Workshop 2 summary:
'Generational identities and the problem of "presentism"'

Report by Helen Kingstone (network co-chair)

The network's second workshop met on 1st April (via Zoom) to discuss generational identities: how and why they form, and what their significance is. Where the first workshop (at University of Surrey in January 2020) had focused on 'vertical' generations down through the family, this second workshop focused on 'lateral' cohort-based generations. The implementation of lockdown a couple of weeks beforehand meant that instead of meeting at Canterbury Christ Church University as planned, we met in the ether via Zoom.

How and why do generational identities form? This was the central question of our opening session. Judith Burnett outlined the sociology of generations as a concept, drawing on her valuable book *Generations: the time machine in theory and practice* (2010). Most valuable for me was her reminder that we always see any generation from *our own* generational perspective, with all the foreshortening and colouration that that entails.

Peter Hegarty (Surrey) provided a refreshing perspective from Psychology, asking 'How do generational identities feel distinct, and for whom?' He riffed on the idea of Generation X as 'Generation Karen' (an entitled and demanding group who insist upon their rights as consumers), to suggest that as Kenneth Gergen put it in 1973, 'theories of social behaviour are primarily reflections of contemporary history'. In other words, the labelling of 'Generation Karen' tells us something about *our* moment. This led him to argue that we need better tools (in Psychology and other disciplines) for analysing medium-term timeframes: those between a day and a lifetime (social sciences often look at one or the other) and between a lifetime and a species history.

Discussion following on from these two papers highlighted the prominence of the 'reminiscence bump' (often young adulthood 'formative years') in what gets remembered, but as Karen Rowlingson outlined, this varies across generations due to differing reference points.

What is the significance of generational identities? This was the subject of our second session, with discussion initiated by short talks from Jan Macvarish and Karen Glaser. Jan provided valuable cross-references between the nineteenth century and the present day, drawing on Leonore Davidoff's historical work on 'long families' in the nineteenth century as a comparison point for siblings in care today, who typically come from similarly large multi-sibling families, where the siblings have been born over a relatively long span of years. In relation to siblings taken into care, the law now intervenes to make judgements about those relationships: how much of a problem is it if older siblings are 'parenting' younger ones? Where this was a comparative norm in the nineteenth century, it now marks these families out as anomalous.

Karen Glaser (KCL) showcased research she had undertaken with the Wellbeing, Health, Retirement and the Lifecourse (WHERL) interdisciplinary consortium. This examined the extension of people's working lives through their 60s and beyond, and found that continued employment is partly evident among those who've had enjoyable working lives, but also among women who have been out of the labour market, who have to work longer to 'catch up' with National Insurance and pension contributions. The project also showed that mobility for women in later life was hugely determined by their prior access (or not) to higher education.

How has the significance of generational identities changed over historical time? This third question formed the basis of our first afternoon session, with discussion initiated by short talks from Trev Broughton (York) and Martin Hewitt (Anglia Ruskin).

Trev turned the question of generational demarcation on its head by asking: 'why are sociological generations assumed to be different from one another?' She pursued this by examining some dynasties of nineteenth-century publishers. While aristocratic families centred on patrilineal generations, and artisans passed on a skill, these middle-class firms had to negotiate and redefine the meaning of 'dynasty'. Showcasing Margaret Oliphant's biography of the Blackwood's Edinburgh publishing house, Trev focused on the transitional points in the multi-generational saga and how they required the writer to present change *as* continuity.

Martin Hewitt picked up on what a fellow workshop member, Claude Martin, had said about generations possibly only becoming generations when they become self-conscious. In Martin's interpretation, that is not always the case: generation effects are visible in the nineteenth century despite relative lack of generation-consciousness. Martin showcased his research in progress to delineate the chronological boundaries of nineteenth-century generations, showing that these did not only come into existence in the twentieth century.

Discussion emerging from these papers reflected on the significance of particular media and communication technologies to different generations (and their formation), and reflected on the notion of whether generations – like economic classes – needed to exist '*en soi et pour soi*' (of themselves and for themselves).

How can we use the concept of 'generations' while avoiding the political tub-thumping and over-generalization we can term 'generationalism'? This was the issue for our final session. Network co-chair Jennie Bristow (CCCU) started us off with a presentation about the problem of 'generation gaps'. She highlighted the need for us to distinguish between age-effects, generation-effects and the effects simply of timing passing: what if attitudes just change over time (for most), rather than fossilizing at 25 and staying static? Karl Mannheim designated the age of 25 as the end of a generation's 'formative period', but we need to remember that he was discussing the concept in relation to the sociology of knowledge, not as variable lived experience.

Rebecca Blaylock (BPAS) then presented research that illustrated the risks of what happens when research is over-instrumentalised and pressed into unquestioning policy. She gave us the example of the DOHAD paradigm ('developmental origins of health and disease'), an influential model that has the undesirable side-effect of placing undue pressure on pregnant women's behaviours on the basis that they influence the foetus and therefore potentially the

child. This model, however, ignores these pressures' impact on the women. It also ignores the impact of others on foetal and particularly child development, such as that of the father. As emerged in the resultant discussion, treating individual women as responsible for 'the next generation' nonsensically distorts the relationship between individual and collective.

Finally, Ann Gallagher (Surrey) got us thinking about cross-cultural perspectives on obligations to elders. Her collaborative international research has shown that the Chinese idea of 'filial piety' is largely historical, a myth used by the state to avoid taking responsibility for the elderly. As came up in discussion, in the Covid-19 pandemic public discourse is focusing us again on individual responsibility and avoidance of harm – again arguably a way for the government to deflect criticism.

Throughout these talks there was a lot of interdisciplinary exchange of responses and ideas. This was the network's first trial use of Zoom, and while it diminished the opportunity for casual and one-to-one conversation, the 'chat' function turned out to be very useful for sharing immediate thoughts and even reading suggestions (to be added to our growing bibliography on this site). The workshop participants were keen to stay involved and keep contributing, so with the continuation of lockdown, we have decided to hold at least one additional online workshop. Watch this space!