



The brief history of generation – defining the concept of generation. An analysis of literature review

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Abstract

The term of generation is used nowadays at conversational level to define various categories of factors / aspects: from age group, time frame, theory to the degree of kinship and animal kingdom/ regnum. As a consequence, the concept of generation is considered to be a complex term, with no well-known, unitary definition, that sometimes creates confusion in social sciences and humanities. Given the frequency of the use of this term, various scientist (from diverse domains) tried to identify and develop a comprehensive definition, but they have failed to reach a common ground, mostly as a consequence of the fact that in their research they have not taken into account the work of other authors that studied the same topic, but started the research process from the beginning. In sociology, the most iconic figure of the generational theory is considered to be Karl Mannheim, the German sociologist who managed to bring into attention the study of generations as a research subject throughout his work. However, there were also other authors (sociologists or not) who further contributed to the development of the generational theories throughout their research conducted in the years to come after Mannheim's well-known paper. Therefore, this article aims at identifying the most iconic works that try to develop a definition for the concept of generation and at presenting the results of the research of various scientists in the field of generational theories, by conducting an extensive analysis of the literature review on this subject.

Objective

The article aims to identify and map the work and results that have already been conducted and published in the domain of generational theories, in order to provide a comprehensive overview of the concept of generation. Therefore, the paper will briefly

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analyze and present the contributions of various authors (in domains such as sociology, psychology, arts, anthropology, management and so on) to the development of the study field of generations, as a separate sociological problem.

Paper selection

Structured research was carried out (based on keywords such as generation, sociology, literature review, generational theory), with no limitations in terms of type, date of publication or language of publication. Search engines that have been used include: Google Scholar, Z-library, Annual Review of Sociology.

Keywords

Generation; literature review; sociology; Karl Mannheim; generational theories;

The history of the evolution of the concept of generation is considered to be quite recent, judging by the fact that only at the beginning of the 1990s the researchers considered that the definition of this term represented another challenge for the academic community, the sociological theories marginalizing the study of this concept (Pilcher, 1994). Although the term is widely used in the contemporary society, being present in various fields of research, from the social, political or economic ones, to the field of humanities or exact sciences, authors worldwide did not manage to develop an exhaustive definition that can be universally accepted literature (Tomonicska, 2016, p.67).

In the domain of social sciences, the concept of generation is being used with multiple meanings, either in order to define the various social groups that exist within a community and the differences between them (young generations vs older generations, the 1920s generation etc.) (Pilcher, 1994, p.481), or in order to define the kinship relationships, demographers trying to develop in this context instruments to measure the “length” of a generation (Foner & Kertzer, 1978) (Kertzer, 1978). Most of the time, the concept of generation is used in order to define the succession of people advancing in different age groups, the young ones replacing the older ones, all of them growing old at the same time (Kertzer, 1983, p.126), thus being confused with the term cohort, which refers, according to the Dictionary of Sociology, to “a group that includes people of the same age or who have participated in a relatively identical period to the activity of the same system” (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1998, p.113).

Even if the study of generations has become a main topic on the research agenda of the academic community in the last years, fact demonstrated by the series of new research approaches that were launched trying to explain the generational conflict and to provide a comprehensive definition of the term of generation, the study of Karl Mannheim, the German sociologist known as the founder of the sociology of knowledge, is considered by sociologists to be the main pillar that has contributed to the development of the sociology of generations as a distinct field of research. Mannheim's paper, “The Problem of Generations”, published in 1927/ 1928 (republished in 1952), considered as “the canonical reference point in the field” (Purhonen, 2016, p.95), it is

constantly identified and presented as the starting point or primary lens for studying the sociology of generations (Connolly, 2019, p.2) (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2014) (Bristow, 2015) (Edmunds & Turner, 2005).

The influence that Mannheim's research has had on the evolution of the field of generation analysis is evidenced both by the fact that his ideas were taken over and subsequently applied and readjusted at the level of the disciplines that compose the field of social sciences, and by the fact that most of his subsequent contributions to the development of the sociology of generations were based on the extension/ extrapolation or critique of the results of Mannheim's research (Bristow, 2016, p.2).

