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Generational Consciousness, Dialogue, and Political Engagement

Molly Andrews

"The fateful act of living in and with one's generation completes the drama of human existence."

Martin Heidegger cited in Kriegel, 1978: 23

Introduction

Researchers interested in "the problem of generations" (Mannheim, 1952) agree that "the crucial ingredient in the formation of generations is generational consciousness" (Braungart and Braungart, 1990; Eisler, 1984). A cohort, it is argued, becomes transformed into a generation only when "many of its members become aware that they are bound together by a shared group consciousness and mobilize as an active force for political change" (Braungart and Braungart, 1986: 217). In this article, I will explore the nature of this shared group consciousness, and examine the role of dialogue in transforming such consciousness into action for social change.

Karl Mannheim, whose work on generations in the early part of the last century remains the key referent for subsequent writing in this area, was primarily

recognized as a pre-eminent scholar of the theory of knowledge. Mannheim contended that all knowledge is based on perspective, or “positionally determined.” “That a view of history is ‘positionally determined’ means that is formed by a subject occupying a distinct position in the ‘historical stream,’ all parts of which—those occupied by us as well as those occupied by the object we examine—are constantly in transition and motion (1952: 120).”

Mannheim’s interest in generations stemmed from his belief that when individuals are born wields a powerful influence on their perspective of history. “Individuals 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” (1952: 290). Obviously he did not think that all persons born at the same time shared a political outlook—they may “work up the material of their common experiences in different and specific ways” (1952: 304). But members of a generation have been exposed to the same historical events at the same time in their life courses. This is important, for Mannheim, because of his belief in a fundamental connection between knowledge and sociohistorical structure. While Mannheim’s theory emphasizes the distinctiveness of generations and the discontinuity between them, here I will explore to what extent generational consciousness might be a consciousness of the distinctiveness of generations, which nonetheless affirms an historical continuity with “ancestors” and “progeny.”¹

The Role of Consciousness in Generation as Actuality

Mannheim regards generations as the engine of social change, the “trigger action of the social and cultural process” (1952: 310); but for him, “mere chronological contemporaneity” (1952: 297) is not enough to realize the potential of the generation. Mannheim makes a critical distinction between generation as location and generation as actuality, explaining: “Not every generation location . . . creates new collective impulses and formative principles original to itself and adequate to its particular situation” (1952: 309). For Mannheim, the defining feature of what constitutes realization of potential is the “participation in the common destiny of this historical and social unit” (1952: 303). Accelerated social change enhances the realization of the potentialities inherent in a generation location (1952: 309). Stated otherwise, times of social upheaval are most likely to stimulate a transformation from generation as location to generation as actuality. The movement is symbiotic: the accelerated tempo of social change helps to actualize a generation (i.e., produce generational consciousness); actualized generations, in turn, realize social change.

Generation as location is similar to the concept of cohort, which “links an individual’s location in an historical social structure with their views or conceptions of the social world” (Pilcher, 1998: 4). Turner (1998) defines generation as a cohort

of persons passing through time who come to share a common habitus and lifestyle (1998: 302); he comments further, “Cultural definitions of generations are the product of twentieth-century social movements which are seen in terms of generational responses” (1998: 302). But contrary to popular myth, the great social movements of the twentieth century have been multigenerational.² If one thinks of activists in the women’s movement, the green movement, civil rights, gay rights—there has been both a continuity across and a distinctiveness between generations (see, for instance, Benjamin, 2000; Bondac, 1999; or Kaiser, 1997). The limited use of the term which Turner suggests only refers, in Mannheim’s terminology, to generation as location. Critically, what is missing is the ingredient of consciousness. For Mannheim, generation as actuality includes only those who “participate in the characteristic social and intellectual currents of their society and period” (1952: 304), and this engagement both reflects and produces generational consciousness.

But what does it mean to say that a generation is conscious of itself? In introducing the concepts of generation as location and generation as actuality, Mannheim comments:

[A] generation in the sense of a location phenomenon falls short of encompassing the generation phenomenon in its full actuality. The latter is something more than the former, in the same way as the mere fact of class position does not yet involve the existence of a consciously constituted class. The location as such only contains potentialities which may materialize, or be suppressed (1952: 303).

