Jane Pilcher

Mannheim's sociology of generations: an undervalued legacy

ABSTRACT

Mannheim's 1923 essay 'The Problem of Generations' has often been described as the seminal theoretical treatment of generations as a sociological phenomenon. Yet in practice scant attention has been paid to the sociology of generations by British sociologists. This is despite the notion of generation being widespread in everyday language as a way of understanding differences between age groups and as a means of locating individuals and groups within historical time. This paper aims to raise the profile of the sociology of generations within British sociology. It is shown that Mannheim's essay can be read as a text which contributes to our understanding of key sociological issues, in addition to 'the problem of generations'. These issues include the nature of time, the relationship between biology and the social, and socio-psychological connections of language and knowledge.

The notion of generation is widely used in the everyday world to make sense of differences between age groupings in society and to locate individual selves and other persons within historical time. We speak, for example, of 'my generation' and of 'the older generation'. We describe those who grew up in, say, the 1960s, as belonging to 'the sixties generation'. We speak of 'a few generations ago', 'a new generation' and of 'the generation gap'. Despite the notion of generation being in such common currency, contemporary sociologists have paid scant attention to the significance of generation. Yet, a longstanding tradition of theorizing the nature and significance of biological age groupings for processes of social change and continuity can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosophers (Nash 1978). More recent contributions have come from Ortega y Gasset, with his notion of *vigencias* (Spitzer 1973) and from the French *Annales* school, via the concept of *mentalities collectives* (Esler 1984). However, it is Mannheim's (1952 [1923]) 'The Problem of Generations' which is

widely regarded as the most systematic and fully developed treatment
of generation from a sociological perspective (Bengtson, *et al.* 1974).
Despite this longstanding tradition, and the lauding of Mannheim's
essay as the seminal sociological treatment of generations, there has
been very little empirical research on the issue, at least within British
sociology. The neglect of the sociology of generations parallels the
lack of attention paid to the social significance of age more generally.
Finch (1986) described the use of age in ways which are theoretically
informed and empirically rigorous as 'relatively uncharted territory'
within sociology (1986: 12). Finch underlined the necessity of de-
veloping a sociology of age by highlighting its value in contributing to
our understanding of key sociological issues, including the interplay
of the biological and the social, the relationship between personal and
social change and the intersection of biography and history (Finch
1986). In more recent years, there has been a burgeoning of
theorizing and research on age in terms of the life course (Allatt, *et al.*
1987; Bryman, *et al.* 1987; Hockey and James 1993) and as evidenced
by various volumes on childhood (for example, James and Prout 1990)
and on later life (for example, Arber and Ginn 1991). Nevertheless,
Finch's point still rings true in terms of there being a lack of
sociological theorizing and research on age in terms of social gener-
ation (in the Mannheimian tradition) within British sociology. To
encourage the newly developing field of the social significance of age
to include a concern with age in terms of social generation, this paper
gives an account of Mannheim's theory and highlights its value in
illuminating a number of key sociological concerns. These include:
the relationship between biology and the social; the nature of time; the
relationship between biography and history and between personal
and social change; the mechanisms of social change; and socio-psycho-
logical connections of language and knowledge.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF GENERATIONS

Mannheim's essay 'The Problem of Generations' is regarded as the
most systematic and fully developed treatment of generation from a
sociological perspective (Bengtson, *et al.* 1974), because it firmly
locates generation within socio-historical contexts, and moreover, is
part of a wider sociological theory of knowledge. Indeed, Mannheim's
sociology of generations must be seen as one element of his broader
interest in the sociology of knowledge. For Mannheim, the sociology
of knowledge is the theory of the social or existential conditioning of
knowledge by location in a socio-historical structure.[1] Mannheim was
mainly concerned with examining social location in terms of class
factors (Abercrombie 1980), although he also conceived of social
location in terms of generational factors. In his theory of generations,

Mannheim identifies generational location as a key aspect of the existential determination of knowledge. Generational location points to 'certain definite modes of behaviour, feeling and thought' (Mannheim 1952: 291), and the formative experiences during the time of youth are highlighted as the key period in which social generations are formed. According to Mannheim's account, contemporaneous individuals are further internally stratified: by their geographical and cultural location; by their actual as opposed to potential participation in the social and intellectual currents of their time and place; and by their differing responses to a particular situation so that there may develop opposing generational 'units'. The likelihood of a generation developing a distinctive consciousness is seen to be dependent on the tempo of social change, but in any case, the change over of social generations is always made smoother by the presence of an intermediary or buffer generation.