Therefore, in accordance with the results obtained by Mannheim in the conducted studies, two schools of thought with different approaches were involved in the study of the problem of generations (Mannheim, 1952, pp.277-278):

1. **“Positivist” School of Thought** – to which a number of French authors contributed through their work, such as Auguste Comte (sociologist and philosopher, founder of the theory of positivism), Augustin Cournot (economist and mathematician), Justin Dromel² (sociologist), Francois Mentre³ (sociologist), as well as other European authors like Giuseppe Ferrari⁴ (Italian philosopher, historian and politician) or Ottokar Lorenz⁵ (Austro-German historian and genealogist). This school based its activities/ logic on quantitative research techniques, formulating the idea that the principle of political continuity can be translated in terms of the biological continuity of generations, with a number of quantitative factors defining human existence (Mannheim, 1952, pp.276-280).

Moreover, within this school of thought the sociologist Auguste Comte applied the concept of generation to decipher the nature and tempo of progress, which he considered to be directly determined by a change in the basic succession of generations and of the average age (Mannheim, 1952, p.277). Thus, basing on the assumption that if the average life of each person increases or decreases, then the rhythm/ rate of his/ her progress increases or decreases inversely proportional, Comte argues that the human body (in terms of biological factors) directly influences the life length of a generation, limiting it to 30 years, biological factors being those that determine the appearance and the level of the influence of the conservative and reforming forces which exist at the level of a society, on its rate of progress (Mentre, 1920, p.66).

This idea is further included in various fields and developed by a number of scientists (mostly French), including Augustin Cournot (French economist and mathematician), Justin Dromel (French lawyer – launched the theory that every political generation, defined as consisting of people aged 25-60 years old, defines its supreme political ideal based on the actions of the previous generation) (Dromel, 1862), Francois Mentre (French philosopher), Giuseppe Ferrari (Italian philosopher, historian and

² Dromel, Justin, *La loi des revolutions, les generations, les nationalites, les dynasties, les religions*, Didier and Co., 1862.

³ Mentre, Francois, *Les generations sociales*, Ed. Bossard, Paris, 1920.

⁴ Ferrari, Giuseppe, *Teoria dei periodi politici*, Milano, Hoepli, 1874.

⁵ Lorenz, Ottokar, *Die Geschichtswissenschaft in Hauptrichtungen und Aufgaben kritisch erörtert*, Berlin, vol. I (1886), vol. II (1891).

politician), Ottokar Lorenz (Austrian historian and genealogist). The movement is known in literature as realism-positivism (direct continuation of classical realism) and it is defined by the final wish/ purpose of identifying a general law that explains the rhythm of historical evolution, based on the biological law of the life length of mankind and on the cyclical succession of the new generations (Mannheim, 1952, p.278).

Thus, the main research problem that the positivist school of thought tries to answer is represented by the identification of the average period of time necessary for a new generation to replace the old one (Mannheim, 1952, pp.278-279). A significant contribution, from this point of view, to the development of generational theory, is attributed to Mentre, who starts from the hypothesis that a generation spans for a period of 30 years and analyses the same problem from the perspective of the animal kingdom, basing on the works of Alfred Espinas⁶, the results being subsequently replicated at the level of the 16th century French society, reaching the conclusion that major changes tend to occur every 30 years and that there is no dominant sphere that imposes its own pace of development on others (Mentre, 1920, p.298).

2. **“Romantic-historical” School of Thought** – developed at the level of German society, whose main work was considered that of Wilhelm Dilthey (German historian, sociologist and philosopher), entitled *Über das Studium der Geschichte der Wissenschaften vom Menschen, der Gesellschaft und dem Staat* (1875). The novelty generated by the results of the quantitative research carried out by him is represented by the distinction between the quantitative and the qualitative concept of the notion of time, the adoption of the generation as a temporal unit of the history of the intellectual evolution allowing the replacement of the external temporal units (such as hour, month, year, decade etc.) with a measurement concept that can be applied from within, aspect that allows the evaluation of the intellectual movements through an intuitive process of restoration. Also, Dilthey highlights the fact that to research this phenomenon one should not focus on the succession of generations, but rather on the coexistence of several generations, an aspect that allows the generation to be defined as a group of individuals experiencing the same intellectual, social and political circumstances, no matter the temporal moment – the first years of life, maturity or the last years of life (Mannheim, 1952, pp.280-283).

