Intergenerational Relationships: Approaches in Theory and Research

As a universal theme of human history, L. Feuer once characterized the relations among generations. For millennia generations and their succession have represented the continuity and development of societies and cultures. The generational relationship figures as an embodiment of the transmission of material and immaterial values, but also of those conflicts and breaches which spur change and innovation.

Much can be learned about the relations among generations from the plethora of material which has come down to us in the shape of the cultural and religious heritage of past societies. Yet these depictions of lineage and tribal development, of blood relation and the life cycle, are not so much authentic descriptions of generational coexistence but images of the dynamics and continuity of these societies. These depictions provide insights into social order, hierarchic structures, and rise and fall of earlier forms of human coexistence. The history of a respective past society is transmitted to us primarily in terms of a genealogical paradigm, with the vital succession of generations as a symbol of continuity. In the descriptions of this succession we can recognize the laws and rhythms which govern sociohistoric development.

The genealogical paradigm illustrates the power relationships which predominated in a particular era and the changes to which they were subject, changes in traditions and the replacement of existing *Weltanschauung* by new spiritual streams, as these appear in descriptions of tribal rivalries, conflicts between fathers and sons, or of the next generation's accession to the house, power, or land of their ancestors. In this context the term "generation" already takes on a meaning akin to that currently attached to it. It is an expression of participation in certain historic events and existing orientations, norms, and values. The individual was predestined for this participation by birth (entry into existence), together with others born at the same time. And this participation would seem to have relevance for the shaping of his generation and its specific consciousness, for upon it depended whether that generation would become a driving force in history, an actor in social change, a vehicle of cultural and intellectual development.

Generations — Traditional Perspectives

Yet despite this tradition and undisrupted interest in the relations among generations, scientific concern with the subject is of a relatively recent date. Not until the 19th century did "the generations" become an integral part of scientific research. This development is closely associated with the names of the positivists (August Comte, 1798–1857; Jean-Louis Giraud/Soulavie, 1753–1813; John Stuart Mill, 1806–1873) as well as with the work of Gustav Rümelin (1815–1889) on the term, duration, and historical significance of the generation. Rümelin, Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) — with his thoughts on the role of generations in history — and Ottokar Lorenz (1832–1907) who attempted to provide a genealogical foundation for the generation theory: they all belong to the "German language tradition" of scientific work on the generation problem.

These "fathers" of generation research all shared an interest in the quantitative

aspects of historical development: they searched for the laws underlying historical rhythms, and for an explanation of the pace of history and progress.

These scholars already dealt with a number of problems which have continued to arise in connection with the concept of generations and intergenerational relationships down to the present day:

— The problem of the duration and demarcation of a generation (Rümelin and Soulavie);

— the significance of life expectancy for the development and structure of society (Comte, Mill, Lorenz); and

— the mechanism of historical change through generational succession (Comte) and periodical appearance of innovative tendencies.

The attempts made at the time to solve these problems must be judged today against the background of two streams of scientific thought. To historicism, which reached its peak in the early 19th century, they owe the method of reconstructive comprehension based on discovered materials and reprocessed sources. The quantitative, descriptive procedure, however, had its inception in the natural sciences (e.g., statistics with Rümelin and biology with Lorenz), whose spell on the social sciences grew ever stronger in the course of the 19th century.

A new tradition of theorems on the problem of generations was founded by Wilhelm Dilthey, the historian and philosopher. In his work the influence of *Lebensphilosophie* is quite traceable: his attention concentrated on questions of experience, and on biography and autobiography as reconstructions of experiential contexts. What was new about Dilthey's generation concept — as Mannheim later noted — was its shift of emphasis from chronological simultaneity to the qualitative category of a historical situation experienced in common. Another new factor which was to exert great influence on future thinking was Dilthey's emphasis on youth, those "years of receptivity" during which the emerging generation acquired the "accumulated spiritual content" ("assets of intellectual culture"). At the same time, Dilthey reasoned, the young generation — able to absorb the cultural heritage — would come under the influence of present-day life and the current cultural situation, which he considered particularly crucial in forming a generation. The "dependence on the same great events and transformations" that appeared in "their age of receptivity" and which tied the generation into "a homogeneous whole" are found again in Karl Mannheim's concept and in successive work.

In the 19th century nearly all the essential aspects of modern theoretizing on generations were known, but no theory of generations was produced. Advanced theoretical constructs did not appear until the 20th century, particularly following World War I. These are bound up with the names of François Mentré in France, José Ortega y Gasset in Spain, and Karl Mannheim in Germany.

