Problematizing a prominent panacea: A critical examination of the (continued) use of ‘social generations’ in youth sociology

Introduction

Despite a great deal of conceptual fuzziness and a degree of flexibility, even ambiguity, it is difficult to argue with White’s (2013: 216) observation that ‘Often, and increasingly, social and political life is narrated using the concept of generation’. The concept is enjoying substantial popularity, with particular ubiquity in both popular and political discussions and debates about whether and with what consequences contemporary young people face harsher economic conditions than their predecessor generations (e.g. Willetts 2010; Howker and Malik 2010; for discussion see Bristow 2019). These discourses, while interesting, usually lack sophisticated or nuanced readings of young people’s lives or their relationships with other ‘generations’, relying on homogenous categories that emerge from ideas in marketing: ‘baby boomers’, ‘Generation X’ and ‘millennials’ and the like are then positioned as wholly different to one another, at odds and even in conflict (Bristow 2019). Contrasting with popular accounts, sociologists use more nuanced devices, often drawing on the seminal writing of Karl Mannheim to suggest the idea of social generations helps make sense of contemporary youth and new forms of generational inequality. Such thinking underpins how recent social change connects young people born in particular historical period, but who are globally dispersed. These sociological currents are the focus of our paper, the primary contribution of which is to make clear that properly attending to the conceptualisation of younger generations is a pivotal part of tackling some of the broader questions pertaining to intergenerational relations, tensions, and differences.

In particular, we extend upon arguments made by France and Roberts (2015), who five years ago situated the prominent and increasingly popular use of the concept of ‘social generation’ in youth sociology as potentially representing a ‘new orthodoxy’. Social generation theory has, regardless, continued to gain prominence. We do not aim to return to the issues raised by France and Roberts (2015), but instead highlight and consider two new major developments. First, we tackle and critique a theoretical advance that developed in response to criticisms that the social

generation approach is unable to capture and explain social inequality; this is most notably evident in the use of the Bourdieu-inspired notion of a ‘generational habitus’ (see Woodman and Wyn 2015a). We make clear that this is conceptually problematic. Secondly, we engage with work by a number of other theorists (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2009; Edwards and Turner 2005) who conceptualise generations as a phenomenon impacting the lives of all young people around the world, creating a ‘global generation’ that cuts across national boundaries. Here we raise important questions about the ‘global reach’ of a generation and about the transferability and effectiveness of this approach to explain and understand the diverse lives of young people living in the global South. In moving through both main arguments, we also point to shortcomings in evidence based upon which the major theorising of social generations rests. Highlighting theoretical dilemmas and inconsistencies, issues with empirical application, and, finally, insufficient engagement with and consideration of post-colonial literatures, we contribute to emerging body of critical social theory that notes the need for caution in the ready uptake and deployment of the concept of generations.

The sociology of generations and its (dis)contents

Underpinned by the seminal writing of Karl Mannheim[1] and described as having an undervalued legacy in sociology (Pilcher 1994; Wyn and Woodman 2006), a ‘generational lens’ has gained substantial traction in youth sociology, where a number of significant writers deployed the idea of ‘social generations’ to make sense of the life worlds of contemporary youth. Here the work of Dan Woodman and Johanna Wyn has been particularly influential (Wyn and Woodman 2006; Woodman and Wyn 2015a). While sometimes subject to subtle recalibration (see Bessant et al. 2017 for example), the overarching emphasis has been on what is *new* and what *binds* contemporary young people together, with advocates arguing that:

[1] The intellectual lineage is sometimes credited to others prior to Mannheim; see e.g. Bessant et al. (2017) who trace the scholarly foundations to the work of Dilthey).

> '...generations focuses on the reality that at particular points in time young people face distinctive conditions that require their active engagement in 'rewriting' the rules for making a life' (Woodman and Wyn 2015b: 1404).

Accordingly, it is conditions such as the spread of neoliberalism; the rise of digital technologies; and political and economic process of globalisation that are creating the foundation for a 'general worldview or zeitgeist' (Bessant et al. 2017). This has led to claims that we are seeing the emergence of a global generation (Beck and Beck Gernsheim 2009; see Craig et al. 2019).