Another paper that has contributed to the development of generational theories is represented by the study of the German historian Wilhelm Pinder on the non-contemporaneity of contemporaries (applied in the field of art), in which the concept of generation is used to highlight the fact that although different generations live the same reality at the same time (judging from the point of view of the experiences they live), the collocation at the same time represents, in fact, different periods of the self, which a person can only share with people of the same age (Mannheim, 1952, p.283).

Basing on the ideas formulated by the two schools of thought on the definition of generation, Mannheim develops within his theory the **model of generational unity**, which considers the generation to be similar to a social class, with individuals holding similar positions within the economic and power structure. Focusing his attention on the

⁶ Alfred Espinas, *Des societes animales*, Paris: Librairie Germer Bailliere et C1, 1878.

biological factor, Mannheim considers that the biological position (age) determines to a certain extent the range of experiences an individual can access, aspect that limits him/her to specific ways of thinking and behavior, as well as to specific types of actions relevant from a historical point of view (Braungart, 1974, p.40). Starting from this idea, he defines the generational unity as a group of people who “*share a location and a destiny throughout the common history and respond in the same ways to similar social and cultural forces. However, the existence of the units is conditioned by the unique way in which the cultural, social and historical forces are interwoven*” (Mannheim, 1952, p.310).

In addition to Mannheim’s research, the Spanish essayist and philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset formulates in 1933 a similar concept of generation, based on the fact that people who are born almost at the same time share a common history that influences their socialization and development process. Considering that the term of “generation is one of the most important concepts in history”, the Spanish philosopher develops the idea that each generation has a “special mission”, which may or may not be fulfilled (Ortega Y Gasset, 1958, pp.15-19). In his conception, the generation is defined as a group of people “whose members are born with a set of specific characteristics that form a common physiognomy, which distinguishes them from previous generations” (Ortega Y Gasset, 1958, p.15).

Keeping the same sphere of discussion, the Russian-American sociologist Pitirim Sorokin applies the concept of generation in the study of the conflict between the “old” and “new” generations, saying that the concept is generated by the different way in which each age group relates to the same events (Sorokin, 1947 , pp.192-193).

The study of generations becomes a topic of interest to scientists in the 1960s and 1970s, when American sociologists (in general) and political sociologists (in particular) focused their attention on the political and social implications of power over different age groups existing within a society, focusing specifically on those age groups that share a common lifestyle, social position and vision of the world (Braungart, 1974, p.32). Thus, in 1963 is developed the second generational theory considered a reference point in the study of the concept of generation, elaborated by sociologists Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt and Talcott Parsons. Known as the **functionalist model**, it argues that the precarious integration of age groups within society is the main determinant of generational conflicts (Braungart, 1974, p.35), Eisenstadt considering that “age is the factor that defines the social and cultural characteristics of one person, characteristics that subsequently help him/ her establish interpersonal relations and obtain a social role” (Eisenstadt, 1963, p.24). In addition, Parsons argues that in modern societies, the middle-aged group holds the majority positions of responsibility, promoting the status quo when it comes to giving up their social position to the detriment of a new generation (Parsons, 1963, p.110).

In the same volume, in addition to the functionalist model, the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim states that in modern mechanized societies, the role of young people within society is lost in the eyes of older generations, which tend to consider them more like an economic and social responsibility/ debt rather than an economic advantage. In these conditions, young people are forced to compete with older generations in order to

gain a position in modern society, which also results in a lower participation of young people (defined as an age group) to the social order (Bettelheim, 1963).

Therefore, the functionalist model defines age as the main factor that makes the difference in the allocation of social roles. In this context, as a result of the societal complexity, as well as of the difficulties that a person encounters in the process of political, social, economic and psychological integration, the phenomenon of generational alienation appears. An example that reflects the generational alienation is represented by the social movements of the young people, determined by their desire to achieve equality and to succeed in integrating at the central level of the society, where the older generations are positioned (Braungart, 1974, p.38).

