

Workshop 1 summary: ‘Generations in the family and the problem of “parenting”’

Report by Tanya Portch, Generations Network project assistant

On 20th January 2020, we hosted the first workshop in our Generations Network project at the University of Surrey. Drawing upon a range of interdisciplinary speakers, papers, and ideas, the workshop brought together senior academics, PhD students and Third Sector workers from a range of disciplines.

The workshop began with an introduction from Dr Helen Kingstone, co-founder of the Network, giving thanks to all those who have expressed an interest in the project and noting the diversity in the group between participants and their respective interests and areas of study and work.

The first session centred upon the question ‘What do we mean by “a generation”, and how do we measure it?’. A key point underpinning the network is that generations are both vertical and lateral: we are considering generations in the family and sociological generational identities. Participants discussed the 25-year parameter of a generation, noting how these seems to have shifted over the last 60 years. Where once a ‘generation’ referred to life span, it now seems to be based upon myriad influences, such as technological advancement, educational attainment, and economic factors. It was noted that psychoanalysts consider a generation as a birth to death life cycle, but also that the term ‘generation’ is relative and not tied to a specific time period. Questions were raised as to how we should see the balance between the social and natural in terms of defining generations. The cultural specificity of generations is also important.

The second session asked, how do we take into account intra-generational differences, and how do these affect intergenerational transmission? Short talks were given by Arun Himawan, research fellow from the International Longevity Centre (ILC), and Katherine O’Brien, Associate Director of Communications and Campaigns at the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS). Each spoke about diversity and inequalities among today’s older people, and teenagers’ lifestyles and the family unit, respectively. Arun Himawan talked us through [ILC research](#) that showed surprising results, such as the fact that among 50-64 year-olds, single people are less commonly in work than those in couples. The group noted that today’s retired population are living longer and taking on more caring responsibilities than in previous times. Ali Somers highlighted how housing ends up segregated along age lines, and in changing ways: children living at home longer, and grandparents helping out with childcare, is producing more mixed households, containing people of ages 2-65. However, those of 80+ with complex medical needs tend to be moved out to specialist housing, creating a new faultline of segregation.

Data shows that there are now four concurrent generations, which is unprecedented. This means that we may need to revise our preconceptions about these generations. BPAS’s [research](#) suggests that current UK teenagers resist narratives of being ‘generation sober’. Despite this, they do much of their peer interaction online rather than in person, and instead spend their time at home, with family – and value that family time.

The third session asked ‘How does intergenerational transmission take place, in genetic, familial and broader cultural terms?’, and was initiated by short talks from Dr Erica Hepper (University of Surrey) and Dr Nigel Williams (University of West England). Dr Hepper argued that nostalgia may play a positive role in the transmission of family narratives and bonds. It was remarked that we can make distinctions between interpersonal, cultural and virtual nostalgia, and these differing types can help to establish generational identities. Building upon these themes, Dr Williams discussed memories between generations, highlighting the relationship between psychology and biology, and harkening back to earlier discussions in the day between social and biological factors of defining generations.

The penultimate session of the day, “How does this intergenerational transmission vary or change over historical time?”, was introduced by Ellie Murray (University of Leeds) and Professor Ellie Lee (University of Kent). Ellie Murray discussed her work on how children learn parenthood from their parents. Gems included the observation that older siblings in the mid-20th century felt shared maternal responsibility for younger ones, and that this became *more* so as family size shrank and this practice stopped being a standard part of all childhoods, and Professor Lee reviewed the term ‘helicopter parenting’ in the context of an increasing cultural and policy focus on parenting ‘styles’. Use of the term becomes parental determination, i.e. blaming them for all that follows. She pointed out that while most parenting criticism lambasts working-class parents, the ‘helicopter’ label attacks a middle-class type of parenting. The group noted that intergenerational transmission and parenting are not one and the same, and discussed ways in which parenting should be located within intergenerational work.

The final session focused upon our reflections and conclusions on our key questions. We had identified a clear separation between the individual and society from different disciplines. Some discussions were on individualised subjective topics, whilst others looked at more ‘objective’ trends such as the economy and technology. The difficulty in defining generations was observed, and the need to distinguish between generation effects and age effects. We also need to be careful not to focus exclusively on either end of the lifecourse and leave out the long midlife. Moreover, we acknowledged how the concept of generations can be weaponised and marketized: we should be careful not to see everything that references generations as necessarily being about generations. Ideas for future workshops and the development of the network were discussed, such as a project bibliography to capture the wealth of diversity amongst the participants and disciplines, and future discussions focused upon the transmission of values between generations.

Our next workshop, titled “Generational identities and the problem of ‘presentism” will take place on Wednesday 1st April at Canterbury Christ Church University. See our Twitter feed @GenerationsNet for more details of particular highlights of the day.