Before considering this theoretical account of generations in more detail, via an illustration of how it touches upon several key sociological issues, some terminological matters must be addressed. Many contributors to generational analysis have pointed out that the way in which Mannheim and others have used 'generation' is really in the sense of 'cohort' and that this would be a more accurate term to employ. Glenn (1977), for example, notes that technically the term 'generation' is a structural one in kinship terminology denoting the parent-child relationship. A 'cohort' is defined as people within a delineated population who experience the same significant event within a given period of time. Glenn advocates that the synonymous use of 'generation' for 'cohort' should be avoided. Clearly, Mannheim's concept of 'generation' is technically speaking properly a cohort, at least in the sense that Glenn and others (e.g. Rosow 1978) have defined it. However, generation meaning cohort remains in wide currency within social science.

Terminological issues such as these are particularly important when the sample used in generational research is composed of members of family groups, as has frequently been the case. In such studies, individuals are generations in the *kinship* sense, yet are also generations in the *cohort* sense. In order that the two dimensions of generations embedded in research designs are not confused, I advocate the use of *generation* when reference is made to kinship relationships and *social generation* when reference is made to any cohort related phenomena. Thus account is taken of the urging of Glenn and others towards cautious use of terminology, whilst links are maintained with the sociological tradition which has roots in Mannheim's use of the term generation.

The issue of terminological confusion surrounding generational analysis acts as a useful introduction to the main argument of this paper: that Mannheim's essay can be read as a text which highlights

several key issues for sociology as a whole. Thus, the confusion resulting from the misapplication of generation as a term arises out of, for example, the conflation of biological generation with cohort and an insensitivity to the multiple nature of time and to the complexity of biographical and historical connections. Mannheim's essay will now be presented in terms of the light it sheds on these and other issues.

BIOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL

The implications of biological ageing and death, and the physical replacement of individuals over time as a consequence of these processes, have been more readily evident in theories which seek to explain the *continuation* of the social order than in those which are concerned with social *change*. In structural functionalism, the ongoing problem of integration of new human beings into society is a fundamental concern and is seen to be achieved via mechanisms of socialization. The functionalist perspective on generations, as represented by Parsons and by Eisenstadt, 'focuses not on age group contributions to dramatic social change but rather on the mechanisms of orderly cohort flow and gradual evolution of the social order' (Bengtson, *et al.* 1974: 5–6). Arguably, theories of social *change* have been rather less concerned with the physical facts of human existence. Such efforts as there have been have opened themselves to the charge of biological determinism and have served to antagonize further the relationship between the biological and social sciences (Benton 1991). In contrast, Mannheim's theory of generations, in recognizing the significance of human existence as biological organisms for social change, is thoroughly sociological in its interpretation.

Mannheim begins his essay on 'the problem of generations' with a critique of two nineteenth-century perspectives on the issue, the positivist and the historical romanticist. Positivists, Mannheim argues, have been attracted to 'the problem of generations' because of its potential in revealing the 'secret of history', i.e. historical progression or social change. Mannheim suggests that the positivists' concern was to try to find a general law of historical development 'based on the biological law of the limited life span of man [*sic*] and the overlap of new and old generations' (1952: 278). Generations were conceptualized as one of the driving forces of social change and progression. Moreover, the concept was seen as one which raised the possibility of predicting the direction of social change (Troll 1970).