The academic work leaning on or developing these ideas contrasts to the dominant use and discussion of generation that pervade contemporary political narratives. As Ferreira (2018: 136) notes, these latter accounts are popular but incoherent, and that 'claims concerning the existence of generations and generational changes are surrounded by too much speculation, are too simplistic, and have a universalistic exaggeration, sometimes even contradiction'. Moving away from the narratives or discourses that underpin the generationalism used to discuss crude age cohorts and associated (mostly marketing) labels of 'baby boomers', 'Gen X', 'Gen Y', 'Gen Z' etc., the sociological account productively prioritises the social reality of generations (Ferreira 2018). That is, the biological rhythm of life, such as birth, aging and death is understood as taking place within a set of historical processes that are specific to different cohorts. Given the right conditions, shared sets of beliefs and outlooks *could* develop and would help these clusters of cohorts construct and see themselves as a 'generation' in *actuality*, recognising themselves as distinct from past and future generations. In this context, Mannheim argued that generation becomes a powerful source of social, political and cultural change, challenging the idea that change emerges through processes such as class conflict or technological innovation. Here, the notion of generation is seen as similar to social class in terms of its collective orientation or consciousness. Yet, unlike class, it is not linked to economic and power structures of modern societies, but instead most prominently to the interaction of history, an individual's biography and social location (Pilcher, 1994; Woodman and Wyn 2015a; Aboim and Vasconcelos 2014; Ferreira 2018).

The sociology of youth has benefited from this theorising, particularly its attention to 'the change processes that allow the induction of socialization conditions that are sufficiently wide and distinct from the past to provide *new experiences* and to shape *new subjectivities* between the younger layers of the population' (Ferreira 2018: 139; our italics; see also Wyn and Woodman 2006; Woodman and Wyn 2015a). It is important, here, to recognise that this relationship between generations and social change is examined most often through the actions of young people (Thorpe and Inglis 2019), who are experiencing a life stage where a generational identity is claimed to become established. The overarching argument is that deploying a social generations approach reveals that each generation shares a 'script' of 'their' collective development that, '…will continue to shape their lives well into the future when they are no longer youth… [and that] Generation Y will always be generation Y – they will not grow out of it – just as baby boomers are always baby boomers' (Wyn and Woodman 2006: 496–497).

Importantly, this does not, in principle, preclude attention to emergent divisions within a generation, because while 'historical dynamics will always translate into generational actualities […] these are carried forward by active social agents within their respective structural constraints' (Aboim and Vasconcelos 2014: 166). Making sense of such divisions usually relies on Mannheim's conceptual device, 'generational units'. This theoretical apparatus was originally designed for understanding collective social and political mobilisation of 'concrete groups', and how 'each generation unit tries to expand its influence on the direction of the whole generation location' (Purhonen 2016: 107). However, Woodman and Wyn (2015a) have been influential in promulgating the value of the generational unit concept for youth sociologists to think about social differences, indeed inequalities, more broadly. Notably, they suggest the sociology of generations is 'surprisingly marginal' to youth sociology given that 'although inequality was not Mannheim's major focus, [generational units] provides the basis for a framework that explicitly formulates the problem of the active recreation of divisions in the context of social change' (Woodman and Wyn 2015a: 59). In sum, they advocate that the value of the sociology of generations is that it,

> support investigations of how social division, across multiple dimensions including class, gender, race, sexuality, disability and

> geographic location, is being made today, in the context of social conditions that differ from those that impacted on the lives of young people in previous generations (Woodman and Wyn 2015a: 108)

The last part of this quote, in particular, ties into and supports another major and influential component of their theorising which is that the sociology of generations facilitates an understanding of how the 'post 1970s' generation experience a 'new adulthood' (Wyn and Woodman 2006). This new adulthood is one characterised by fluidity complexity and status reversibility, rather than one epitomised by youth transitions through a series of status markers on one's journey to an adulthood destination. Despite the critique of the transitions concept embedded in the 'new adulthood' literature, it is also important to note that a large body of scholarship still deploys or defends the concept of transitions to adulthood (e.g. Roberts 2007; Roberts 2010; Ferreira 2018; Moreno & Uracco 2018). Similarly, others question the degree of substantive 'newness' in the contemporary conditions shaping young lives, relative to other historical periods (France and Roberts 2017; Bessant 2018).

Generational theory and Bourdieu: conceptual advance or conceptual incoherence?

Tackling the question of difference been a core task for Woodman and Wyn (2015a,b), and they propose that strength of and necessity for generational theory is to expose the new processes that remake social inequalities in contemporary times. Furthermore, they have been clear that for a Mannheimian sociology to properly theorise young people's lives, some modification to his approach is required. Accordingly, they have led in providing this modification, buttressing Mannheim with Bourdieu to maximise the effectiveness of social generations theorising (see Woodman and Wyn 2015a). Here we want to draw attention to a number of conceptual issues that derive from this pairing.