Marx’s distinction between the objective situation of a class and subjective awareness of this situation has direct implications for the discussion of generational consciousness. If an empirically existing class can only act effectively when it transforms itself—in Hegel’s terms—from a “class in itself” to a “class for itself,” is this also true for generational consciousness? If the answer is affirmative, then how are we to interpret “generation for itself”?

DeMartini (1992) has argued that the unspecified meanings of the term generation have given rise to different understandings of how this social unit functions. Specifically, he identifies two interpretations of the generation concept, cohort, and lineage, both of which are “crucial to an understanding of social movement dynamics and participation” (1992: 450). The cohort interpretation of generation “places heavy emphasis upon differences in age and assumes that age peers have more in common with each other than with persons in younger or older age cohorts” (1992: 451). This interpretation is based upon a conflict model of generations, with the tensions between generations especially high for participants in social movements.

This is the model promoted by Mannheim—whose focus on the importance of youth as yielding a particular force of influence on subsequent political development—and implicitly adhered to by Turner. Here, “generation for itself”

can be interpreted as just that: members of generation imbued with an awareness of themselves as constituting a group and acting in an intentional way to promote the best interests of that group. But is it only when the object of the political activity is explicitly directed to questions of age that a generation can be said to act as a generation for itself, that is with generational consciousness? This would describe, for instance, both the Grey Panther movement in the United States and the International Youth Movement of the 1960s, possibly even the Beat Generation who felt themselves to be speaking not only as a generation, but for a generation.

DeMartini's second interpretation of generation, that of lineage, encourages us to think about relationships between generations—and by extension generational consciousness—in quite a different way. Here the premise is that there is a relatively strong bond between parent and child,³ and continuity of political values is especially strong between social movement participants and their parents. As evidence of this perspective, DeMartini quotes Doug McAdam's summary of his study of participants in the legendary Freedom Summer project of 1964: "Far from using Freedom Summer as a vehicle for rebellion against parents, the applicants [who worked on this project] simply seem to be acting in accord with values learned at home" (McAdam, 1998, cited in DeMartini, 1992: 452). Would students who worked on the Freedom Summer projects of 1964 necessarily have any less generational consciousness than, for instance, those who participated in the events of 1968, presumably an age-related social movement? I think it is not unreasonable to assume that at least in some cases we may be talking about the very same individuals. A continuity of political orientation with values of parents, then, does not preclude generational consciousness, though it does challenge the argument that generational consciousness is predicated upon generational conflict.

I would now like to turn to the work of Paulo Freire, which I feel is useful in providing a framework for our understanding of generational consciousness, as well as enhancing our appreciation of its importance. Like Mannheim, Freire is interested in how individuals and groups of individuals acquire consciousness of their location in the historical process, the sense of agency produced by this consciousness, and the implications this has for social transformation.⁴

Freire and Human Distinctiveness

According to Freire, humans are distinct from all other creatures because (1) we possess consciousness, or "intentionality towards the world" (Freire quoted in Lankshear, 1993: 96); (2) we live "authentically" only when engaged in "creative transformation of the world"; (3) humans are uncompleted beings who are humanized in dialogue; and (4) humans are historical beings (Lankshear, 1993: 95).

Each of these four characteristics has a particular relevance for the present discussion, and shall be discussed in turn.

For Freire, critical consciousness is the primary goal of pedagogy. There is, he explains, an "archaeology of consciousness" (cited in Taylor, 1993: 61). The lowest stage is that of "intransitive thought"; here, disempowered individuals adopt a fatalistic perspective, believing that there is nothing they can do to alter the conditions of their lives. They live in what Freire calls "a culture of silence" (1985: 72). In the second stage, that of semi-intransitive consciousness, individuals believe that they can partly change their lives, but their inclination is to put blind faith into one party or leader who they hope will "set the world right." People operating at this level of consciousness lack "structural perception" (1985: 75); they regard the source of problems in their lives either as lying in some mystical dimension or within themselves. The move to naïve transitive consciousness is marked by the emergence out of cultural silence; persons, groups, or communities operating at this level begin to develop an awareness of the social structure and for the first time really begin to think politically. As Freire describes it: "Poets begin to write about more than their lost loves. . . . They speak now of the field hand and laborer, not as abstract and metaphysical concepts, but as concrete men [sic] with concrete lives" (1985: 78).