Mannheim is critical of the positivist conception of generation for their neglect of the 'social factor' in favour of the biological. He maintains that attempts to discover the 'rhythm of history' can be achieved only through research into the 'nearer and more transparent fabric of social processes' and their influence on the phenomenon of

generations, since 'any biological rhythm must work itself out through the medium of social events' (Mannheim 1952: 286). Mannheim starts his sociological analysis of the problem of generations with an attempt to clarify the nature of generations as a social category. He likens generation to social class position, since both concepts denote an individual or group's location in the social structure. In the case of class location, an individual or group's position emerges from the existence of an economic and power structure within society. The structure from which generation emerges is the 'existence of biological rhythm in human existence – the factors of life and death, a limited span of life, and ageing' (Mannheim 1952: 290). Although recognizing the influence of biological factors, Mannheim stresses the overriding and ultimate importance of social factors, so that biology is seen to be embedded within social and historical processes

> Were it not for the existence of social interaction between human beings – were there no definable social structure, no history based on a particular sort of continuity, the generation would not exist as a social phenomenon: there would be merely birth, ageing and death. (1952: 291)

The dichotomy of biology and the social is firmly entrenched within sociology but there have been recent calls for the 'settled division of labour between the biological and social sciences' to be questioned (Benton 1991). Arising out of her work on time and social theory, Adam (1990), for example, calls for a yielding of traditional distinctions between biological and human nature and natural and social time (1990: 90). Human beings are 'biological clocks and organic beings' (1990: 89). As such, we breathe, eat, digest; our activities and our sleep are linked to the light-dark cycle of the earth; our life span follows the natural cycle of growth and decay. These features have effects which cannot, Adam argues, be limited to our physiology, but which permeate our social lives. She contends that, consequently, there is a need to enlarge the time-span of social scientific analysis to include an 'evolutionary scale', so that the importance of our sociobiological being is recognized (Adam 1990: 166). Whilst I am not suggesting that Mannheim breaks down the biology/sociology dichotemy in his essay on generations, he does at least take account of the biological, organic human in recognizing that the biological rhythm of human existence plays a part in social change and historical progression. To this extent, then, Mannheim acknowledges that our organic existence has effects, not limited to physiology, but which permeate the social world.

THE NATURE OF TIME

As Adam (1990) shows, there is a longstanding, if somewhat hetero-
geneous, body of social scientific thought on the topic of time. Con-
temporary contributors argue that time is central to the subject of
social science and that the 'complexity of times' (*sic* – Adam 1990: 9)
needs to be recognized and reflected in theories about social reality.

As Adam herself concludes, time is a multi-layered and complex
fact of life, multiple in its forms and its expressions (1990: 169). Con-
ceptions of time are central to the variety of ways in which generation
is used in everyday language, including in terms of locating persons
within historical time and as a marker of time past, time future and
historical progression. In his account of generations, Mannheim dis-
cusses contrasting conceptualizations of time and the resultant conse-
quences for the concept of social generation, as is illustrated below.
The value of Mannheim's theory of generations for illuminating the
'complexity of times' is further discussed in an examination of the
multiple nature of time revealed when social generation is investi-
gated in empirical settings.

The positivists' conception of social change and progress, and of
generations (discussed above) rested on a particular understanding
of the nature of time. In his essay, Mannheim characterizes the posi-
tivist conception of time as 'mechanistic' and 'externalized' and as ex-
pressed in measurable, quantitative terms (see also Adam 1990: 11–
12). In contrast, the conception of time held by Dilthey, the German
historical romanticist, recognized quantitative and qualitative (or, in-
terior) time. This distinction has profound consequences for the con-
cept of generations and their measurement, since the 'time interval
separating generations becomes subjectively experienceable time'
(Mannheim 1952: 282) rather than quantified time in decades and
years. In the German historical romanticist conception of time, and
thus of generations, questions of a quantitative nature, of delineating
generation spans or dating historical periods in an external sense, be-
come superseded. 'External units' of time such as decades, years and
months are replaced by 'generation' as a temporal unit in history.
Contemporaneity is conceived, not as the co-existence of persons be-
tween two sets of dates, but as a subjective condition of having ex-
perienced the same dominant influences. Mannheim found much
that was valuable in the German historical romanticist treatment of
the problem of generations, particularly the notion of the 'non-
contemporaneity of the contemporaneous' (that is, that 'all people
living at the same time do not necessarily share the same history'
[Troll 1970: 201]).