Basing his research on these ideas, the sociology professor Richard G. Braungart concludes that the relationship established between generational succession and social integration is a curvilinear one, where both younger and older age groups are part of a slower social, political, economic and psychological integration process, while the middle age group is at the top of the pyramid, in terms of integration. Therefore, generational alienation tends to occur during childhood, when young people experience the lowest level of social integration (Braungart, 1974, p.39), but when they have the necessary resources and energy to achieve a change of social position.

At the same time, Braungart develops a model that synthesizes the theory of the functionalist model, where the generational conflict is defined as the dependent variable X_1 , a result of the high levels of alienation (variable X_2), which are influenced/ determined by low degrees of integration at the level of the psychological (variable X_3), social (variable X_4), economic (variable X_5) and political (variable X_6) sectors – all considered intervention variables. The only independent variable defined by the author is the age group (variable X_7), and he assumes that this variable influences directly the intervention variables and indirectly the dependent variable. Thus, he argues that, according to the functionalist model of generational conflict, young people, as an age group, integrate (politically, economically, socially, and psychologically) with difficulty within society, and that the lack of social integration leads them to revolt in order to occupy the position they consider they own within the social order (Braungart, 1974, pp.39-40).

Trying to prove the applicability of the generated model, Braungart applies the principles of path analysis, developed by Sewall Wright, to explain the interdependence relationships that are created between the defined variables. Thus, the resulting recursive equations are as follows (Braungart, 1974, p.40):

$$\begin{aligned} X_1 &= p_{12}X_2 + p_{13}X_3 + p_{14}X_4 + p_{15}X_5 + p_{16}X_6 + p_{17}X_7 + p_aR_a \\ X_2 &= p_{23}X_3 + p_{24}X_4 + p_{25}X_5 + p_{26}X_6 + p_{27}X_7 + p_bR_b \end{aligned}$$

In the same defined period of time (1960-1970) the first criticisms of Mannheim's theory also appear, author who is accused that by the definition he gives to the concept of generation has created confusion, failing to provide a clear distinction between the terms cohort and generation. The first author who attacks the polysematic use of the term of generation, proposed by Mannheim, is the American demographer and

sociologist Norman B. Ryder, who proposes the restriction of the use of the concept of generation to a single meaning, referring to the descent of kinship, supporting his idea by highlighting the fact that the term of cohort defines, in fact, the succession of individuals who pass through a social system, and that the concept of life stage actually defines a certain segment of an individual's life (Ryder, 1975).

Ryder's arguments received support from demographers, who were the adepts of the terminology assimilated to the notion of cohort, rather than to the one assimilated to the concept of generation, but his arguments did not enjoy the attention of most social scientists (Troll & Bengston, 1979). However, there is a paper in sociology, *Aging and Society Volume 3: A Sociology of Age Stratification*, considered to be a landmark in the study of generational theories, which supports Ryder's arguments, reiterating the hypothesis that generation is a relational concept based on the descent of kinship relationships, stating that the concept cannot be used to divide societies into segments or population into groups (Riley, et al., 1972, p.5).

In addition to the above-mentioned authors' contributions to the development of the concept of sociology of generations, one can also consider the studies developed by Lillian E. Troll, a psychology professor at Rutgers University, who offered five possible definitions for the concept of generation, focusing her attention, in particular, on the role of the generation in the relationships established at the family level and in the descent of the kinship relationships, as well as on the study of the generational gap (Troll, et al., 1969) (Troll, 1970; 1982).

In her study on the generational gap, Troll concludes that generation, as a concept, generates confusion by being used in different fields to define different things, although close in meaning. However, the confusion is also generated by the size of the conceptual analysis (the use of generation sometimes refers to structure, and in other situations to process), the level of conceptual application (on large-scale historical patterns or on the transition from adolescence to maturity), as well as the conceptual location (the study of the generation within the family or at the societal level) (Troll, 1970, p.199).