A "collective stage of mind embodied in a group of human beings" (Mentré) and "sharing as essential destiny" were thought to characterize generational unity. Yet this consciousness of unity and the generation itself were shaped less by historical or political events than by spiritual transformation (Mentré) and intellectual thought (Ortega). These are key concepts which Mannheim refined in his thinking.

Karl Mannheim formulated his socioscientific conception of generations in terms of the constitutive traits of generation location, generation as an actuality and generation unit. This was the quintessence of Mannheim's search for classes and

other subgroups in a society caught up in rapid social change. Mannheim described the vital succession of generations in terms of a continual renewal of the participants in the cultural process. The respective generation takes on the character of a new participant in the cultural process as a consequence of its particular location in sociohistorical space. It is this factor, together with the phenomenon of varying stratification of experience, which distinguished the generations from one another.

The location of a particular generation in sociohistorical space is the precondition for the formation of generation as an actuality, which bears a similarity to class membership. A generation *unit*, however, develops only when a conscious bond between individuals arises. This unit does not exclude the possibility that polar interpretation schemes may exist within it.

The process of social transformation determines the qualitative differences between one generation and those that succeed it. The more rapid this process, the greater will be the potential of the respective generation to react to a changed situation by bringing forth new entelechies. Conveyor of new entelechies, according to Mannheim, is youth, the formative phase in a person's life. Adults and older members of society, he conceded, have only the possibility to modify sociocultural orientations and value systems, in order to bring new impulses into conformance with existing experiences.

The process of social and cultural change is also constitutive for the problem of intergenerational relationships since it determines the transmission of experiences, values, etc. to the succeeding generation. If this process is very rapid in pace, new experience patterns which differ from traditional ones will be formed with comparable swiftness (cf. also Dreitzel, this volume). And while these consolidate, new impulses arise for generational configurations.

With Mannheim's generation model, discussion on the problem of generations culminated. As early as the 1930s interest had already begun to decline. Thus the history of the reception of Mannheim's concept is, initially, a history of its *non*-reception (Kohli, 1978, 34). Though in the social sciences, interest has never flagged in the topic of generations, research into it has shifted increasingly to subdisciplines of sociology. No comprehensive theoretical scheme with universalist character of the type attempted by Comte, Mill, Dilthey, and Mannheim has since appeared, with the possible exception of Julian Marías' "universal mechanics of generational succession."

Essential Features in Current Research

The influences of "classical" generation theories are ubiquitous not only in the social sciences; psychology, pedagogy, and cultural history have all been affected even though the reference is not always explicit. Sociologists hark back to the tradition of classical concepts — particularly to Mannheim's concept — whenever the question as to the conveying of cultural and social change arises. Nevertheless, as Marshall, Berger, Hoerning, and also Hollstein in this volume show, no consensus has yet been reached in attempts to explain the formation and scope of a new collective consciousness. Above all the question remains unanswered as to whether collective consciousness and collective identity can come about at all, let alone be

identified, in a social aggregate such as a generation, in view of the structural inequalities (stratum or class differences) it contains. Controversy continues over the relevance of the youth phase in which significant sociocultural orientations and values are thought to take shape under the influence of basic historic events. Moreover, the problem of the constancy of these orientations over the course of a generation's further existence remains unsolved (Elder, 1979; Elder & Liker, 1982; Rosenmayr, 1983b; Hoerning, 1983; Rosenthal, 1983, to name only a few).

By the same token, numerous divergencies have become apparent in the discussion of possible ways to operationalize the generation concept and apply it in empirical research (Marshall, this volume; and Mayer, 1975; Müller, 1978; Kertzer, 1983). Especially in this context it is necessary to distinguish the generation concept from other, related ones, particularly the age stratification theory and cohort concept (Riley, 1971; Riley et al., 1972; Riley, 1976a, b; Ryder, 1965; Foner, 1976; Cain, 1967; Neugarten & Datan, 1976; Schaie, 1976; Streib, 1976; Maddox & Wiley, 1976, etc.).