Other ways in which Mannheim's essay touches upon the issue of
time are evident when attempts are made to investigate the concept
of social generation in empirical settings. The essential problem with

an empirical investigation of social generations is that the operational-ization of the concept involves a tension between its *qualitative* nature (social generations as distinguished by qualitative experience) and their accompanying *quantitative* features, of age and of time measured in numerical units. Mannheim sidesteps the problem of how gener-ations are to be delineated empirically, although he appears sympa-thetic to Dilthey's notion of interior time, which replaces numerical measures of time with a qualitative, subjectively experienced time. Strategies for managing time tensions in the empirical investigation of generational phenomena have, though, been put forward by sub-sequent contributors. For example, Spitzer (1973) argues that the boundary problem of where to delineate social generations in the 'seamless continuum of daily births' is one faced by all who choose to mark off categories in any continuum, including social class or political ideology. At the boundaries of such categories, there is always an unavoidable ambiguity (Spitzer 1973: 1358). His advice is that, if age specific differences are historically significant, they will reveal themselves wherever the 'cuts' are made in the continuum. Rosow (1978), though, is more cautious about the advisability of uncritical classification and maintains that the 'general bounding criteria for cohorts can [not] be clearly established independent of specific analytic questions to delineate them.' (Roscow 1978: 69). He argues that fixing the cut off points of social generations is further made problematical when 'there are few incisive events to punctuate the flow of time and people' (*ibid.*). He contrasts, as an illustration, the sudden change in status quo marked by the 1929 Wall Street Crash, and the 'soggy recession' of the 1970s. Rosow's point is that when 'major historical events are soft and indistinct, cohorts may be clearest at their centers, but blurred and fuzzy at the edges.' (*Ibid*; see also Abrams 1982).

   The boundary problem which arises from the tensions between the two kinds of time conflated within the concept of social generation is sidestepped in empirical studies which use family groups as a research sample. The focus on social generations at family level means that generational boundaries are 'fixed' by the years separating the parent-offspring generation. In one recent study (Pilcher 1992), the 'marking off' of the two cut off points at the extreme ends of the oldest cohort and youngest cohort was a consequence of the analytical interest in question, as advised by Rosow. The youngest social generation in the research had to have grown to adulthood and been exposed to the significant social and cultural changes in women's lives that have occurred since the 1960s, so that these would have been features of their formative experiences. This requirement set their age range at approximately seventeen to the upper twenties. Since this age band was of primary significance, and due to the research practicalities of finding three generational families (see Pilcher 1992),

the age bands of the mothers and grandmothers were not set or fixed – basically, they came as they were.[2] The focus of the research can be summarized as the social and cultural changes in women's lives. Applying Rosow's point about the nature of the historical events under investigation, a similar argument can be proposed in terms of fixing a cut off point between social generations. There has not been a 'Wall Street Crash' in women's lives; the changes in women's lives have not occurred in a sharp, easily delineated manner, although there have been a number of key events (such as World War Two) which have punctuated the gradual change.

A third way in which Mannheim's theory of generations illuminates the multiple nature of time arises from the 'mutual phasing of two different calendars' (Abrams 1982: 240), of personal life span and of history. Thus in the empirical investigation of social generational phenomena, the multifaceted nature of time is revealed through the difficulty of separating processes of ageing (as in stage in life cycle) from those of location in socio-historical time (as in social generation – see Finch 1986).

Most often, studies that are concerned with continuities and discontinuities between age groupings have been cross-sectional in design. That is, they focus on a comparison of two or more age groups at one point in time. Longitudinal studies are sometimes undertaken but are rare due to the enormous problems that accompany the process of collecting data from discrete sets of individuals over lengthy periods of time. The advantage of longitudinal research is that, since individuals are sampled at more than one point in their life span, the assessment of any generational consciousness is made less problematical than is the case in cross-sectional research designs. In the case of the latter, the sampling of two or more age groups at one point in time means that an 'unambiguous assessment' (Buss 1974) of why age groupings might differ cannot be made. In cross-sectional research designs, ageing effects are unavoidably entangled with period and cohort effects, since a social generation is also always a group at a particular stage in the span of life.