Finally, the last stage in the growth of consciousness is that of critical consciousness. "A critically transitive thinker feels empowered to think and to act on the conditions around her or him, and relates those conditions to the larger contexts of power in society" (Shor, 1993: 32).

Conscientization is the process of moving through these levels of consciousness, the journey to developing a critical consciousness. Conscientization is, Freire explains, "a way of reading how society works. It is the way to understand better the problem of interests, the question of power. How to get power, what it means not to have power. Finally, conscientizing implies a deeper reading of reality" (Freire, 1998: 9).

Freire has developed and used this concept in the context of the politics of Latin America. However, I would like to borrow his framework, and to rethink the concept of conscientization as it might apply to generational consciousness. In the first instance, the topic of generational consciousness is far less political than the coup d'états which pepper much of Freire's work. But I would like to suggest that ultimately the topic being considered here is also a very political one; the process by which individuals and groups come to locate themselves in the historical process is intricately tied with their level of structural consciousness. While the tempo of social change might increase the probability of a generation moving from a "generation as location" to "generation as actuality," conscientization is the motor through which this transformation is realized.

Through conscientization, members of a generation come to a deeper understanding of their historical location, which includes an appreciation of their ability

to act upon the social world. The initial awareness of one's membership in a particular cohort might be perceived as the early stages of consciousness described by Freire. Only when this generational consciousness is accompanied by a structural understanding of the social world, and therefore of a generation's potential to act upon and influence prevailing social conditions, can there be a realization of, in Mannheim's words, generation as actuality.

But as we have already discussed, generational consciousness is not necessarily a product of, nor does it necessarily lead to, generational conflict. Indeed, participating in the common destiny of an historical unit—one's generation—might very well involve developing a deeper appreciation of what has gone before, and what is to follow. In other words, it might serve as an impetus for a heightened awareness of one's own generational identity, coupled with a sense of bonding between preceding and succeeding generations. It is possible, then, for generational consciousness to lead to intergenerational consciousness, and it is in this form that agency becomes most fundamentally linked to the historical process. This enhanced understanding of generational consciousness allows us to include participation in those social movements which are not directly age-related.

So far, we have seen that both Mannheim and Freire are interested in consciousness, which is manifest in social action. But where does this consciousness come from? How is it arrived at, and how do we as researchers interested in this field know it when we see it?

Narrative and Intergenerational Dialogue

As many narrative theorists have commented, the relationship between living and telling is a dynamic one: "[I]ndividuals do not merely tell stories, after the fact, about their experiences, instead they live out their affairs in storied forms" (Ochberg, 1994: 116). We become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell; our stories are a cornerstone of our identity. Narratives both construct and are constructed by individuals, but they are encased "in larger ideological metanarratives" (Maines, 1993: 34). Thus, as individuals construct the stories they tell about their lives, they do so as (but not necessarily for) members of a particular generation.

Here, then, we come to the importance of narrative for the present discussion.

[E]ventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very "events" of a life. In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives. . . . [Thus] we also become variants of the culture's canonical forms (Bruner, 1987: 15).

Significantly, narration involves not only speakers, but also listeners. Stories are a fundamental means of communication between people; through listening to and telling stories, we learn about others as they learn about us. Thus it is not stories alone, but importantly the communication of stories which informs our construction of who are, who we have been, and who we are becoming.