More than other sociological subdisciplines, *youth sociology* has recourse to the tradition of earlier theoreticians. In this field, the generation concept serves, as a rule, to provide a basis for the detection and legitimation of "generation-specific" characteristics within a particular age group — that of youth. Such descriptions as "the sceptical generation" (Schelsky, 1957), "generation of candour" (Blücher, 1966), the "new" or the "shattered" generation (Jaide, 1961; Tartler, 1955, etc.), in addition to such newer labels as "the generation of no-sayers" or "give a shit generation," all point to the fact that here the term generation is being used as a synonym for youth. Youth's relation to "the others" (meaning other generations) is usually seen in terms of (generational) conflicts (cf., e.g., Feuer, 1969; Bettelheim, 1963; Elsler, 1974), or from a perspective of maintenance of social continuity by preparing youth to assume adult status and full membership in society (e.g., Heberle, 1951; Erikson, 1968; Braungart, 1974). In the first-named context of conflict and revolt, researchers are obviously concerned to come to terms with recent developments, relying on the way the problem is treated in the public and political discussion. These include, for example, an investigation of student movements (e.g., Feuer, 1969; Weinberg & Walker, 1969; Elsler, 1971; Braungart & Braungart, 1980); on the difficulty of integrating youth in the labor market and other social spheres (Hornstein, 1982; Shell-Studie Jugend '81, 1983, etc.); and on the troubles of young dropouts (Ibid., and Hollstein, 1979; 1983; Jaide, 1978).

In these approaches, youth is generally identified as a driving force of change, a motor of revolt and social movements, but the attempts to explain these phenomena rely on rather different bases. They either focus on social discontinuities and breakdowns in the structure of society (e.g., Eisenstadt, 1978) or on the character of youth as a quasi-homogeneous group without clearly defined roles (breathing space), but also lacking access to social resources which they have yet to attain (Parsons, 1963; Braungart, 1974; 1982). Correspondingly, the estimations differ on the significance of youth movements and revolts as regards profound political change and social transformation (cf. also Hollstein and Berger, this volume).

The view that youth is a special phase of development and life, a phase predestined for fragile relations to others (whether generations or age groups), marks the intersection between the approach of youth sociology and explanations based in

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psychology or psychoanalysis. Here, conflict-ridden relations are generally seen in terms of a search for identity, ego formation, detachment, social control (deficitary) socialization, estrangement and deviation, etc. (Freud, 1856–1939; Erikson, 1968; Stierlin, 1975; Elkind, 1980; Coleman, 1970; Becker, 1975; Brunner, 1982, etc.). Harmonious relations are traced back to the maturation process and the fulfilment of developmental tasks, to the acquisition of social competence and autonomy, to active adjustment and identification with positive models (White, 1974; Havighurst, 1972; Erikson, 1968; Haan, 1977; Hall, 1904; Spranger, 1926; Jaide, 1970, etc.).

Youth is given much attention in the *political sciences* as well, as the representative of that force which can bring about social change through new political attitudes or through conflict and revolt. Discussion centers on questions of the transmission of political attitudes among the generations, political socialization, and the education of adolescents (Lipset, 1967; Lipset et al., 1969; 1976; Flacks, 1971; Jennings & Niemi, 1975; Braungart, 1974; Loewenberg, 1974; Keniston, 1968). Numerous empirical findings in the field of opinion research and particularly research on voting behavior reveal differences in political orientation and behavior among age groups or cohorts. Interpretations of such findings are used implicitly to conclude how far the generation succession is relevant for changes in everyday policy-making practice as well as for longer term political developments (Hunt, 1982). This involves the problem of formation and stability of political attitudes in the life course of cohorts on the one hand, and the political behavior of different cohorts (age groups) during a given period on the other, that is, the question of progressiveness or conservatism (Agnello, 1973; Bengtson & Cutler, 1976; Fendrich, 1974; Glenn, 1974; Hudson & Binstock, 1976; Jennings & Niemi, 1981, etc.). Wherever the political mobilizability of social groups (as a rule, youth groups) is analyzed, Mannheim's generation concept usually comes into play again, particularly his construct of a generation unit. The simultaneous appearance of left-wing and right-wing groups within "the same youth," activists and pressure groups among otherwise passive and unpolitical adolescents, and potentially intragenerational conflicts, are explained in terms of that polarity which according to Mannheim may exist within any generation unit (Westby & Braungart, 1966; Braungart, 1982).