The 'mutual phasing of two different calendars' are further entangled by several assumptions contained within the notion of a social generation. Mannheim assumes that a person's location in the socio-historical structure sets the parameters of their experience and that the significant period in this respect is the exposure to events and experiences in the formative years, the years of youth. Clearly, this assumption is heavily reliant on the validity of the relationship between stages of the ageing process and key periods of socialization: people are 'fixed' within a socio-historical world that predominated in their youth and they carry this with them throughout their lives. In this manner, each social generation, although contemporaneous with other social generations, has a distinctive historical consciousness

which leads them to experience and approach the same social and cultural phenomena differently. Schuman and Scott (1989), amongst others, note that Mannheim's work contains assumptions about late adolescence as a key period for the formation of social and political outlooks, but point out that so too do almost all later writers. Moreover, such assumptions are supported by the findings of developmental psychology (Schuman and Scott 1989). In their own research, Schuman and Scott found that the hypothesis that people of all ages tend to report events and changes that occurred in their youth as important, was supported 'remarkably well' (see also Stewart and Healy 1989).

The implication of the criticisms that have been levelled at cross-sectional research designs, that they do not allow an 'unambiguous assessment' of why age groupings differ, is that theories relating age processes to social characteristics, and the theory of social generations are, in some way, competing theories. In large part, however, the competitive status of the two types of theory is dependent upon how the former theory is conceptualized. Recent work (Bryman *et al.* 1987) on theories of age processes has led to a movement away from the concept of the life cycle to that of the life course, from an emphasis on 'ages and stages' (Allatt and Keil 1987) and a normative sequence of life events, to the life *transitions* that individuals and families make over time. The concept of the life course locates the processes and movement of transition within changing historical circumstances. Hareven (1982) thus makes the distinction between individual time, family time, and historical time; the historical context is viewed as crucial to the interpretation of individual and family transitions (see also Jones 1991).

Rosow (1978) argues that the concept of social generation should be seen as an index, locating people in a socio-historical structure. The concept of the life course can also be viewed as an index, which locates people along a socially constructed age continuum within historical time. When life cycle is reconceptualized as life course in this manner, proper attention is given to the role of historical circumstances. The apparent tension between theories relating age processes to social characteristics and the theory of social generations is then dissipated.[3]

Thus, via his discussion of generations and via the empirical translation of his theory into practice, which raises the problem of where to 'draw the line' between age groups and that of the mutual phasing of life span and history, Mannheim's essay illustrates the 'complexities of times' (Adam 1990: 9).

THE DIALECTIC OF BIOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

Abrams (1982) argues that society must be understood as a process constructed historically, by individuals who are constructed historically

by society. The relationship is a dialectical one, whereby individuals both constitute historical configurations and are constituted historically by them. Mannheim's essay on generations can be read as a text in which this dialectical, symbiotic relationship is characterized as fundamentally crucial to the constitution of individuals and society, to biography and history.

For Mannheim, just as shared class location limits individuals to a particular range of experiences and predisposes them to a characteristic mode of thought and experience, so too does generational location set the parameters of experience, in that it points toward 'certain definite modes of behaviour, feeling and thought' (1952: 291). Thus, those who 'share the same year of birth, are endowed . . . with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process' (1952: 290). Mannheim is not implying that mere chronological contemporaneity produces a common generational consciousness. Contemporaneity becomes sociologically significant only when it also involves 'participation in the same social and historical circumstances' (1952: 298). Chronologically contemporaneous individuals are stratified by the tendency for the formative experiences and early impressions of youth to 'coalesce into a natural view of the world' (*ibid.*). The individual then carries this with them throughout their life. 'All later experiences then tend to receive their meaning from this original set, whether they appear as that set's verification or its negation and anti-thesis' (1952: 298). Here, Mannheim is drawing heavily on the notion of interior time. People are crucially influenced by the socio-historical context that predominated in their youth: they are fixed in 'qualitatively quite different subjective eras.' In this manner, each social generation has a distinctive historical consciousness.

