

### 3.7 Qualitative Generation Research

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With the loss of a society of large groups the concept of generation today offers one of the last reference points for a we-concept of the individual (Bude 1997). Now that 'class' and 'nation' are no longer automatically available as obvious collectivization entities, 'generation' is coming to be preferred as a category of social embedding, and this seems to be unencumbered either by political ideology or by national history. The generational community of experience and memory emphasizes a horizontal identity of seeing and coming to terms with the world beyond the vertical solidarities of feelings of provenance and willingness to associate (Nora 1996). What makes proximity of year of birth into a generation is a feeling of being identically affected by a unique historical and social situation. In this way reactions of completion and thematic merging in everyday conversations create a unique proximity between people who in other respects are alien to one another (cf. Bahrtdt 1996). The generational coherence that is, in this way, becoming thematic is the focus of comparison between the life of an individual and others of the same age, and in this the experience of contingency of biography is anchored in relationships of collective experience. Individual life-history is judged in respect of the life-course of members of the same generation: what can be expected, what constituted happiness and where there was failure.

#### 1 AN EXPRESSION OF THE MODERN EXPERIENCE OF TEMPORALIZATION

The present popularity of the concept of generation in social and sociological self-description can indeed lead one to ignore the fact that the problem of generations has occupied sociology since its beginnings and that the concept of generation belongs to the fundamental historical concepts of the modern experience of temporalization of social relationships (see Koselleck 1978). Admittedly the methodological use of the term is relatively underdeveloped. Despite the classical reference to Karl Mannheim's article (1952b), there is no agreement on questions of how generations are formed, how they are to be identified and what socializing effect they have on the lives of their members. A structural weakness in the concept has been postulated, and although this does permit a reformulation of retrievable obvious facts of everyday life, it does not allow for a controlled structuring of anonymous data. Alternatively, one can refer back to methodologically tighter concepts, but with these the essential informative content of the concept of generation is lost. It is therefore essential, for a justification of interpretative generation research, to make a number of conceptual statements and methodological clarifications, so

that it is not always necessary to start again at the beginning when one could long since have made progress.

#### 2 THE CONCEPT OF GENERATION RATHER THAN COHORT

The move from cross-sectional to linear descriptions that was so vital for the understanding of social change, and the related insight that well-founded statements of trends can only be derived from the systematic comparison of the life-situations and life-balances of different birth cohorts (cf. Mayer 1990 for an outline), has incidentally led to a replacement of the historical concept of generation by a chronological concept of cohort. Although cohorts, according to Norman B. Ryder's (1965) open definition, refer to an aggregate of individuals who have shared the same experience in the same time-frame, in research the concept normally denotes a year-group (on the genesis and application of the term cohort, see Sackmann 1998: 29-63). Birth cohorts, however, do not in themselves constitute a generation: it is rather a matter of the possible relation to a common experience that marks and influences, and from which there arises evidence of something shared, despite differences of provenance, religion or ethnic affiliation. Where this evidence is missing, then we are not dealing with a generation, even when years of birth coincide. But where this feeling of participation in a common way of experiencing and reacting does exist, it cannot be countered by a contradictory chronology. For generations are collective formations and it is only they which make possible a meaningful adding together of individual year-cohorts. We are beginning at the wrong end, as Richard Alewyn (1929: 522) saw long ago, if we compare the courses of individual lives and seek to harmonize them. From this, instead of constructions of generations, we shall achieve only catalogues of cohorts, which always make too many conceptual promises and always contain too little information about forms of behaviour and meaning-patterns.

It is not a matter of contesting the argument advanced by representatives of the cohort-approach to demography and, by extension, to mobility and socialization research, that objective life-chances are determined solely by year-group strength (Easterlin 1980), or by the chance

structure encountered by same-age groups in the transition from education to employment (Müller 1978). It is simply that the constituted generational situation needs a context of generation which constitutes it, and which creates - from diverse effects - a socially attributable unity. Here we may see the methodologically demanding implication of the concept of generation: the fact that it makes intelligible the gradual definition of a generation entity which is only the initial framework for the aggregation of individual birth cohorts into the totality of people of the same age. Without this interpretative element generation research would lose itself in a process of random distinction and comparison that would miss the phenomenon of a society that renews itself with every generation.