Taking into account all these aspects and considering that the term generation can be defined as the link between the social systems and the family systems, uniting the family systems with the individual and his/ her personality system, the author generates five possible definitions of the concept of application (also considering the specialized literature in the domain), making a comparison between the five definitions as follows (Troll, 1970, pp.199-200):

1. the generation as class descent (e.g. man/ woman, son/ daughter, grandson, great grandson, great great grandson etc.);
2. the generation as a homogeneous age group (e.g. youth – aged between 14-25 years old; adults – aged between 25-40 years old; elders – aged between 40-65 years old; aging – aged over 65 years old);
3. the generation as a stage of development (e.g. childhood, adolescence, maturity, middle age, old age);

4. the generation as a time interval (in terms of time span – 4 years or 25 years or 30 years and so on, depending on the perspective of each scientist that studies the term of generation from this point of view);
5. the generation as a *zeitgeist* (the atmosphere/ attitude that defines a certain period of history, demonstrated by the ideas and beliefs that were launched/ circulated during that period e.g. activism and hippies, affluence, gray flannel suit and so on).

The generation as class descent refers to the family tree of a person, where the oldest generation is represented by the oldest (living) person in the family of that person. This concept is used with this meaning only in genealogical studies, given that a person's class depends on the survival of other people (for example, a family member may now be part of the second class, and over a year, part of the first class – if his/ her parents die). Although the use of this concept raises a number of problems (generated by the interpretation of classes according to variables such as fertility, cultural practices etc.), the term continues to play the role of key variable in family study, used in order to identify the roles and identities each family member develops within the family, as well as for the analysis of many other aspects including family organization, inter-family relations, family processes, transmission of culture within the family etc. (Troll, 1970, pp.200-201).

The generation as a homogeneous age group can be applied at the level of the social system (in comparison with the first meaning of the concept, which could be applied only at the family level) and refers to a group of people of the same age and who share a set of common cultural characteristics, who have developed an identity of belonging to the group and who are perceived by the society as belonging to this group. In this concept's case, according to Troll, one can distinguish between generation for life (where group membership and identity are maintained throughout the life of an individual, even if he or she grows old; this is also the concept used by Mannheim in his writings, where he argued that people living at the same time do not necessarily share the same history) and the temporary generation (where group membership and identity are developed and maintained for a certain period of time, in the process of transition from a life stage to another; for example, this concept may refer to young people who are in the process of transitioning from adolescence to maturity – once maturity is reached, the formed group disintegrates and the former members of the group integrate into the adult group) (Troll, 1970, pp.201-202).

The generation as a stage of development emphasizes the status of an individual, defining the specific life stage he/ she is currently transitioning (childhood, adolescence, maturity etc.). Partly dependent on the chronological age, this meaning of the term generation shapes a continuous socio-psychological-biological phenomenon. For example, when a group of adolescents has completed the process of transition to maturity and dissolves the group they previously formed, a new group of adolescents is born that will go through the same process, even if they will no longer share similar cultural characteristics to those of the previous group (Troll, 1970, pp.202-203).

The generation as a time interval was introduced by German and French sociologists (Mannheim, Dilthey, Mentre) who came to the conclusion that a generation

lasts approximately 30 years (time allotted for the emergence of a new social change), fact that led to the use of the concept of generation as a unit of time that can mark social change. However, the contemporary society is characterized by a more accelerated tendency for social change, which occurs at shorter time intervals (from 20 years, up to two/ three years) (Troll, 1970, pp.203-204), as a result of various social factors such as marriage at a younger age (Rodman, 1965) or precocious sexual maturation (Tanner, 1961).

The meaning of *zeitgeist* was assigned to the concept of generation by European sociologists who tried to study the field of generational theories at the beginning of the 20th century, considering that this domain represents a mix of explanatory principle and measurement unit of social change. As a result, they focused on describing the characteristics of a generation (which are the factor that allow to distinguish between generations), rather than on the structure of a generation, because they considered that in this manner they could identify a way to anticipate and predict social change (Troll, 1970, p.204).