Mannheim is insisting then, that in order to share generational location in a sociologically meaningful sense, individuals must be born within the same historical and cultural context and be exposed to experiences that occur during their formative adult years. Mannheim characterizes this shared location as an unconscious and inactive one, as opposed to a 'generation as actuality', whereby members have a 'concrete bond' through their exposure to and participation in the 'social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization' (1952: 303), such as in time of war. Mannheim expresses the difference between basic 'generational location' and 'generation as actuality' as that of *potentially* being capable of being 'sucked into the vortex of social change' and in *actually participating* in the 'characteristic social and intellectual currents of their society and period' (1952: 304). Within a generation as actuality, Mannheim recognizes that there may come into being differing or opposing forms of response to the particular historical situation. Thus a generation as actuality is likely to be stratified by a number of 'generation units'.

Youth experiencing the same concrete problems may be said to be part of the same actual generation; while those groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different and specific ways, constitute separate generation units. (1952: 304)

In Mannheim's theory of generations, therefore, individuals are constituted by the historical dimension of the social process which predominated in their youth and, thereby, social generations are formed. Individual biographies are shaped by socio-historical location and through a lesser or greater participation in the events of the time. As is discussed below, social generations and active generation units, in turn, become agencies of change which construct the history of society. Mannheim's approach thus fully appreciates the reciprocal relationship between lives and structure (Hess 1988).

GENERATIONS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

It has been argued that Mannheim's theory of generations is essentially a theory of social change (Laufer and Bengtson 1974), with generations, particularly generation units, as the agencies of change. In his essay, Mannheim is at pains to set his thoughts on social change clearly apart from 'most generation theories'. He states that, in contrast to what has often been assumed, not every generation develops an original and distinctive consciousness. Although there is potential inherent in any generation, Mannheim argues that it is likely that the frequency with which a generation's potential is realized is 'closely connected with the tempo of change' (1952: 309), with the 'trigger action of the social and cultural process' (1952: 310). Mannheim implies that, in times of accelerated social and cultural change, 'basic attitudes' need to change more quickly than the continuous but more gradual change brought about by the 'fresh contact' with culture experienced by the new generations, and the dying off of older generations, allows. The 'fresh contact' of new generations with the already existing cultural and social heritage always means a 'changed relationship of distance' and a 'novel approach in assimilating, using and developing the proffered material' (1952: 293). In times of accelerated social change, however, when normality is disrupted, the 'new brooms' have even greater opportunity and access than the natural, gradual change over of generations allows. However, since transition from one generation to another always takes place continuously, the process of social change is made smoother by this interaction: '. . . it is not the oldest generation who meet the youngest at once; the first contacts are made by other "intermediary" generations, less removed from each other' (1952: 301).

Empirical research finds that the ageing and eventual physical

replacement of components of the population are major long-term forces influencing value change in society (Abramson and Inglehart 1986). As I argued earlier, theories of social *change* have been rather less concerned than theories of social continuity have with the consequences of generational replacement over time arising from birth, ageing and death. Mannheim's account accords such processes, when embedded in social interaction and history, a fundamental role in the 'genesis of historical development' (Mannheim 1952: 320).

SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS OF LANGUAGE AND KNOWLEDGE

Mannheim's seminal work represents the strongest sociological account of generations: it is, however, a theoretical treatment of the problem. It does not contain an empirical model or any guidelines as to how the investigation of generational phenomena is to proceed, aside from stressing that recognition of social and cultural factors in the production of social generations should be paramount in terms of their investigation. The lack of any guidelines includes a failure to specify what is to count as 'generational consciousness' in terms of data: what is it that sociologists should study?

In fact, the sociology of generations is little different in this respect from the empirical difficulties associated with researching the larger area of the sociology of knowledge. As Dant (1991) notes, Mannheim does not clearly specify exactly what constitutes 'knowledge' in empirical terms, other than suggesting that *words* (as the repositories of the meanings that constitute a style of thought or a world view) are significant objects for study (see Mannheim 1960: 245). Although Mannheim himself does not specify how socio-psychological links are to be made, solutions can be found in the writings of commentators on Mannheim's sociology of knowledge and which can be applied to his sociology of generations.

Mills (1967) is critical of most sociological theories of knowledge, including Mannheim's, for their inadequate formulations of the terms with which they connect mind with other social factors i.e. that the socio-psychological connections are inadequately conceptualized (1967: 424).

