

We can therefore ask whether certain age-groups will be central to this process, since they accompany it from start to finish. On the other hand, it means that some age-groups may be forerunners of generations and others will step into the period of adolescence when the topic begins to expire. Generations – collectively constituted in the socially demonstrated period of adolescence – are temporally limited. They appear during a limited historical time and will embrace a limited bundle of age-groups born in the same period. People born at the borders of these age-groups fall in between, that is, they are virtually members of the preceding or succeeding generation. They do not form the centre of a generation of their own. The crystallization process of a generation during the collective experience of adolescence has two culmination points:

1. the assertion of a semantic within a limited number of age-groups born in the same period;
2. the ‘over-ageing’, that is, the collective crossing over of the generational protagonists to the next stage in the life course.

In this way this generation and its criteria lose their credibility vis-a-vis the next generation. At first, a generational semantic takes time to emerge within its discursive relationships, to line up the cultural circles that will function as the carriers of this semantic. The acceptance of such a semantic has been established when a generation can articulate temporally the interpretative forces (‘vigencias’) of its new ideas. But from this moment on, the chance that the succeeding age-groups will seek alternative patterns of interpretation increases. The process of crystallization and the ‘over-ageing’ of a youth (adolescent) generation has two further dimensions in the location of a generation in an intergenerational discourse, and then the collective ageing of a generation.
5.2 Relationships between generations: ‘polyphonically organized time perspectives’

One constitutive moment of a generation is that it can be distinguished from other generations. At first sight this seems to be due to age differences or age strata in a society, but again we have to ask more precisely how such ‘age strata’ are constituted, and how a generation comes to be placed in this particular stratum. From the perspective of the framework elaborated above, we make two basic assumptions about this problem. The structure of ‘age strata’ or ‘coexisting’ and ‘interrelated’ generations is the result of a history of discourses. The endogenous discursive process of a specific generation and the interrelated discourse of coexisting generations is co-constructive.

The first assumption refers to how we can identify and explain the historical culmination points at which one generation moves out of a certain ‘stage’ and another follows. The second asks how one generation recognizes another as different, how they react to each other, and how these reciprocal reactions impel the succession of generations. If we consider the life course as a succession of culturally defined stages, phases or biographical periods, we can assume that generations as collectives step into and out of these phases. This collective succession through life phases is balanced out in an intergenerational discourse. This intergenerational discourse is necessary for marking the turning points of generational succession, to identify the historical moments where at a certain life stage an ‘old’ generation disappears and is replaced by a new one.

Once again, the crystallization of a generation of adolescents can be taken as exemplary. As shown above, the stabilized possibility of recognizing certain patterns of interpretation and articulation as typical for one’s generation is a first step toward the intergenerational discourse. It enables social actors to share their (own) collective perspective in discourse; it makes it possible for them to mark their own position in discourse and distinguish it from what might, at first, be seen as other diffuse, standpoints. But in the case of adolescent generations, two other generational collectives are important in demarcation: the parent generation, and the preceding generation of adolescents. From the standpoint of adolescent children, the parent generation (which is not a generation in itself) symbolizes the problem of dissolution and finding their own way, while the preceding generation of adolescents represents a rival concept of identity which has to be conquered.

So if it is correct that, during their adolescence, people work out a generationally comparable definition of problems for different contexts of life, then they do this in relationships which are opposite to or in competition with other age-groups. This shows the polyphonically ‘organized time perspectives’ (Pinder, 1926; Mannheim, 1952) of coexisting generations. In different life contexts, adolescents will meet other adolescents and people of different
age-groups, but the proportions of the age-groups can vary enormously. This is the main reason why it is so important for a generation to be able to immediately recognize the specific type of articulation of its own generation in the multiple universe of intergenerational relations, to locate its own time and world perspective in disparately succeeding situations where very different time perspectives and worldviews coincide. The decisive tribute for an emerging generation is that it gains acceptance for introducing a new theme, and thereby transforming the structure of the intergenerational discourse.

5.3 The ageing time of generations

Generations share not only their adolescence, but also the other phases of life: adulthood, old age. The idea of ‘over-ageing’ at the stage of adolescence makes it clear that institutionalized age (or life phase) markers force individuals, as the collective of generations, to transform their ‘identity’. Thus the collective ageing of a generation also means collective learning. The discursive crystallization of basic intentions and formative principles of articulation in adolescence is followed by stepping collectively into the next life phase. In this next phase the generational modes of life practice adopted have to be reconsidered, with regard to which elements can be kept and which have to be modified.

In the example of the ‘postponed’, ‘risk-sensitive’ generation of ’78, this would mean asking how they could find an answer to the problem of adult life – taking responsibility in practice – within their generational framework of ‘postponing responsibility’ or ‘procrastinating’ (see p. 264).

6. Conclusion

My aim has been to explicate an underelaborated legacy of Mannheim’s sociological concept of generations – the specific dimension of ‘generation as actuality’. I have suggested that we reconstruct his notion of formative principles emerging in youth as discursive practices of cultural circles of adolescent age-groups. In this way it seems possible to ‘model’ the historical crystallization of generational semantics, which contain the criteria for interpretation and articulation by which individuals or strata of adolescents become able to identify their own way of understanding themselves and their worlds. Beyond this generational self-thematization in historical time an endogenous process is set off. This endogenous process always has to be taken into account when defining the historical (temporal) demarcations of generations, the polyphonically organized time perspectives of intergenerational relationships, and the time schemes of the collective ageing of a generation. In this article I have only been able to develop
the theoretical dimensions of the problem. Therefore, several specific questions have been left open. But here I argue that the orders of time(s) that are associated with the collective phenomenon of generation have developed their finity (‘finite meanings’: Bloor, 1997) through the discourse of generations. This development of ‘finite meanings’ of time(s) in generational discourses can only be reconstructed empirically – from case to case. Therefore we need to study how, out of the experience of ‘having been young together’, the attributes ‘my generation’ or ‘our time’ gain a solid social validity and become general aspects of identification in discursive practice. Only then can we find the self-description of an experiential horizon by which a generation ages and by which it can relate itself to others.

Notes

1. From my point of view, the ontological differences in sociological theories go back to the two strategies mentioned. The first rejects the notion of an ‘ontology’ of social facts and relies on the stability of the methodological concepts derived by the social scientist. It is ontologically indifferent, but epistemologically rigid. The second is a latent realistic position that presumes that there are always at least social practices as a ‘pre’ that have to be reconstructed by the researcher (Corsten, 1998).

2. ‘We shall therefore speak of a generation as an actuality only where a concrete bond [wahrhafte Verbindung] is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization’ (Mannheim, 1952: 303). ‘Individuals of the same age, they were and are, however, only united [connected, German: verbunden] as an actual generation [Generationszusammenhang: ‘coherence of generation’] in so far as they participate in the characteristic social and intellectual currents of their society and period, and in so far as they have an active or passive experience of the interactions of forces which made up the new situation’ (1952: 304).

3. Mannheim’s original German: ‘Dieselbe Jugend, die an der selben historisch-aktuellen Problematik orientiert ist’ I would translate as: ‘The (same) youth that is oriented at the same historically-current complex of problems lives in the coherence of a generation.’

4. Elder’s (1974) research tradition is a good example of this method of investigation.

5. Generations of parents are neither homogenous birth nor parenthood cohorts.

References


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