

Workshop 4 Summary: Generational identities and historical events

Thursday 10 September 2020, via Zoom
(Report by Jan Macvarish and Jennie Bristow)

The fourth workshop in the Generations Network series set out to consider the relationship between historical events and the formation of generational groupings and identities. Part One focused on conceptual questions, and Part Two discussed some particular case studies.

Tatjana Buklijas (University of Auckland) began by presenting her research on ‘What genes remembered: The sciences of intergenerational trauma, ca. 1945-2015’. Buklijas began by charting the emergence of epigenetics from the study of cell cultures through animal studies, leading to its application to understanding transmission between generations of humans. The development of epigenetics, Buklijas explained, was preceded by the growing availability and authority of psychoanalytic psychiatry. This emerged in North America following the Second World War, and was bound up with attempts to understand the impact of the Holocaust on the offspring of its victims. The concept of inherited trauma came to constitute a medical phenomenon, and the idea of ‘intergenerational cycles’ offered explanations based on biological and environmental factors that were distanced from earlier eugenic approaches. Epigenetics complicates the idea that inheritance is determined by genetics alone, and speaks to the double meaning of ‘generation’ as a biological and environmental concept.

Astrid Erll (Goethe University, Frankfurt) introduced a discussion about generation from an interdisciplinary Memory Studies perspective. Erll explored ‘generationality’ as a useful term for the twofold meaning of generational identity: a generation’s explicit self-identification, resulting from shared experiences; and explicit identification by others, in the form of generational labels. She explored the relationship between generationality and genealogy – the ‘vertical’ expression of generational continuity and transmission – and asked, what is the (tacit) genealogical imaginary behind any articulation of generationality? When looking at widely-understood labels (‘the Generation of 1914’), and imagining emerging labels (for example, ‘Generation Corona’), we need to engage with the range of factors involved in constituting these terms, including different types of inheritance ((epi)genetic, familial, social/societal, material, cultural); generation-defining historical events; temporality; and explicit/implicit memory. Whereas ‘the Generation of 1914’ implies antagonism between that generation and that of their parents, the same may not be true for the Corona Generation.

Helen Kingstone (University of Surrey) reflected on her recent collaborative project exploring generational affiliations among Queen Victoria’s contemporaries. Asking to what extent those born at the same time as Victoria saw themselves as a generation, Kingstone offered some evidence of a sense of generational identity, complicating assumptions that generational identities first emerged during the First World War. However, while these were a networked group of individuals, this did not necessarily stretch to a cross-class generational identity. Study of the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885-1901) reveals the construction and emergence of a more formalised cultural memory, with attempts to emphasize both novelty and continuity, in the terms ‘modern’ and ‘always’; and use of the notion of ‘sympathy’ in Victoria’s entry, signalling outwards to other, more ordinary contemporaries.

Our discussion focused on three themes that emerged from these introductory presentations: the relationship between the natural and the social in discussions of generation; differences of historical context; and the extent to which generations feature as elite constructions. It was suggested that epigenetics may offer a more holistic explanation than a focus on genetics alone, by seeking to understand the effects of both nature and culture, but such explanations can also lead to reductionism. One participant noted that although lateral generations are widely understood to be culturally constructed, understanding of vertical generations continues to emphasise heterosexual reproduction and kinship relations; but the ‘natural’ base of these relationships has also been questioned over the past decades. This understanding can become polarised with the emphasis on the biological that is expressed by the Human Genome Project, resulting in extreme version of the nature/nurture debate.

There was also a discussion of how the role of historical events in forging generational identity tend to focus on specific, traumatic events, such as the First World War, but there may be a benefit to looking at the impact of longer influences. The notion of trauma, in the sense used more recently, seems both inclusive and exclusive, in that particular groups have a shared experience but it is one that by definition cannot be shared by others. Yet at the same time, what one participant described as ‘the international extrapolation of essentially Anglo-American generational identities’ has played a significant role in attempting to universalise experiences that are more diverse and complex.

Part Two of the workshop focused on some case studies of generational groupings and identities. **Lucy Bland** (Anglia Ruskin University) discussed some findings from a project charting mixed-race children of black GIs and British women following the Second World War. She explained that all these children were born illegitimate, as the segregated US army invariably refused their parents permission to marry. Many of the children grew up in children’s homes, in areas of high racial prejudice, and lacked male role models and a sense of belonging – they pre-dated the Windrush generation, and often felt different from black and white people alike. Through this project, many of the participants met each other in person for the first time. Their sense of belonging has been enhanced by finding American relatives, via DNA testing and genealogy websites; and many grandchildren have contacted the project, adding to its intergenerational dimension.

Ruth Blue (Thalidomide Society) discussed the case of “‘The Loneliest Parents in Britain’”: How the survivors of a medical catastrophe found each other in the 1960s.’ She began by noting that, in the case of children born with physical disabilities as a result of Thalidomide, a generational marker or label is highly visible. In presenting some findings from her oral history projects and archival research, Blue explained that the parents of children afflicted by Thalidomide parents were worried about physical disabilities being passed on, and also question of inherited trauma. Among these mothers, birth experiences created a shared trauma, from the shock of their baby’s disability to the negative attitudes that prevailed at the time. The Thalidomide experience stimulated the development of self-help groups formed in relation to medical catastrophes; people found each other and remain a tight-knit group, having supported each other through the long process of fundraising and fighting for compensation and justice.

Matthew Hall and **Andrew King** (University of Surrey) presented some insights from the CILIA-LGBTQI+ Lives England Project, in their discussion of ‘queer(y)ing the relationship between significant historical events and the formation of generational identities’. This project compares intersectional life course inequalities, and applying a generational lens to certain questions highlights some interesting tensions. For example, stratifying by familiar generational cohort labels does not account for marginalised groups. However, stratifying according to key historical events, such as the Stonewall riots and AIDS, does not address

intragenerational differences in experience. Within the LGBTQI+ community, different generations often express different approaches to rights, with the older generations perceiving them as something to be continually fought for, and the younger generations perceiving rights as something to be expected. Hall and King concluded by raising the question of whether LGBTQI+ cohorts can be better defined by point at which they became *aware* of their identity, to mitigate against the problem of labelling and universalising experience.

Our discussion attempted to disentangle the category of generation from a more granular understanding of generational sub-groups. The presentations revealed the extent to which particular events or experiences have a distinctive impact on those who are intimately connected with the event itself – for example, parents and children connected by the Thalidomide tragedy, or members of the LGBTQI+ community directly affected by the experiences of the Stonewall riots, AIDS, or the campaigns against Section 28. But the temporal significance of these events arguably means that they play a role in a wider, formative generational consciousness. Balancing an acknowledgement of universalising experiences with intersectional distinctions has emerged as an important question for generation scholars, as does the tension between categorisation and the recognition of fluidity and change.

The workshop concluded with a discussion of our next steps as a network. We noted that, by holding our discussions online due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we were able to programme five workshops rather than the three that were initially planned, and this has provided a fruitful opportunity for some wide-ranging discussions. For our final workshop in January 2021, we plan to pull together some conclusions for generation scholarship, alongside some questions for policy-makers to consider when engaging with the concept of generation. In developing this, we will establish a working group to develop policy-focused questions, alongside an online discussion group to enable members of the network to continue to share their work and thoughts. We will also develop plans for a publication arising from our interdisciplinary discussions over the course of this year.