After 1970, we can notice the tendency of sociologists to marginalize the study of the concept of generation, term that plays a less important role in sociology as a distinct field of research (Pilcher, 1994). Despite its extensive use, the problem of defining this concept is a relatively recent topic, the number of studies dedicated to this problem increasing in the twentieth century, according to the results of the research carried out by the French historian Pierre Nora⁷, who considers generation to be a “place of memory” (Nora, 1997). According to his research, the term is used from ancient times, with roots in the Bible and Herodotus – to whom Egyptian priests “shared the secret that a century consists of three generations, which meant an average of about 33 years for the age gap between generations, only that a century actually includes the activity of five generations, because the father and grandfather, descendants of a great-grandfather born at the beginning of a century, can assist for a certain period of time to the raising of his child and his future children” (Petersen, 2013, pp.91-92).

Nora also believes that this concept has become of interest to researchers since the events of May 1968, which refers to the revolution of young intellectuals and workers in Paris who were fighting for human rights and freedoms, demonstrating the result of democracy and the acceleration of history (Nora, 1997, p.2975). On the other hand, the author draws highlights a series of aspects that can raise problems in the study of the term of generation, all regarding its temporal context: (1) what is the length of a generation in terms of period of time, how can it be identified/ calculated and which is the starting point of a new generation; (2) how the birth dates of a generation can be defined and how can be identified the period to which a generation is limited (Nora, 1997, p.2981).

More recently, taking further the idea of age and the presence of the concept of generation in all areas of existence, sociologists Claudine Attias-Donfut and Philippe Daveau have developed a definition of the generation according to which this concept is

⁷ A historian promoting the “new history”, a phrase that is based on the concepts of memory and identity, being famous for introducing the term “place of memory”.

“one of the essential dimensions of life: the time period that separates the birth of an individual of his/ her death, but whose consciousness also elicits a projection from his/ her own temporality into a past he/ she has never known and a future he/ she will not know” (Attias-Donfut & Daveau, 2004, p.101).

Therefore, the study of generational theories became a subject of interest for scientists, aspect demonstrated by an increased number of papers that have contributed to the development of this field of research as a distinct research area, as follows: Bryan Turner – *Strategic generations: Historical change, literary expression, and generational politics* (Turner, 2002), Julia Brannen – *Towards a typology of intergenerational relations: Continuities and change in families* (Brannen, 2003), Jonathan White – *Thinking Generations* (White, 2013), Sofia Aboim and Pedro Vasconcelos – *From political to social generations: A critical reappraisal of Mannheim’s classical approach* (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2014), Jenny Bristow – *Baby Boomers and Generational Conflict* (Bristow, 2015), Semi Purhonen – *Generations on paper: Bourdieu and the critique of ‘generationalism’* (Purhonen, 2016), Jenny Bristow – *The Sociology of Generations* (Bristow, 2016).

Also, in this period are published the results of the author Norbert Elias, who although a contemporary of Karl Mannheim, remained in obscurity, his research not being visible in the sociology of generations, although his studies focused on documenting the concept of generation. Thus, in Elias’s opinion, the members of a generation share common experiences and feelings (Elias, 2012[1991]), and the connection between generations is formed by biological factors, together with the similarity of social conditions and experiences (Elias, 2013[1989]). In this context, the author considers that the new generations are dependent on the older generations in terms of maturity (the old generations contribute to the pace and the way of growth of the young generations), focusing in his studies on identifying the opportunities that the younger generations benefit from (Connolly, 2019, p.5).

In Elias's opinion, the reduction of the channels to access professional careers for young people, as well as the difficulty in accessing top positions at the society level, is a consequence of the deliberate strategy developed by the older generations at a societal level that prevents younger generations to take over their positions (Connolly, 2019, p.6). In this context, Elias applies the concept of generation (without explicitly defining it) to study social movements, his applied study using as a research object the movement of young people from West Germany, from 1960, thus being able to distinguish between members and groups of a generation and to show that generational tensions appear rather in the middle class, with young people tending to follow the path of their parents in terms of lifestyle and career choice (Elias, 2013[1989]). Therefore, we can conclude that the research of Elias is based on historical data, the results he obtained being accurate in locating and identifying the connections established between the different generations in terms of social positions, opportunities and values and interests, managing to underline the idea of transmitting sociological inheritance from one generation to another (Connolly, 2019, pp.8-9).