The concept of generation does not embrace the simple variation in living circumstances within the simultaneity of that which is non-simultaneous, but the constant new application of predominant formations which give expression to a new approach to facts and new kinds of distancing from tradition. The way in which generations act, either as desired by themselves or expected by others, cannot be captured by the concept of cohort. With all necessary caution in the face of a corresponding reductionism, one cannot ignore the truth that the periodic emergence of generations is based on the biological facts of our limited existence. Nothing sociological can be derived from this biological basis, but the phenomenon is missed if no account is taken of this relationship between the fact of a limited life-span and the projects of generational self-assertion. It therefore makes a decisive difference in the mode of procedure, whether one is looking at social alterations in the sequence of cohorts or at the vital moments in the change of generations.

Here the theorists of generation and cohorts are pulling in the same direction, when it is a question of abandoning assumptions of constancy and slowness in their observation of social development. Modern generations are characterized not by smooth transitions but abrupt mutations, as may particularly be seen in the political history of the twentieth century. The generation of youth movement at the beginning of the century, the generation of political youth of the inter-war years, the sceptical generation of the post-war period, or the protest generation of the welfare society (Schelsky 1981) demonstrate about-turns and new beginnings in social

self-understanding, and these can hardly be made to fit a process of collective learning or gradual audience development. The genealogical concept of the family generation, in particular, presupposes links with tradition in which some new access to accumulated culture is sought. The processes whereby the social status of the family of origin is inherited from one generation to the next must also be distinguished from the changes between generations in collective behaviour, passions and memories. Generation is not a concept of updating but one of interruption (see Riedel 1969 on the history of the concept).

### 3 PRINCIPLES OF RECONSTRUCTION

#### *Self-determination from the setting of differences*

From this follows the first principle of an interpretative method of generation research: generations define themselves by their difference from other generations. One cannot always immediately say which generation one belongs to, but one can definitely state the generation one is not associated with. From this form of self-determination by difference, spontaneous generational attributions can be both extracted and also reconstructed. Here, as always, help is available from the structuralist doctrine of relationism, according to which the individual thing can only be defined through its relationship to some other. Colloquial patterns of identification can then be related to public formulae in order to measure the degree to which the meaning of some term has been adopted (see Bude 2000). For example, there is the expression the '89 Generation' (Leggewie 1995), and this comprises a multiplicity of meanings and attributions which first of all need to be checked for their place in our lives before they can be used to give an informative description of society.

#### *Polar unit*

A generation is indeed a problem unit and not a unit of solutions (Jaeger 1977). Generations reproduce themselves in both external and internal opposition. Not only are there always different patterns of individuality (see Popitz 1972: 15 on this term) within one generation, but, in

particular, contradictory consequences are drawn from the shared experience of the same situation. For this reason Mannheim (1952b) distinguishes between the 'generation-situation', which requires interpretation, the horizon-forming 'generation-relationship' and the polarized 'generation-units'. In the 'auxiliary-generation'<sup>1</sup> of German reconstruction after the Second World War (Bude 1987), for example, an influential critical fraction of protest and rejection stood in opposition to a dominant passive faction of 'communicative keeping quiet' (Lübbe 1983). The polarity of Luhmann and Habermas, or of Walser and Grass, is constitutive of the social and intellectual physiognomy of this generation. The systematic consideration of such polar forms of dispute over the same social and historical involvement may be taken as a second methodological principle of generation research.