First, as Purhonen (2016:3) contends, 'Bourdieu seldom if ever used the concept of generation strictly in the same sense as Mannheim (1952) and later theorists, for whom generation means essentially a social or cultural generation, a potential source of collective identity produced by the shared youthful or young adulthood experience'. Beyond this more overt incompatibility, other theoretical

issues that persist, and we suggest these are especially visible in discussions on 'generational units' and the idea of the creation of a 'generational habitus'. Both these, we argue, end up being heuristic devices that first and fore mostly *prop up the possibility of deploying social generations* as a concept, rather than primarily being new, central vehicles for explaining young people's lives.

As noted above, primarily 'generational unit' was Mannheim's (1952: 305-315) device for making sense of different *political and intellectual* responses to a common experience of a particular historical moment. Rather than inequalities or indeed any mention of social resources, it is the '*overtly* created, partisan integrative attitudes characterizing generation units' that interests Mannheim (1952: 307; our italics). This is consistent with Mannheim's aims to understand the drivers of social change in relation to the sociology of knowledge. Woodman and Wyn (2015a: 73) recognise this, and suggest that with 'a modified understanding of generational units, we are able to approach questions of continuity and change in the context of transitions and cultures in an alternative way'. Their preferred method for doing so is to utilise the concept of 'generational habitus' (Edmunds and Turner 2005).

Woodman and Wyn's (2015a) book that offers their major theoretical treatment of social generations uses the idea of generational habitus in relation to both 'generation' (the whole) and 'generational unit' (a segment of the whole). For example, they write that:

> '…a cleft habitus of 'tensions' and 'contraries' could arise and arguably become common among a new generation – a generational habitus developed by people living in a world infused and shaped by an awareness of rapid change and in which, to varying extents, people must manage a proliferation of contradictory rules and guidelines.' (Woodman and Wyn 2015a: 66)

This statement could arguably refer to generational units *or* actualities. A few pages later, it appears it is both, despite the goal of the paragraph being to cement the possibility for maintaining a focus on intra generational differences:

> '…habitus provides a tool for thinking about the subjective, embodied and affective dimension of generations, and generational units, which

> moves beyond Mannheim's focus on a conscious sense of belonging to a political generation' (Woodman and Wyn 2015a: 73).

We think there is tremendous value in using Bourdieu's concepts to understand youth's contemporary condition (Authors X), and we do not wish to diminish efforts to modify social generation theory to facilitate focus on difference. Yet, in the very least, whether generational differences can be so readily identified in habitus requires stronger evidence (Purhonen 2016). Moreover, the descriptions of how generational habitus might operate seem limited to how habitus works without its generational prefix. For example:

> '[given] expectations connected to social identities of various kinds that face this generation, many young people will likely need to fall back, creatively, on their dispositions, their 'feel for the game', no matter how poor this 'feel' may be for the situation they face or how contradictory the pull of their various dispositions.' (Woodman and Wyn 2015a: 68)

> 'The value of habitus, and linking the generational experience of youth to the unfolding life course, is that it reminds researchers that this constant reworking of dispositions will be on the basis of the cognitive styles, inclinations, and habits that were previously established by this and previous generations.' (Woodman and Wyn 2015a: 70)

Both these quotes echo how Bourdieu describes practice: i.e. always 'the product of a dialectical relationship between a situation and a habitus' (Bourdieu, 1972: 261), with habitus being 'individual and group history sedimented in the body, social structure turned mental structure and sensorimotor engine' (Wacquant 2018: 530). Here we must recognise that the attention to history and historical moments, that the generational theorists are keen to bring back to the proverbial table, is already at the table. Indeed, as Wacquant (2018: 528) makes plain, Bourdieu offers a *triple historicisation* of 'the agent (habitus), the world (social space and fields) and of the categories and methods of the social analyst (reflexivity)'. Of further relevance, Wacquant (2018: 532) describes habitus as 'suited to analysing crisis and change no less than cohesion and perpetuation'. This conceptualisation, perhaps unlike the

generations' model prioritisation of the historical moment, is one that is well attuned to understanding history as a variety of overlapping forces rather than a simple series of chronologically distinct slices (Kertzer 1983: 132).