Now and then the same approach is favored by *subculture* researchers (insofar as they deal with adolescent subcultures), regardless of whether they are anchored more in youth sociology, cultural sociology, developmental psychology, or the political sciences (cf., e.g., Elsler, 1974; Brake, 1981; Braungart, 1982; and Berger, this volume). The marginal position of youth — a generation in statu nascendi — predestines it for the emergence of alienation and detachment from mainstream culture all the way to its negation (Elsler, 1971). Intercourse with like-minded people encourages the formation of partial cultures alongside the main culture (Tenbruck, 1965), or a peer-group culture characterized by the external segregation of an age-homogeneous group, or even of a counterculture that represents a counterweight to the overall culture of a society. However, the generation concept is no longer sufficient to adequately explain subcultural phenomena (Braungart, 1982), such as material and immaterial products of a subculture, or even to detect the "sources" of subcultural phenomena and their relevance for society (or culture) as a whole. Recent subculture research in particular — as is suggested in Chapter III — derives from

quite diverse approaches to social reality. There is some evidence that conventional thought linked to a functionalist perspective is giving way to more phenomenologically-oriented approaches (Brake, 1981; Clarke et al., 1981; Diedrichsen et al., 1983, and the work of the Birmingham Center for Cultural Studies), or to approaches founded in the neo-psychoanalysis which, using the narcissism concept, investigate the dynamics of adolescents' "subjective self-structures" (Ziehe, 1981; Ziehe & Stubenrauch, 1982).

That translation problems arise between these different theoretical levels, is something that becomes obvious in the present volume as well. Thus the question remains open as to whether, in adolescent subcultures, an increasing politization of public behavior and simultaneous depolitization of their everyday lives can be made out (Ziehe, 1981; Ziehe & Stubenrauch, 1982) — a contradiction that could be explained in terms of Mannheim's polarity. Or is it that both developments have nothing in common? Maybe researchers identify one or the other depending on whether they focus more on the function of subcultures for societal change or on everyday reality and experience within a subculture. For a long time the marginality of adolescent status before the acquisition of full membership in society, and even a certain discrimination, figured as causes for the formation of specific subcultural expressions. Recently a different assumption has begun to find favor, namely that the offer of adult status has lost its binding force (Ibid.). This is to characterize subcultures as refuges in which their members can experience youthfulness with as little outside disturbance as possible. In this way and through the commercialization of subcultural products, the myth of youthfulness gets further nourishment, this myth which has long been a key characteristic of relationships among the different age groups.

As we shall indicate in Chapter II of this volume, *the family* represents a multifarious and manifold area of scientific involvement with the subject of intergenerational relationships. In this context, unlike its use in the fields mentioned above, the term generation describes lineage and succession, whereby such purely biological determinants as blood relation play a greater or lesser role depending on the particular cultural and sociohistoric conditions (Huber, 1979). In recent years the focus of scientific interest has shifted both as regards the subject itself and as regards approaches to it. Relatively new, for instance, is the interest of historians and historical demographers in researching the qualitative and quantitative links between lineage generations in the past (cf. Mitterauer & Sieder, 1977; Mitterauer, 1981; 1982; Imhof, 1981; Conrad, 1982; Hubbart, 1983; Duby, 1981, etc.). Based on the tradition of analyses of annals and collected source materials, investigation in this field concentrates on broad sectors of the population, frequently with the aim of reconstructing the everyday reality of past periods and the mentality of average people who lived through them. The manifold references of this topic to economics, politics, culture, and education have awakened the interest not only of historians but of sociologists, economists, and educators as well, which has precipitated, among other things, in new methods of analyzing comtemporary society and in new economic and social security models (Grohmann, 1980; 1981; Plaschke, 1983, etc.).

A reorientation is likewise evident in those approaches to intergenerational relationships within the family which are based on developmental psychology and so-

cialization theory. Just a short time ago researchers concentrated on the influences of primary familial socialization on infants and children. They emphasized that many of the traditional tasks of the nuclear family were no longer required but at the same time they identified new functions of, for example, an emotional and social or cognitive and intellectual kind (Ainsworth et al., 1973; 1978; Carew, 1977; 1980; Lamb, 1977; Lehr, 1973; Papoušek & Papoušek, 1979; Rauh, 1976; White, 1970; Yarrow et al., 1979, etc.).

Moreover, developmental psychology has provided many fundamental results which contributed to an explanation of the idiosyncratic relations between adolescents and their parents. Yet as we have already indicated, interest focussed primarily on the consequences of these relations for youth, while in recent years the question has come to the fore as to the extent to which parents' development is influenced by the events associated with their childrens' growing up (cf., e.g., Kimmel, 1974; Alpert & Richardson, 1980).

