From the concept of generation to an intergenerational lens on family lives

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This piece discusses the concept of ‘generation’ and its several meanings. While it argues that generation is an important concept for putting lives in historical context, it needs to take account of social differences within and between generations. Looking at family generations, such differences become evident together with the processes through which they come about, especially when understood in their historical context. Some of the methodological approaches to analysing intergenerational family research are briefly outlined.

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This short piece suggests that the concept of ‘generation’, while it has multiple meanings, is useful for bringing an historical focus to sociological research. However, it is often applied in such a way as to obscure intergenerational inequalities and underestimate intergenerational transmission. By contrast, a focus on intergenerational relations in families has fewer disadvantages. Intergenerational relations and transmissions are the experiences of most families in the context of increased longevity. The advantages of applying an intergenerational focus to families is outlined in the paper and some of the methodological approaches to analysing intergenerational family research are briefly outlined.

A sociological concept that sets lives in historical context is ‘generation’. Generation has many meanings: first, as biological or kinship relation (Alwin and McCammon, 2004), second as an age cohort that experiences the same set of historical conditions over the lifecourse, while a third meaning refers to belonging and identity (Biggs et al, 2007). Karl Mannheim (1952 [1923]: 290) defined generations as ‘[i]ndividuals who belong to the same generation, who share the same year of birth, are endowed, to that extent, with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process’. In Mannheim’s approach, age is uppermost, but generational location is also important as is the distinction between generation as actuality and as unit (see Nilsen, this issue, for further discussion).

Generation represents different subjective experiences (Elliott, 2013). For some people it means belonging to a family generation. For others it relates to the experience of growing up in a particular decade on account of some specific aspect of lifestyle (the swinging sixties) or it has connotations with a particular lifecourse phase. Because
generational belonging is reflexively constructed, people are continually re-evaluating and re-interpreting the meaning of ‘their time’ (Alwin and Krosnick, 1991). Some historical generations lack a clear generational identity because of being sandwiched between generations that have a strong identification – for example, the baby boomers and the war generation – and hence are what Edmunds and Turner (2002) termed ‘passive’ generations.

The concept of ‘generation’ has been in vogue of late although used largely by politicians to pit different historical generations against one another (eg, Willets, 2010). References to intergenerational conflict and to the baby boomer generation in Britain in particular have become part of a political strategy to undermine the intergenerational pact upon which the welfare state stands. But being a member of an historical generation does not mean that the lives of its members are all affected in the same ways. In adopting an intergenerational lens it is necessary to focus at the level of social classes, ethnicities and families in particular historical eras in order to understand social inequality. As is currently evident in the UK, inequalities come about for those at the bottom of the wealth and income pyramid since there is little trickledown effect from older to younger generations. By contrast, at the top of the income and wealth pyramid, assets cascade down the generational hierarchy.

Moreover, making assumptions about future generations on the basis of the past or the present can also be problematic, a mistake that the current doom merchants who blame the baby boomers are at risk of making. For the middle-class baby boomers who have retired or are retiring on defined occupational pensions, their futures are very different from those baby boomers who, because of low pensions, are continuing to work or living on receding welfare benefits (Hills, 2014).

A focus on historical generations needs also to take account of intergenerational solidarity, with a considerable body of evidence demonstrating the transfer of assets and cash between generations both *inter vivos* and on inheritance (eg, Kohli and Küнемunde, 2003; Albertini and Kohli, 2013). Such transmissions again depend on the assets particular historical generations have acquired at particular periods, for example access to state pensions and home ownership and their availability for the exchange of care for grandchildren and very old people. Thus, intergenerational solidarity may be undermined in the context of a diminishing welfare state and lead to intergenerational conflict.

A focus on intergenerational relationships at the level of families is important because they increasingly form the experience of most people; with the growth of longevity, several generations within a family overlap. As Lüscher and Hoff (2013) suggest, generations are distinguished by their boundedness, while at the same time they are integrated in a cross-generational succession and relationship. An intergenerational focus also has the advantage of setting family relationships in historical context. Furthermore, an intergenerational focus alerts us to what is transmitted across generations over time and the lifecourse, covering a variety of phenomena including assets, values, political beliefs, social mobility and social status. It shows the dynamism and openness of transmission so that what is passed on only becomes a transmission when it is received (Bertaux-Wiame, 1993/2005). As Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame (1997) argue, it shows the ways in which the younger generation makes its own mark on that which is passed on to it, albeit what the new generation makes of its inheritance may not prove to be so innovative in practice.
Intergenerational family relations may also result in generational breaks and ambivalences, as well as continuities and the reproduction of resources across generations. As new generations come forward and old generations withdraw, a new generation may reject what is passed on and employ what Mannheim calls ‘fresh contacts’ as it engages with the social and cultural heritage of a given society. Breaks or ambivalences between generations may be acted out at different levels, for example structurally and/or interpersonally. When applied to migrant groups, an intergenerational focus can show which resources migrants bring to a new society, those they act upon and transmit to younger generations, and which transmissions are rejected or not taken up by younger generations.

The analysis of intergenerational family relations is no easy task, whether using quantitative or qualitative approaches or, as Elder (1974) did to great effect, using both approaches. However, whatever the methodological approach taken, it is useful to adopt a biographical lifecourse approach set in historical context. Thus, it is important to compare and contrast the experiences of different family generations at different points in the lifecourse and to set them in the periods and social structures in which their lives unfolded. In an empirical inquiry we may examine the typicality of an individual biography in relation to others from a similar social group and cohort and contextualise the data analysis in the relevant historical literature and statistical sources. The approach also needs not only to attend to how social transitions play out in different historical periods and in particular political, economic and policy contexts but also to note the transmissions that take place across generations (Nilsen and Brannen, 2014).

In much intergenerational research, the methodologies employed rely on retrospective accounts and in some types of intergenerational research on life story or narrative interviews. Paying attention to the way stories are told is integral to making sense of their meaning. Thus, for example, we need to pay attention to the fact that stories about the past are narrated in present time, are related to the current context of the person’s life and are told in the interview encounter. Thus, we need to be attentive to the struggle in which a narrator is engaged in deciding what to relate and what not to relate. Moreover, how a story unfolds is a performance and accomplished with audiences in mind (Reissman, 2008) and in the presence of and in collaboration with an interviewer. A story situates the self in particular ways, some of which may be unintended or unselfconscious. In that sense, what the narrator is saying is not so much consciously hidden but needs deciphering in the process of analysis (Jossellson, 2004). This does not mean imposing external interpretations on a story. Rather, it is about examining the whole interview – the jigsaw of material that the interviewee presents, paying attention to how it is performed and what sort of story the interviewee is seeking to tell. It also means paying attention to the silences in the account, some of which may be to do with the taken-for-granted historical and structural context of the period to which the story relates.

At least in qualitative research on intergenerational families, there is much value to be gained in paying attention to the temporal context in two senses – in the sense of the biographical historical context of interviewees’ lives and in the sense of the narrative context of how stories are told and meanings made (Brannen, 2014). This is
important, given that all interpretation is partial, provisional and anchored on shifting ground (Andrews, 2013).

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