The concept of generational habitus, like other collective notions of habitus, is 'merely a label for describing the family resemblances between individuals situated in a certain section of social space' (Atkinson 2011: 337). As a short hand heuristic it offers analytic value in grouping people together, but this can also 'threaten to throttle analysis of the very things [habitus is] intended to comprehend: specificity, complexity and difference' (Atkinson 2011: 338). In the case of generational habitus, the core *relational* component of Bourdieu's sociology goes missing – there is no to very little discussion of *field* in the context of generational habitus in youth sociology[2]. This is somewhat fatal because a habitus only exists in relation to the complex of fields and social spaces in which it is embedded; individuals are located in fields, not generations.

To offer an example, consider that many advocates of social generations point to the massification of higher education as being a distinctive generational reality. There appears to be a consensus that 'young generations 'will get less out of their qualification than the previous generation would have got' – or collective deskilling – which may, in turn, generate a level of disenchantment that spreads across that generation' (Bessant et al 2017: 101). However, while generation advocates do not overlook inequalities in contemporary higher education, a key issue is that any wholesale cross-generational comparison of the educational-employment nexus is misleading.

The logic of a generational deskilling is problematic because the return on investment is historically and contextually specific. We ought not automatically expect parity of outcome in respect of attaining higher education qualifications between 1975, when, for example, the baby boomer generations would have been graduating, and only 5% of Australians held a bachelor degree (ABS 2013), and, say, 2017, when 45% of women and 32% of men aged 25–29 years had attained a

[2] Cf the sociology of the third age of life, e.g. Gilleard and Higgs' (2007) idea of a generational field. However, even here a confusing conflation exists, with the authors ultimately discussing a 'generationally defined cultural field' – cultural fields being well in keeping with Bourdieu's original formulation of habitus.

Bachelor Degree (ABS 2017). Yet, such comparison is regularly made, often in the same breath as reporting on educational inequalities in access and attainment. In making this incommensurate comparison, education deflation is signified as a crude and level process, such that attention is dragged away from the fact that the 'educational system is a vehicle for privileges' (Bourdieu 1993: 99). It is these privileges, or potentially their erosion, that ought be front and centre of inquiry. To make generational comparisons of this ilk it is necessary instead to compare the middle class, elite and privileged of 1975 – i.e. the large swathe of the small number of bachelor degree holders – with their comparable contemporary counterparts. The educational returns to a first class honours degree for a white upper middle class man in 1975 are non-comparable with similar qualifications for an indigenous woman graduating from a 'new' university in the first decades of 21st Century. As Bourdieu (1993: 97-98) notes, 'a qualification is always worth what its holders are worth, a qualification that becomes more widespread is ipso facto devalued, but it loses still more of its value because it becomes accessible to people 'without social value''. Those misrecognised as imbued *with social value* will mostly likely retain the 'return' to educational credentials, much in the ways that the 5% did in 1975. To be able to test for a generational habitus or to even assess it as a mechanism demands a comparison of parts of the generation with a *comparable* individual habitus and stocks of capital, and an interrogation of how this enables such people to engage with the field of higher education.

Our point here is to ask what social generations adds for youth sociologists. We are using Bourdieu to make clear that sociology has both the tools to do the job of historicising young people's unequal experiences, and already does it very well. Suggestions to the counter rely on a misreading that situates youth sociology as ahistorical (France and Roberts 2015). Advocating the concept of the generational habitus helps to shore up the sociology of generations for the *way contemporary youth sociologists might need or want*, but ultimately feels a lot like the 'emperor's new clothes'. Habitus can stand alone without generation theory, but not vice versa. Similarly, generational theorists' calls for greater attention to the specific social and political conditions that affect a generation echoes other established sociological principles. These include Mills's (1959: 4) much heralded contention that 'No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, history and of their

intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey' (see also France and Roberts 2015). We suggest, then, that what is on offer from social generations advocates is part of what Atkinson (2011: 344), discussing boarder developments in Bourdieusian theorising, describes as the '…trap of fashioning concepts for the sake of neatness or synthesis rather than explanation and illumination of concrete processes'.

While our major focus here is to offer a sustained critique, we want to point towards some potential productive avenues for ongoing theorising in youth sociology, especially if it is to retain a 'generational bent'. In respect of better incorporating Bourdieu, a more productive option than generational habitus *might* be to consider *generational doxa*. For Bourdieu, doxa represents the taken-for-granted and accepted rules of any given *field*, and it seems that the contestations, continuations and/or contemporary navigations of these might offer a generations approach something more fruitful. This is but a tentative suggestion for future empirical testing, because if for no other reason, as above, the original conceptualisation of habitus already is sensitive to historicising. Nonetheless, investigating doxa, as it applies to specific fields, provides access to an account in a generalised sense of 'what is done'. It also provides a way to think about intra-generational difference, given that it at the same time offers 'the key means through which unity and unanimity, the sense that people are 'the same' as one another in some respect or 'belong' to the same entity or field, [and] is achieved *in the face of difference*' (Atkinson 2011: 340; our italics).