According to Freire, it is through dialogue that humans become complete. "I can only become truly myself when other people also become themselves" (cited in Taylor, 1993: 62). Extrapolating from this statement to a narrative perspective, and expanding upon it, one can argue, "I can only become truly myself when other people also become themselves . . . and I do so by telling stories and listening to those of others. These stories lend meaning to past experiences and influence my future actions." Dialogue is, then central to our identity, which is fundamentally social and historical, and constitutes "the essence of societal structure and societal change" (Taylor, 1993: 62)

For Freire, dialogue "cannot exist unless it involves critical thinking" (cited in Lankshear, 1993: 110). The essence of dialogue is "the true word," or the unity of reflection and action "in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers" (cited in Lankshear, 1993: 96). This dialectical unity of action and reflection, which for Freire is the essence of realizing one's humanity, is also what lies at the heart of Mannheim's generation as actuality, as we have already seen.

So far, we have discussed relevance of three out of the four characteristics which Freire argues distinguish human beings. The fourth characteristic—that uniquely, humans are historical beings—has a particular significance for the discussion of generations. When Freire claims that we are historical beings, he means

that we are conscious of time and of our location within time. Humans have, and know they have, a past, a present, and a future. . . . Precisely because human beings are conscious of time they can conceive causes and effects, and thereby act with intention upon the world. . . . Humans can know that they have been different in the past . . . that they may become different in the future, and that these changes reflect transforming action by humans upon their world (Lankshear, 1993: 97).

Generational consciousness both marks generations as distinct from each another, at the same time that it relies upon an awareness of the connection between generations. For a generation to realize its potential, for it to become a self-conscious group which acts to transform the world and is itself transformed in the process, requires a consciousness of generations which have come before and which will follow; in other words, historical consciousness is a necessary but insufficient condition for generational consciousness.

Generational Identity and the Emergence of New Stories

Thus far, I have argued that generational consciousness, which is the key ingredient to the formation of generations as actuality, is comprised of both a continuity and a discontinuity of identity with previous and succeeding generations. Generations from this perspective are distinct entities which at the same time are integrally tied to the historical process.

The complex interplay between continuity and discontinuity of generational identity becomes particularly evident in in-depth conversations with individuals who, in Mannheim's words, "participate in the common destiny of this historical and social unit" (1952: 303). The actual stories which people tell about themselves and their lives indicate both the specificity of their location as well as their position within a wider historical perspective. An example of this can be seen in my own research in the former East Germany (German Democratic Republic, GDR). In 1992 I conducted in-depth interviews with forty women and men living in East Berlin and Leipzig who had been leaders in the citizens' movements.

The focus of the study was on the social psychological dimensions of the transformation of East Germany, including but not limited to the effect of acute political turmoil on the arousal of generational consciousness. The interviewees ranged in age from their late teens to late seventies, and represented a broad spectrum of society—including the arts, church, academia, construction workers, architects, social workers, and youth group organizers. The sample was well-suited for studying the effect of a particular political event on the generational consciousness of an age-heterogeneous population. All respondents were, by definition, political activists, who were characterized by substantial participation in and reflection upon the dramatic events of the day. A key difference between them, however, was their age at the time of the revolution.

Because East Germany's brief history was punctuated by dramatic events at intervals of significant length, a study of its citizens offers an ideal, and in some ways unique, forum for the exploration of generational consciousness across generations coexisting in time and place. Three key dates provide a convenient structuring for the framing of generations: October 7, 1949, the founding of the country; August 13, 1961, the day the building of the Berlin Wall began; and November 9, 1989, the opening of the Berlin Wall, commonly considered the death knell of the country. Theoretically, "societal breakdowns, dislocations, and upheavals" (Braungart and Braungart, 1990: 250) can have a marked influence upon generations becoming conscious of themselves. In the case of East Germany, the dramatic transformation of the society seemed to heighten the generational consciousness of its citizens. Respondents in my study spontaneously and consistently framed the stories they told about their lives in terms of their location of themselves as belonging to a particular generation. My data

suggests that generations stood in different relationships to the very existence of the country, and as such tended to experience its demise in varying ways (Andrews, 1997). The way in which this consciousness was expressed was in the telling of stories.