If previously adolescence represented that point in life where most psychologists ceased to trace the development of the individual and his familial relationships, today more and more attention is being paid to the entire life-span and particularly to the "midlife transition," to a redefinition of developmental tasks and familial ties with their implications for psychopathology (Troll, 1975; Cytrynbaum et al., 1980). The multi-generational family found its true entrance into the research scene with work in the area of psychological and social gerontology, that is, when researchers began to take into account the demographic fact that the proportion of elderly and very old in the population had markedly increased. Particularly in the course of the discussion sparked by the publication of the disengagement theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961), research into the social relationships of older people, including their familial ties, experienced a great upswing. The need to find solutions for the problem of support for the very old also contributed to making the strength of intergenerational ties a subject of numerous empirical research studies. For an impressive overview of this field, see Bengtson et al. and Ursula Lehr, this volume.

All of this research points up the fact that the involvement of developmental psychologists with problems of intergenerational relationships within multi-generational families has been based mainly on concrete problems and conducted with an eye to applications. Examples of this are the economic and especially the socio-political implications of the subject mentioned above, a few aspects of the latter are discussed in this volume; further examples are studies on the occurrence of and coping with critical life events and life crises in the context of familial relationships (Filipp, 1981; 1982) and their significance for health, prevention of diseases, coping with the aging process, and life expectancy. Another important domain of application is family psychotherapy (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; 1975; Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1975; Radebold & Schlesinger-Kipp, 1982, and many others). This complex of problems, like that of pedagogic and educative application of the theme of intergenerational relationships within families, has yet to be given a foundation in developmental psychology (Montada & Schmitt, 1982).

Problems that occur in sociology with the use of the term generation and with the examination of the theoretical and empirical impact of the generation concept, prove to be less relevant in connection with lineage generations. Instead, other conceptual divergencies dominate the discussion. This becomes apparent in this

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volume not lastly when the term and concept of "solidarity" is employed (Bengtson et al., Knipscheer, Rosenmayr). Efforts to link theoretical or developmental psychological studies on the multi-generational family to the ecological and environmental models are in the starting phase rather than in the stage of solution. No doubt exists, however, as to the fruitfulness of this connection (Bronfenbrenner, 1978; 1979; Parr, 1980; Garms-Homolová, 1982; 1983, and others).

Reference to time dimensions is the most striking feature of recent reorientations in the way scientists view vertical familial relationships. Initially, the historic time dimension is emphasized: the change of generational ties in the context of sociohistorical and sociocultural development (Elder, 1978a; Mitterauer & Sieder, 1977; Mitterauer, 1981; 1982; Imhof, 1981; Conrad, 1982; Hubbart, 1983).

The second time dimension considered is the lifetime of the individual which in the course of increasing emphasis on the entire life-span by developmental psychologists is fructifying research into intergenerational relationships within the family as well. The third time dimension — social time — which refers to the age-grade system of society (Neugarten & Datan, 1976) is "a middle-level approach to the study of family patterns, one that attends to both general structural trends and to the behavior of families in concrete settings; that investigates expressions of generalized institutional arrangements in particular settings and explicates processes of family change in this context which have implications for social development as a whole" (Elder, 1978a, 34).

Nascent research (cf. Elder, 1975; 1978a; 1981b; Hagestad and others, this volume) already suggests that this level will probably move to the center of both theoretical and empirical study of intergenerational relationships in the future. Since it represents the basis both for connecting the individual life-spans of family members and for the network of expectations, dependencies, contacts, and functions, this level forms the framework of relations among familial generations and of negotiations concerning these relationships namely their intensity and meaning. Analytically, this level is well-suited to identifying the types of courses of relationship patterns, and for corresponding trend prognosing. It could provide firmer foundations for application-oriented study of this subject. From the perspective of social time, the family represents a platform for encounter, exchange, and reciprocal influence of members of different cohorts and age groups (Mackensen, this volume). By means of the biographies of its members we can gain insights into the everyday nature of familial coexistence (Menne, 1981), and through family biographies, insights into important historical periods ("lived history," e.g., Mannzmann, 1981) and into individual and social processing of the guidelines offered by society and culture.

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Thus far the stage at which the considerations underlying this volume begin. If traditional attempts to formulate a general theory of intergenerational relationships were characterized by all-too global claims, later and current efforts tend to draw the opposite criticism — that they limit themselves, often empiristically, to partial

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aspects of the problem and questions of detail. The reason for this, as may have become clear from the above, lies not lastly in the fact that only with difficulty can the existing theoretical constructs be applied in an empirical context. Bringing together the various perspectives and explanatory attempts, as we have done in this volume, in itself represents a first step towards a theoretical conception of intergenerational relationships. It should prepare the way for a perspective which is more complex than the research approaches now in currency.

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