A further fundamental issue, where Bourdieu might be useful, regards the mechanism by which generations comes into focus. Some scholars suggest that is almost impossible to have a sociology of generations that is at least in part not imbued with crude generationalism (Purhonen 2016; see also France and Roberts 2015). But, borrowing from Bourdieu, Purhonen (2016: 110) suggests one way to avoid this conflation could be for generational theorists to first recognise that what they study is 'generations on paper'. Doing so would overt the 'quasi-magical power to name and to make-exist by virtue of naming' (Bourdieu, 1985: 729), and allow the focus to be turned instead to by whom and/ or how generations come to be named, represented *and divided*. Furthermore, through this process 'the very relationships

between the elites of a generation and other parts of the age cohorts should [and could] be taken as the object of careful analysis' (Purhonen 2016: 108).

Putting 'generational units' to use (or not) to understand inequality

In addition to our critique of generational habitus, we want to return briefly to the issue of generational units, and in particular how this concept has (not) featured in the empirical research findings of those who have most promoted it. This is perhaps most evident in much of the writing emerging from the Life Patterns study, a three decade research program that longitudinally explores responses of two generations of young Australians' to social change, and upon which Woodman and Wyn's (2015) theorising rests. We explore issues in the research sample below, but here speak to the empirical reporting and the absence of generational units as an analytical device to make sense of inequality (see above).

First, the reported findings offers much less attention to material inequality than the intention set out in the extracts above. This criticism does not extend to analyses of gender, which receives considerable attention as a unitary variable (see e.g. Wyn et al. 2017a). Still though, the work appears to lack the intersectional analysis vividly promised in the promoting of a method and theory that purports to unpack 'the complex intertwining of change and continuity in the production of inequality in the lives of contemporary young people' (Woodman and Wyn 2015a: 7). Indeed, mention of generational units is very much absent (including in work published at the time of our writing: see Woodman 2019; Chesters et al. 2019). Further, the lack of information on parental background and resources and the reduction of individual employment data to contract status (see Chesters et al 2018: 19), which is no indicator of income and socio-economic status, both ensure that any serious investigation of inequality and of the much heralded generational unit remains out of reach.

The recent Life Patterns research findings (non-academic) reports offer further problems here that, in our view, even if inadvertently, props up popular generationalism, despite its overt distancing from such positions. We recognise that research reports that emerge from the study are less likely to be grounded in theory; nonetheless, they have important theoretical and practical implications. The reports,

restricted here to those published after France and Roberts' (2015) critique of social generation theory, regularly and frequently use generation and cohort interchangeably, often in the same paragraph (see the three reports: Crofts et al 2016; Wyn et al 2017b; Chesters et al 2018). Shifting from one label to another in this way has long been criticised in sociology (see Kertzer 1983). Not only can a generation *not* be distinguished by age, researchers are tasked with disentangling the effects of age, life stage, cohort and period; but the Life Patterns project offers mostly conflation, often resulting in comparison of different points in the life stage, not generational differences. Moreover, the closest the Life Patterns research reports come to offering significant insight on *intra*-generational differences is the 2018 output, which states that 'It has not been our intention to present these two cohorts as homogenous and undifferentiated groups' (Chesters et al. 2018: 17). Here, analysis of different variables is offered within the two cohorts, with some attention given to difference in attitudes to 'the most important issues facing Australia' (e.g. environment, jobs and job security, housing, health) by gender, education, marital status and parent status. Additionally, attributions to qualitative comments include age, occupation and a broad geographic rural/urban indicator. There is still though, no mention of generational units, and the intersection of various dimensions of difference is not discussed. Further, despite noting that studies of young people's lives have 'a tendency to neglect the role of families in transitions, and thus, to underplay the increasing intergenerational support many young people require to thrive in material and emotional spheres' (Chester et al 2018: 16), the central role of the flow of resources between familial generations is given scant attention. While it emerges sparsely across the reports in relation to some qualitative interviews, it is not a sustained feature of the analysis.