#### *Avant-garde and receptive groups*

This involves a third principle of reconstruction which concerns the interplay of *avant-garde* and receptive groups in the formation of a shared meaning-horizon. It is always a few people who set the tone for the totality of their contemporaries and who coin the keywords. In Germany, the active core of the movement of 1968 consisted of about 10,000 people who provided the majority of what was subsequently known as the 68-generation with their atmosphere and their material (see Bude 1995: 40f.). It is possible to trace the process of retrospective multiplication of the 68-generation through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, which presents itself as a paradoxical case of intensification of experience through dissipation of the experience. It becomes ever less relevant what actions one really took part in: what is most important is the we-feeling of common origins and shared motives. The generational narrative community is open to alternative versions and histories that go further back, and becomes ultimately only a resonance chamber for matching associations.

#### *Leading, suppressed and redirected types*

Finally the adaptive relationship of biography and history is changed with the history shifts of

emphasis in the context of generation. Julius Petersen (1926) coined the distinction between 'leading', 'redirected' and 'suppressed types of generation', to account for the different forms of establishment and development of the constitutive basic intentions and formative tendencies of a generation (cf. Mannheim 1952b). While the 'leading type' of generation accepts the opportunities and demands of a social and historical situation as a realization of dispositions and tendencies contained within itself, the 'redirected type' feels itself obliged by a certain existential indecisiveness to cling to dominant themes and styles. The 'suppressed', on the other hand, sees itself as pushed into a position where it can either surrender to the spirit of the age or can confront its age in isolation.

How in 1989 the balance was distributed between the heroes of the civic movement, the sceptics from the official opposition and the 'people' of the change, cannot yet be said. But it is beyond question that the age of 'leading generation types', like Bärbel Bohley or Sascha Anderson,<sup>2</sup> is over. Now other forms of self-fulfilment are required in which the members of a generation can see their opportunities and measure their risks. For generations there exists, therefore, the experience of the historical moment where decisions are made between forerunners, pathfinders, distinctive figures of the age, independent talents with no major significance, dependent fellow-travellers, lone runners and fashionable talents. But then, in the very next moment the original 'leading type' may turn out to be an exaggerated and extravagant figure full of self-deception and false attitudes, and the formerly 'suppressed types' are remembered, who have anticipated, in their resistance and obstinacy, what is now required. The fourth methodological principle of generation research is connected with these alternating relationships between biography and history through which the generation becomes a reality of constant re-interpretation and re-modelling. Every total reconstruction must therefore become aware of its own position in respect of the ageing of a generation, so that what actually counts as a primary experience is not simply repeated.

At any event, with all the reflexivity in the life-long self-formation of a generation there remains an 'a-problematic life-source' which causes the feeling of fateful closeness amongst

contemporaries. It is this basis, in the non-reflexive and the unavailable, which brings about the historical-social unit of a generation. It is encountered when the question has been found to which the reconstructed form of a generation is the answer.

### 4 RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

Measured against these interpretative principles qualitative generation research is comparatively underdeveloped. The mixing of the concepts of cohort and generation is responsible for the proliferation of methodologically uncontrolled definitions of generation that are attached partly to the fashions of popular culture (Diederichsen 1993) and partly to the changes in lifestyle or value-orientations of the younger generations (Jugendwerk der Deutschen Shell 1985). To this must be added the dominance of a genealogical concept, relatively unconnected with cycles of public thematization, which is used to determine a succession of generations who are coping with the past: according to this we have now reached the Third Generation – the grandchildren – of the victims and agents of National Socialism (Kohlstruck 1997). A new generation that would make its claim for a definition of reality is, according to this research, nowhere to be found.

One may view this situation as an expression of some modality of historical time that promotes an exhausted blurring rather than a sharp differentiation between young and old. But wherever possible we are experiencing a phase of groundbreaking changes in the educational processes and developmental dynamics of generations. It is no longer wars and their consequences, but the welfare state and its transformations that characterize the life-chances and life-views of neighbouring year-groups (Leisering 1992). Nowadays politically mobile generation conflicts are breaking out in the interpretation of the 'Generation Contract' in the provision of pensions (Stiftung für die Rechte zukünftiger Generationen 1998). How these kinds of institutionally created relationships between generations relate to ideas of historical generations is, of course, recognized as a research problem (Kaufmann 1993). So far, however, it has not been solved, either conceptually or methodologically, by generation research.