In addition to Elias' research results, in 2005 authors June Edmunds⁸ and Bryan S. Turner⁹ publish a study that introduces a new understanding for the concept of generation: global generations. Starting from the perspective of Mannheim, who stated that a generation is a nationally bounded entity, the two authors launch the idea that the growth of technological communication systems and global mobility have both allowed the development of so called global generations that live the same global trauma (enabled by technological communication instruments), developing a common culture. Therefore, in their opinion, the 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the rising of international generations, formed by the influence of print media, whereas the mid-20th century was witness to the development of transnational generations, which was possible due to new broadcast communications. Only at the end of the 20th century the global generations started to take shape, being characterized by electronic communications technology, which allowed increasing interactivity (Edmunds & Turner, 2005, p.559).

Thus, the authors use the concept of generation in order to identify and define the role of social trauma (now experienced at a national/ international/ regional/ global level) in shaping the collective memory and experience. In their study, the authors start from the hypothesis that media is the main trigger for generational movements, and state the fact that even though during history warfare significantly influenced a generational consciousness (for example, the First World War, the Spanish Civil War, the Russian Revolution and so on, events that contributed to the shaping of political views and opportunities for different generations), nowadays traumatic events play a more important role in generating diverse types of generations (Edmunds & Turner, 2005, p.560).

In their opinion, the domain of generations has become of importance for the sociologists due to their interest in studying the demographic transformations and their political effects. As an example, in the UK society, the evolution of the baby-boomer generation has generated different pressing welfare – such as employment concerns, intergenerational conflicts generated by the lack of resources, as well as diverse political developments like the implementation of “grey vote” system and the pensions crisis (Blackburn, 2002). Taking into account these aspects, Edmunds and Turner concluded that *“it is the interaction between historical resources, contingent circumstances and social formation that makes ‘generation’ an interesting sociological category”* (Edmunds & Turner, 2005, p.561).

Starting from the theory developed by Bourdieu, according to which generational struggle directly influences the cultural transformation – the social world is based on multiple semi-autonomous fields (like arts, politics, economics etc.) in which actors fight for resources in order to achieve a desired status (symbolic capital) (Bourdieu, 1990), the two authors develop their own theory on generations, introducing the concepts of active and passive generations, both determined by the interaction between resources,

⁸ Faculty member at the University of Sussex, School of Law, Politics and Sociology.

⁹ British and Australian sociologist.

opportunity and strategic leadership. Therefore, in their opinion, the intergenerational change is generated by alternating generations – an active generation that contributes to the development and change of social and cultural life tends to be followed by a passive generation that only inherits the transformations determined by its predecessor (Edmunds & Turner, 2005, p.562).

Edmunds and Turner further apply their theory on the study of the generation of 1960, a generation considered by them the first example of a global generation who globally experienced traumatic events and that contributed to significant developments in the family, gender relations and social welfare, generating a new kind of consumerism (Edmunds & Turner, 2005, pp.565-566). Moreover, the generation of 1960 was the first generation to create a collective memory by experiencing events throughout media channels (television, in particular) (Eyerman, 2002) and developing, in consequence, a common orientation towards traumatic political events, global music, consumerism and communication systems (Edmunds & Turner, 2005, p.566).

They concluded that, taking into account the unprecedented development of the Internet, which created the necessary conditions for the emergence of a new generation, the 21st century is the witness of the rising of a new global generation – the Internet generation – a generation that shares its ideas and information across borders and whose actions have a global impact. They also define the two main factors that generated the creation of a new global generation as (a) growth of electronic forms of communication – new media allows everyone to experience an event transcending the time and space – and (b) increased mobility, education, tourism and global labor markets (Edmunds & Turner, 2005, pp.570-573).