While we are critical of how generational units have been used (or not) in youth sociology to understand inequality, there are various possibilities that offer more productive ways of working with the concept. These emerge especially from engaging with those proponents of social generations working outside of the sociology of youth, but who remain committed to understanding generational units as drivers in or representative of *social change*. For instance, Aboim and Vasconcelos (2014) note that a unit cannot be made to mean simply everything that is different, but that more attention can be given to 'the increasing opportunities for individuals to

participate in a large array of units, or rather, social circles, which are not necessarily generational units or even crystallized ones' (Aboim and Vasconcelos 2014: 173). Beyond this, as an empirical example, Roberts (2018) uses generational units as an analytic heuristic to show the differences in 'doing' masculinity among working-class men (see also Aboim 2010).

The 'global turn' in the study of generations

Our last substantive critique turns to the deployment of generation as a unifying device for theorising contemporary global youth. First articulated in Edmunds and Turner's (2005) work on the globalising possibilities of transnational media flows, the concept of social generations has been powerfully pushed forwards in arguments for a cosmopolitan sociology in the work of Beck (2008) and Beck and Beck Gernsheim (2009). One core element of the argument is that '…for the first time in history the rising generations of all countries, nations ethnic groups, religions and living in a *common present*' (Beck 2008: 206, italics in original), part of which is an extensive flexibilisation and heightened insecurity of economies. Beck argues that we must analyse 'a multiplicity of global generations that appear as a set of intertwined transnational generational constellations' (Beck and Beck Gernsheim 2009: 25). This also borrows from Mannheim, given that it points to the possibility of different impulses and responses within a global generation, but who are united and oriented to one another regardless of place or space. Woodman and Wyn (2015a: 159) also note that this 'enables us to recognise cross-border interactions between young people in different parts of the world and cultural links across different parts of the world'. Others in youth sociology talk in these globalising ways despite attempting to avoid a homogenising outlook as they raise questions about the impact of globablization. For instance, Ferreira (2018: 149), reflecting on the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and subsequent austerity measures in many countries around the world, states that young people 'find conditions to be fast and efficiently shared on a transnational scale, potentializing the creation of a global generational conscience'.

As above, explanations for what is creating this generational global identity focus on changing economic and political process over the last thirty years. For example, Andres and Wyn (2010) when explaining the similarities of results from the

longitudinal programmes in Canada and Australia locate a new form of generational experience that is evident in both countries as ‘caused’ by the interplay between the growth of the ‘risk society’ and political evolution of ‘neo-liberalism’. This ‘neoliberal zeitgeist’, as described by Bessant et al. (2017), is understood to have fundamentally reconstructed the work, educational and lifestyle opportunities and choices of the young. While the impact of neoliberalism and ‘risk’ is felt as stronger in the Anglo Saxon counties, these impacts are seen as creating a universal experience of what it means to be young that transcends national boundaries (Lloyd, 2005; Bessant et al 2017).

The problem of (who is included as part of the) ‘global’ generations

Claims of ‘global reach’ and the emergence of a cross-national generational identity and experiences should be read with caution. To begin, the major evidence base of these claims, especially within youth sociology, does not capture the diversity of young people’s experience and also over states what is happening. For example, Andres and Wyn (2010) undertook a cross-national analysis of young people’s lives who were born in the 1970s in Canada and Australia. While these two longitudinal studies (the Pathways on Life Project in Canada and the Life Patterns Study in Australia) were developed independently, they each claimed to show the ‘the making of a generation’. That this occurred across international boundaries was used as the evidence that neoliberal policies and practices, combined with the growth of the ‘risk society’ experienced in Australia and Canada, were creating a similar generational experience for young people.

Yet, of concern in this analysis is what is missing. While the authors acknowledge the ‘gaps’ in their data and analysis, significant limits exist that undermine the claim we are seeing generations in the making. First, while both studies are linked to different countries, the samples collected are local in nature. The Canadian study is based in the province of British Columbia and the Australian study in the state of Victoria. They are in fact *very regional* studies. Secondly, the samples of each study remains small and unrepresentative. For example, the Canadian study had a sample size of 733 for analysis while the Australian sample was 625. While these figures seem sufficient, substantial problems are present in

diversity across both samples. As Andres and Wyn (2010) state, their sample 'bias favours women' (p15) and participation from indigenous and 'same-sex' were too small to enable a valid analysis. Indeed, ethnicity in general is absent from the analysis.