Mills proposes two hypotheses to remedy the situation. The first is based on Mead's social statement of the mind, and particularly his concept of the 'generalized other'. This, Mills argues, can be employed to show how societal processes enter as determinants into reflection, into the mind (1967: 426). Mills' second hypothesis is constructed from a conjunction of the social dimensions of language with the fundamental role of language in thought (1967: 432). The linking of the two hypotheses leads Mills to propose that,

> We may 'locate' a thinker among political and social coordinates by
> ascertaining what words his [*sic*] functioning vocabulary contains
> and what nuances of meaning and value they embody. (Mills
> 1967: 434)

In this way then, Mills claims to have presented a sociological
approach to reflection and knowledge that overcomes the weak
socio-psychological formulations within most sociologies of know-
ledge. Dant (1991) echoes Mills' critique of the sociology of knowledge
and similarly argues that the difficulties can be overcome through
taking discourse as the empirical location of knowledge, 'since
discursive practice involves social action that can be identified in time
and place' (Dant 1991: 31).

A further difficulty remains, however: *how* are links to be made
between generational consciousness and historical time? Again, it is
possible to turn to the more general solutions contained within the
sociology of knowledge. According to Dant (1991), Mannheim main-
tains that the interpretation of meaning is central to the task of the
sociology of knowledge, particularly in the sense of 'documentary
meaning'. That is, interpretation of meaning with reference to the
social context, so that interpretation and explanation of generational
consciousness, for example, is made in terms of its (formative)
socio-historical context. Dant also notes that part of Mannheim's
method in this respect is that of 'imputation', that is, an evaluation or
assessment as to whether the style of thought or world view under
investigation is in accord with what is known about its social context
(Dant 1991: 30). There are, according to Mannheim, two levels of
imputation. The first involves the reconstruction of styles of thought
back to a central world view which they express, that is, the uncovering
of a unity of outlook. The second level of imputation involves the
assumption that the reconstructions built up from the first level are
'ideal types' which are then tested against what is known about the
socio-historical context of the persons or groups being studied
(Mannheim 1960: 276–277).

In these ways, then, a reading of Mannheim's theory of generations
raises issues of how socio-psychological connections are made. I have
suggested how the essay, and Mannheim's wider sociology of know-
ledge of which it is a part, can be used as a point of departure in
developing solutions to this problem.

CONCLUSIONS

The low profile of age as a sociologically significant variable is, as Finch
(1986) points out, surprising given its value in highlighting issues
which are central to our understanding of social relations and
processes, including the interplay of the biological and the social, the

relationship between personal and social change and the intersection of biography and history. Rosow makes similar points about the value of the concept of social generation or cohort. He describes it as 'amorphous' but as 'extremely valuable in sensitising us to forces that we are prone to forget or ignore' (1978: 74). Although I am not suggesting that it is the only work to do so, or that it offers solutions, I have illustrated in this paper the variety of ways in which Mannheim's essay can be read as a text which highlights several key issues of sociological concern, resultant from his discussion of generations. It has been shown that the sociology of generations epitomizes several of the concerns which are fundamental to sociology. In being imbued with macro-micro and qualitative-quantitative tensions, it reflects the dichotomous tension that is a feature of the social world that sociologists strive to study and to understand. Because of this, there are difficulties involved in the empirical investigation of social generations, some of which have been indicated in the paper. As a concept, social generation straddles the disciplines of sociology, history and social psychology and viewed in this light, it epitomizes Mills' dictum on the components of the sociological imagination (Mills 1970). As such, the sociology of generations deserves a greater profile within British sociology than it has had to date.

(Date accepted: September 1993)   *Jane Pilcher*
Department of Sociology
University of Leicester

NOTES

1. Critics of the sociology of knowledge argue that the perspective can fall into the trap of determinism, so that social structure is seen as 'giving' individuals their knowledge, beliefs and world views (Abercrombie 1980). However, Mannheim is careful to explicate his use of the term 'determine' and states that he does not mean by it 'a mechanical cause-effect sequence' (1960: 239, footnote).

2. The oldest generation were aged between 62 and 87, the middle generation between 38 and 56 and the youngest generation, between 17 and 29.