In a more recent study of author Jonathan White, the concept of generation was applied in order to analyze the British contemporary public life throughout the lens of “generationalism” – an appeal to the concept of generation to narrate the political and social life (Wohl, 1979). Starting from the idea that the concept of generation is both a category of analysis and of practice (Jureit, 2017), Jonathan White examines the main themes that exist in today’s generationalism within the British society, focusing on determining the definition/ understanding of the generation notion in public discussions (White, 2013, pp.217-220).

As a result, the author identified five understanding of the concept of generation, depending on the object of analysis, as follows:

- generation as a historical explanation – the concept of generation can be used in order to describe social facts that influence the course of history, due to the fact that this particular notion can be defined both demographically and culturally, creating a causality (White, 2013, p.223). Moreover, generation is important in explaining historical facts because most recent political trends/ events are rooted in the common experiences of older generations (in the British case, the 1950s generation) (Beckett, 2010, p.159). It can also be concluded that the role of generations in describing past events is crucial since the factors that shape each generation can be taken into account when explaining later developments

- these factors are considered to form a mechanism throughout which the past leaves its legacy (Willems, 2010, p.83).
- generation can be used for periodization, in order to locate/ to place a specific event/ phenomenon in time, helping at ordering the history, “*putting a face on an otherwise faceless past or present*” (White, 2013, p.224). In the British society, the author uses the example of the ‘Jam Generation’ – which consists of MPs growing up in the times of the 1980s rock group The Jam (McElvoy, 2008).
- generation as a source of the community – in this case, the concept is used in order to suggest connectedness across different periods. As an example, the “*jilted generation*” not only makes reference to another musical factor (a Prodigy album), but also is considered to be “*an idea targeted at a specific age-group that encourages them to locate their experiences in a collective framework*” (White, 2013, p.224).
- generation as a means to identify justice – in this case, the concept is used as a way to imagine cross-temporal and cross-age obligations, trying to highlight the moral values developed by a specific age group towards other groups (located in the present, or past and future). In order to describe this particular use of the concept, the author uses the example of the baby boomers who produced a “*jilted*” younger generation by fighting to keep all the power in their hands (White, 2013, p.225).
- generation as an axis of conflict and impending crisis – taking into account the fact that more generations live at the same time, the author highlights the fact that the fight for resources and power has created a generational war – the older generations try to maintain their social status and resources obtained during life, making it difficult for the younger generations to survive and to define their role within society/ community (White, 2013, p.226).

To conclude, the author Jonathan White has contributed to the development of the sociology of generations by analyzing the application of the concept at the level of British public discussions, identifying five more understandings that can be attributed to the notion of generation: historical explanations, method to catalogue time, sources of community, instrument to identify injustice and axis of conflict and impending crisis (White, 2013).

Conclusions

The development of the sociology of generations as an independent field of research begins with the studies of Karl Mannheim, considered to be the ones that influenced all the studies that followed in the same field. However, based on the aspects presented in the current paper, one can notice that most authors who tried to contribute to the definition of the generation concept, using it in applied studies, sometimes in different

fields, did not take into account the results recorded before, each time starting from the beginning in the study of generations.

Nowadays, the concept of generation does not benefit from a definition that may be unanimously accepted at the level of the academic sphere, the term being often confused with the term of cohort or used with polysemantic meanings, depending on the field in which it is applied, as well as on the size of analysis (generation as time interval, as development process, as homogeneous age group etc.), fact that generates confusion. Although in the last years the field of the sociology of generations has become an active topic on the research agenda of scientists (especially in sociology, but also in fields such as business sciences, political sciences, psychology), the academic environment still feels the need to identify a definition that limits the use of the concept to a single meaning, comprehending and reflecting in an unitarily manner the results of the studies elaborated on this topic.

Thus, the concept of generation will continue to be of a topic of interest in sociology, the generational processes being those that underlie social metabolism. Moreover, the study of the relationships established between the different generations directly contributes to the analysis of social changes, social mobility and the transmission of values within the family (Kertzner, 1983, p.143). As a result, it can be anticipated the fact that in the years to come, a number of other studies will be published, papers that will try to define this concept, eliminating any kind of confusion existing now in this area.

Disclaimer

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