We can look more carefully, too, at the Australian Life Patterns study, which has grown in influence in terms of showing generations in the making. It now comprises of two cohorts, those who left secondary school in 1991 and those who left secondary school in 2006. The two groups are described in various reports as roughly equating respectively to the popular terms Generation X and Generation Y (see Crofts et al. 2016; Wyn et al. 2017b; Chesters et al. 2018). This has allowed the researchers to compare 'two generations'. Although rather than reflecting the diversity of generations, the sample is comprised of two cohorts that are over 70% Bachelor degree or above educated, and both nearly 70% female. The enormous disproportionately highly educated profile leaves the study open to the same critiques that were targeted at Mannheim regarding only focusing on a relative few to explain generational change (see Aboim and Vasconcelos 2014).

Of course capturing diversity in longitudinal studies is always methodologically challenging. Getting nationally representative samples, and being able to follow young people after formal schooling and ensuring representation is always hard to manage and will inevitably lead to attrition and a lack of representativeness. But given such studies are very localised in their focus within their countries of origin, the claim that such research gives a 'voice' or perspective to 'generations' seems a flagrant over stretch. What they do show is a particular experience of a section of young people in Australia and Canada as they progress through the life course. How this equates to the experiences beyond their geographical boundaries or the particular social groups that are not represented remains difficult to claim.

'Global generations' and the Global South

Again putting aside this critique of ow local rather than nationally representative those samples are, Philipps alerts us to how the dominance of sociological knowledge in the Global North constructs our understanding of youth around concepts embedded in a few localised regions and states:

> ‘All talk about today’s ‘global youth’ notwithstanding, data on young people are still mostly collected and evaluated in the Global North, and youth studies concepts, theories, and approaches, while often treated as universally valid, are in fact locally specific, i.e., rooted in European, North American, and Australian historical experiences and conceptualizations of youth’ (Philipps, 2018: 4)

What tends to be ignored or unrecognised is that the Global North accounts for around 10% of the global youth population (Population Reference Bureau, 2017). As Cooper et al. (2019) suggest, serious questions need to be asked about the transferability and usefulness of Northern theories to understand the lives of young people in Africa, Latin America and developing countries in Asia. Philipps (2018) further suggests that when social science focuses it ‘gaze’ on the Global South it tends to equate ‘African youth’ with a whole continent, giving limited attention to diversity and difference across and within Africa’s 54 countries. A similar issue also exists in countries normally defined as belonging to the Global North that have been colonised (i.e. Australia, New Zealand and Canada). In these contexts, indigenous populations are seen in much of the literature and data analysis processes as homogenous. Yet, major differences exist that structure the life experiences and life worlds of these ethnic groups. It other words, research often fails to recognise the nuanced ways that the ‘local’ operates within the lives of these social groups. For example, in Aotearoa New Zealand over 100 Māori iwi (local tribes) exist across New Zealand. While there are important similarities (e.g. in language) there are major historical and cultural differences. To talk of ‘Māori youth’ without recognising this diversity within Aotearoa, is to ignore the histories and cultural norms that can and do operate in their everyday lives (Author X). Mannheim’s pre-condition that generations had to be born within the same social, historical region and share common cultural identity does not work in this context. It fails to understand how the notion of generation works in Māori culture, where *whakapapa* (genealogy), *tikanga* (customs and protocols) and *whanaungatanga* (relationships) are of great importance. At the heart of the Māori life world is a belief in *intergenerational* relations as both a source of culture, knowledge and understanding of the past the present and the future and also as a mechanism of maintaining such knowledge for future generations. The idea that youth may be disconnected from this, and ‘form’ a

particular generational identity that is not connected to their life worlds ignores what it means to be Māori. Further, to suggest that they share a 'common cultural identity' with the dominant Pākehā New Zealanders (those related to the first white settlers and colonises) is to ignore colonial history and its impact today on Māori youth. Being colonised saw Māori culture virtually destroyed and given very little recognition in the official 'way of life' in Aotearoa New Zealand (Smith, 1999). Philipps (2018) raises similar questions about the usefulness of the concept of generation when looking at the urban protests of groups of African youth in Guinea and Uganda, noting that 'similar events locally meant very different things because youth and generational change were conceived differently in their respective contexts.' (Philipps, 2018:14)