3. Schuman and Scott (1989) in fact point out that the concept of the life course is implicit in much of Mannheim's discussion of social generation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abercrombie, N. 1980 *Class, Structure and Knowledge. Problems in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Abrams, P. 1982 *Historical Sociology*, Somerset: Open Books.
Abramson, P. and Inglehart, R. 1986 'Generational Replacement and Value Change in Six West European Societies', *American Journal of Political Science* 30(1): 1–25.
Adam, B. 1990 *Time and Social Theory*, Cambridge: Polity.
Allatt, P., Keil, T., Bryman, A. and Bytheway, B. (eds) 1987 *Women and the Life Cycle. Transitions and Turning Points*, London: Macmillan.
Allatt, P. and Keil, T. 1987 'Introduction' in Allatt, P., Keil, T., Bryman, A. and Bytheway, B. (eds) 1987 *Women and the*

Life Cycle. Transitions and Turning Points, London: Macmillan.

Arber, S. and Ginn, J. 1991 *Gender and Later Life*, London: Sage.

Bengtson, V., Furlong, M. and Laufer, R. 1974 'Time, Aging and the Continuity of Social Structure: Themes and Issues in Generational Analysis', *Journal of Social Issues* 30(2): 1–30.

Benton, T. 1991 'Biology and Social Science: Why the Return of the Repressed Should be Given a (Cautious) Welcome', *Sociology* 25(1): 1–29.

Bryman, A., Bytheway, B., Allatt, P. and Keil, T. (eds) 1987 *Rethinking the Life Cycle*, London: Macmillan.

Buss, A. 1974 'Generational Analysis: Description, Explanation and Theory', *Journal of Social Issues* 30(2): 55–72.

Dant, T. 1991 *Knowledge, Ideology and Discourse. A Sociological Perspective*, London: Routledge.

Esler, A. 1984 '"The Truest Community": Social Generations as Collective Mentalities', *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 12 (Spring): 99–112.

Finch, J. 1986 'Age' in Burgess, R. (ed.) *Key Variables in Social Investigation*, London: RKP.

Glenn, N. 1977 *Cohort Analysis*, London: Sage.

Hareven, T. 1982 *Family Time and Industrial Time. The Relationship Between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hess, B. 1988 'Social Structures and Human Lives: A Sociological Theme' in Riley, M., Huber, B. and Hess, B. (eds) *Social Structures and Human Lives*, California: Sage.

Hockey, J. and James, A. 1993 *Growing Up and Growing Old. Ageing and Dependency in the Life Course*, London: Sage.

James, A. and Prout, A. 1990 *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, London: Falmer.

Jones, G. 1991 'The Cohort in Time and Space', *Bulletin de Methodologie Sociologique* 30: 44–54.

Laufer, R. and Bengtson, V. 1974 'Generations, Aging and Social Stratification: On the Development of Generation Units', *Journal of Social Issues* 30(3): 181–205.

Mannheim, K. 1952 'The Problem of Generations' in Mannheim, K. *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, London: RKP (first published 1923).

Mannheim, K. 1960 *Ideology and Utopia*, London: Routledge (first published 1936).

Mills, C. W. 1967 'Language, Logic and Culture' in Horowitz, I. (ed.) *Power, Politics and People. The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, Oxford, Oxford University Press (first published 1939).

Mills, C. W. 1970 *The Sociological Imagination*, London: Penguin (first published 1959).

Nash, L. 1978 'Greek Origins of Generational Thought', *Daedalus* 107: 1–22.

Pilcher, J. 1992 'Social Change and Feminism. Three Generations of Women, Feminist Issues and the Women's Movement', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wales.

Rosow, I. 1978 'What is a Cohort and Why?', *Human Development* 21: 65–75.

Schuman, H. and Scott, J. 1989 'Generations and Collective Memories', *American Sociological Review* 54: 359–81.

Spitzer, A. B. 1973 'The Historical Problem of Generations' *American Historical Review* 78: 1353–85.

Stewart, A. and Healy, J. 1989 'Linking Individual Development and Social Changes', *American Psychologist* 44(1): 30–42.

Troll, L. 1970 'Issues in the Study of Generations', *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 1: 78–79.