The opening question of the interview asked respondents to place their life stories in a historical context; this was followed later by a series of questions about the relationship between age and East Germans' reactions to the changes in their country. Bärbel Bohley, the so-called "mother of the revolution" (a label she herself always rejected), began her interview by telling me:

Most formative for me was the fact that I am a postwar child. Born in May 1945. I grew up in Berlin, always lived there and was forever confronted with the problems, not so much the economical ones but more the human problems of life in a divided city. Because prior to 1961 already and the building of the wall there was the Cold War and frontiers, some of the city's inhabitants were in the east the others were in the west. These facts made a deep impression on me. Then there were the events of 17 June⁵, the 1956 Hungarian uprising and Prague 1968. These were the factors that made me sympathetic to the building of the wall in 1961. I thought this might give us some peace so that we could get on with creating a socialist state. It turned out in retrospect that this was an illusion.

For Bohley, the timing of her birth and where this placed her in relation to the building of the Berlin Wall are, as she describes it "most formative." Indeed, it is members of her generation, born in the first ten years of the country's existence, who were the most pivotal in creating the political upheaval of 1989. While 41.1 percent of the 343,854 people who left the GDR in 1989 were between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-nine (Naimark, 1992: 86), most of the leading members of the opposition were in their forties in the 1989. Like Bohley, they were "GDR babies" born at virtually the same time as the country. This generation was not responsible for establishing the country, but they generally identified themselves as socialists—like their parents—and one motivating force behind their actions was that of making a better socialism (see Andrews, 1998). They neither wanted to leave East Germany for the West, nor did they wish to stay and accept things as they were—and so they stayed, with the rallying cry "We are staying here. We are the people."

Ulrike Poppe, a key figure in East Germany's underground opposition, is also a "GDR baby." She describes her early years in the following way:

I was born in '53; when the Wall was built, I was quite a small child but I was very conscious of this experience because I grew up at the edge of Berlin, and we lived near to the forest, and through this forest, the wall was built. I remember my parents always reminding us not to go too deep into

the forest because there were soldiers with guns. I was mostly afraid of the guard dogs. We heard the shooting day and night, and this made us very anxious. [In English] We always played "the frontier game": one was a soldier, and the other smugglers, and we smuggled "leaflets" and the leaflets were the leaves from the trees. I remember once being very proud because no one found my leaflets because I had swallowed them. The smugglers were always the good guys, and the soldiers were the evil ones. [Laughter].

For Poppe, the importance of the Berlin Wall for both her psychological and physical experiences as a young child in some ways foreshadow its significance in subsequent years. As she tells this story to me, it is not only clear that she is enjoying a humorous, and slightly heroic, reminiscence of her childhood, but that for her this tale continues to have importance, primarily because it historically situates her biography. In the cases of Bohley and Poppe, we see examples of generational narratives. Both speakers highlight the importance of the times in which they born, and identify this as an ongoing influence in who they perceive themselves to be.

As argued earlier, the stories which people tell about their lives are more than individual creations; they are part of larger metanarratives. The experiences reported here by Bohley and Poppe are both their own, individual stories, as well as stories of their generation. As such, these stories function as a critical link between the founding generation of the GDR (those who built the wall) and the younger generation who fled to the West in 1989.

Narratives can, then, be a very rich source through which to explore generational consciousness. Each generation has its own new story to tell and the act of identifying and creating the tale is itself part of the journey to generational consciousness. Plummer (1994) explores the process through which particular social conditions facilitate the emergence of new stories; how, he asks, do new stories come to be told and heard? Stories are not only the way in which individuals process their own lived experiences, but they are also inherited and remade anew—and it is in the interplay between these that identities are forged. For instance, the very fact that a story can be told might be an indicator of its historical location. A gay man speaking in the late 1990s recalls his experiences of forty years earlier:

In the fifties acting straight was very important. I don't know how many dates I had in that period with guys . . . where they would say, "I'll meet you Friday at 11:30 'cause I'm taking this girl out after office hours. The date will be over by 11:00, I'll meet you at 11:30 in the Village." That was really a standard operating procedure on a Friday night (Kaiser, 1997: 112).