This raises major challenges to the idea of a 'common cultural' understanding of what it means to be a generation. It requires any analysis to give greater attention to recognising differences rather than similarities. That said, we, like Philipps (2018), acknowledges that young people across the globe face a different world to those who have gone before. Over the past two decades, a rising numbers of globalized events have impacted on the young; the expansion of the internet, the Global Financial Crisis, the rise of transnational movement of people and the growing anxieties over climate change. These events clearly create a sense of connectedness between young people across national borders. Yet, such developments challenge Mannheim's idea of local social and historical units as a useful way to study a generation, suggesting that in fact transnational developments may be more important in helping form a generational connection. However, Philipps (2018) warns us that we should be, '…wary of the notion of globalization as homogenization' or that the 'increased intercultural contact will imply some form of cultural identity' or 'cultural levelling level'' of young people's experiences. (Philipps, 2018:3). As he goes on to write:

> Young people come into contact anew not only with their own region's history, but with entangled histories whose origins are scattered across the globe. To different degrees and through different means, they harness and hybridize a diversity of cultural inventories to navigate a world that simultaneously becomes more

> interconnected and less capable of silencing long-standing inequities (Philipps, 2018:3)

This idea is further developed by Thorpe and Inglis (2019), who illustrate how research in the Global South illuminates the limitations of a 'generational consciousness'. In much theorising about generations, the work of Turner and Edwards (2005) is significant. They argued that major events, such as attack on the Twin Towers in New York (9/11), will have created a common experience or 'shared consciousness' amongst young people at that historical moment that helps them form a sense of being a part of a generation. Concerns over this idea were raised by France and Roberts (2015) in their suggestion that there is little evidence that young people identify with a 'generational consciousness', given that Turner and Edwards assessed generational differences and similarities more through an intergenerational lens. Thorpe and Inglis (2019) further suggest that the idea of global events such as 9/11 are not always global in their impact:

> 'Just because 9/11 is known about by people of the same age cohort in, for example, Buenos Aires and Jakarta, there is presumably nothing intrinsic to that event or its diverse forms of mediation which must necessarily, or even possibly, create a shared sense of generational membership among such people. (p50)

In such light, Turner and Edmunds' claims seem questionable. Indeed, Thorpe and Inglis (2019) suggest that rather than ideas of a global generational identity existing objectively, it is at the subjective level where differences are really identifiable. The example they use is the work of Artini et al (2010), who looked at the relationship between the upwardly mobile, well-educated Indonesian cruise ship workers and the less well-educated working and lower middle class young white Australian holiday-makers who go on such cruises. Clearly, these two groups have similarities such as both being major uses of digital media, they wear similar branded clothes and they both work in precarious forms of employment. But stark differences result from young Indonesian workers being located in the Global South and the young Australians being from the Global North. As Thorpe and Inglis (2019: 55) consider, '…are these shared elements sufficiently strong or similar enough - beyond

superficial resemblances - for us really to talk of both groups as part of the same generation? Saying that they are members of different generational units of one generation does not really answer that question. It works to obfuscate the question.'

Conclusion

While recognising the commitment of social generation advocates to understanding the relationship between social change and social inequality, in this article we have raised substantial concerns about the empirical and theoretical weaknesses that exist within the approach. Complementing and advancing critical scholarship on social change, our concern is to advocate for a theoretically robust sociology of youth that can properly tackle questions pertaining to contemporary intergenerational relations and tensions, and issues of power an inequality.

Our critique has suggested that theorists of social generation in youth sociology do not turn theoretical claims into reality when analysing young people's lives. While social generation advocates actively distance from ideas that generations are defined by birth dates, their research often reduces analysis to cohorts that are not representative of national or international youth demographics. We also suggested that its failure to turn concepts such as 'generational units' into theoretical modelling is problematic. Similarly, the notion of 'a 'generational habitus' does not address the question of inequality, and, as we have argued is theoretically incoherent, at odds with Bourdieu's insistence on the importance of locating habitus in fields and in relationship to capitals, and remaining blind to the *triple historicisation* already built into Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus. This leaves it a redundant concept. Nonetheless, if theoretical innovation is required for thinking through generational issues, we have suggested that *generational doxa* might be an avenue for empirical investigation and conceptual development. Similarly, rather than a wholesale abandonment of 'generational units', we have pointed to the work of Portuguese scholars that lays the foundation for thinking productively about how young people traverse different generational units.

Finally, we have raised questions about the 'global reach' of generations suggesting that the claims made lack substance and demand caution. While there has clearly been significant social change, suggesting that this creates a global

sense of generational identity or consciousness fails to recognise the importance of the local context or of the diversity of experience within diverse groups. If social generation theory is going to be a valuable tool for analysing the experience of young people and for offering meaningful insights into questions of generational conflict, it must be made clear how the core theoretical tools give us greater insight. Further, it must also explain the experience of the other 90% of global youth population living in the global south.

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