Stories are products of their times; not only what someone tells, but how they tell it or even that they tell it might be evidence of generation as location, even

possibly as actuality. Pilcher's (1998) excellent study of cohort differences in the ways women talk about gender makes a similar point: the narratives provided by her respondents are, she argues, "the empirical location or repository of the "social generational consciousness"" (1998: 129). Along similar lines, Benjamin (2000) employs a case study method, using in-depth interviews, to examine racial consciousness across three generations of Black Americans. She argues

community moves on consciousness and changes it: culture stirs consciousness. Consciousness is both collectively and individually cyclical . . . group racial consciousness varies according to historical time periods; the cultural structural, and economic trends and transformations within the larger society; and in response to mobilization from within Black communities (2000: 13).

For Benjamin, consciousness is cyclical and therefore best explored through generational change. Consciousness—portrayed as being the property of individuals and of collectives—is dynamic and performative.

In all of these examples—my East German data, the emergence of gay stories in the second half of the twentieth century, the effect of cohort on talk about gender, and the generational transformation of racial consciousness of Black Americans—one can identify generational consciousness in the articulation of stories belonging to a particular time and place. When people speak about their lives, and about the communities to which they feel they belong, they do so in ways which by necessity reflect an integration of biography and history—and it is in this intersection where expression of generational consciousness is most enhanced.

Conclusion

We come to know ourselves, and others, as members of a generation through acts of narration. Temporally, these narratives are both horizontal and vertical. All beings living at a particular moment construct and are constructed by stories. At the same time, stories pass between generations; they are the stuff of cultural identity, and it is this which we inherit from preceding generations and bequeath to the next. It is through these stories that individuals, as members of a generation, locate themselves in the historical process, and in so doing, create a framework which optimizes the possibility of realizing their own ability to effect real change.

Pilcher (1994, 1998) states that the strength of Mannheim's work on the sociology of generations is in the theoretical framework with which it provides us. However, she continues:

[I]t does not contain an empirical model or any guidelines as to how the investigation of generational phenomena is to proceed. . . . The lack of any

guidelines includes a failure to specify what is to count as "generational consciousness" in terms of data: what is it that sociologists should study? (1994: 492).

In this paper I have argued that it is through our communication with others, in our words and deeds, that we reveal our generational consciousness. "We actualise ourselves through the activity of narrating" (Ochs and Capps, 1996: 29), and this narrating entails telling, listening, and doing. By participating in, and attending to, the stories of our own generation and those of others, we develop a consciousness of ourselves as a constituting distinct group, which in turn contributes to our becoming "knowing actors in a historical drama [we] script" (Myerhoff, 1982: 100).

Notes

1. I use the terms *ancestor* and *progeny* both literally and figuratively.
2. Even the international youth movement of the 1960s drew inspiration from earlier generations, Kriegel (1978) describes the so-called "generation of 1968" as

a generation which . . . had at the time chosen its own models, its heroes and its titles from the "generation of the Resistance," even speaking of a "New Resistance" although never truly spelling out what and with whom this New Resistance was fighting, except in a metaphorical way (p. 32).

They thus constitute a generation for itself, or actual generation, while simultaneously affirming a connection with an earlier generation. This anticipates the forthcoming discussion on the relationship between historical and generational consciousness.

3. DeMartini uses the term *lineage* to indicate biological continuity. Indeed, the research from this perspective has focussed on comparisons between adult children and their parents. I would like to expand the construction of lineage to include people from different generations, who may or may not be biologically related, but who nonetheless share fundamental beliefs and outlooks.

4. Unlike Mannheim, however, he does not have a special interest in either youth politics or generational conflict.

5. Before 1989, June 17, 1953, stood out in East German history as the single largest citizen uprising against the government. For two and a half days, workers throughout the country demonstrated. Ultimately, the Red Army came in, and order was imposed. Indeed, during the height of the demonstrations in the autumn of '89, Honecker is said to have asked one of his aides, "Is this another '53?"

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