

## CHAPTER 2

# Generations, Cohorts, and Social Change

DUANE F. ALWIN  
RYAN J. MCCAMMON

The transformations that occur via a *succession of cohorts* cannot, for basic demographic reasons, be equated to the product of a *procession of "generations."* ... this brute fact is a profound key to the understanding of social continuity and social change. Indeed, a characteristically human type of society might well be impossible were the demography of the species structured differently. (Otis Dudley Duncan, 1966, p. 59)

## INTRODUCTION

Social philosophers from Auguste Comte to David Hume considered the fundamental linkage between the biological succession of generations and change in the nature of society. As early as 1835, the statistician Adolphe Quetelet wrote about the importance of taking *year of birth* into account when examining human development (see Becker, 1992, p. 19). In the 1920s, the German sociologist Karl Mannheim wrote a highly cited treatise entitled "The Problem of Generations," arguing that having shared the same formative experiences contributes to a unique world view or frame of reference that can be a powerful force in people's lives. In Mannheim's words (1952, p. 298): "Even if the rest of one's life consisted of one long process of negation and destruction of the natural world view acquired in youth, the determining

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DUANE F. ALWIN • Department of Sociology and Population Research Institute, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania 16802. RYAN J. MCCAMMON • University of Michigan Survey Research Center, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1382.

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influence of these early impressions would still be predominant.” Similarly, the Spanish sociologist José Ortega y Gasset wrote that generation “is the most important conception in history” (1933, p. 15) arguing that each generation has a special mission even if it goes unachieved (see Kertzer, 1983, p. 128).

In the modern era of social science, a similar sort of generational reasoning has been widely employed in empirical studies aimed at documenting how societies change. For example, in the 1950s Samuel Stouffer found that popular support for the toleration of Communists, atheists, and socialists followed generational lines, with more recent generations being significantly more tolerant than their elders. He argued that this was due in part to their higher levels of education, which fostered openness to “freedom of speech” and the exchange of ideas (Stouffer, 1955). In the 1970s, Ronald Inglehart found that post-World War II generations in Western Europe sought freedom and self-expression, in contrast to the pre-War generations’ concern for economic security and political order (Inglehart, 1977, 1986, 1990). He argued from a Maslowian “hierarchy of needs” perspective that more recent generations had the luxury of economic prosperity that could not be taken for granted by their elders who had to focus on a more basic set of needs in an earlier time. More recently, Robert Putnam (2000) argued in his popular book *Bowling Alone* that civic engagement has declined, not because individual Americans have become less civic-minded, but mostly because earlier-born, engaged Americans have died off and been replaced by younger, more alienated ones, who are by and large less tied to traditional institutions, such as the church, the lodge, the bridge club, and the bowling league.

According to this theoretical perspective, how people think about the social world around them may depend as much on what was happening in the world *at the time they were growing up* as it does on what is happening in the present. The reference to this as a “generational” phenomenon is probably derived from the presumption that historically based influences shaped the development of all or most people growing up at a particular time and that there is nearly always a shared cultural identity that sets them apart from the parental generation. The idea of distinctive generations is, however, a complex one whose existence and effects are not easily documented. One of the persistent questions in research on social change upon which we focus considerable attention in this chapter is whether the unique formative experiences of different generations become distinctively imprinted on their world views making them distinct in their orientations and identities; or whatever the nature of their formative experiences, do people nevertheless adapt to change, remaining evanescent in their dispositions, identities, and beliefs throughout their lives? Unique historical events that happen during youth are no doubt powerful. Certainly, some eras and social movements (e.g., the Women’s movement, or the Civil Rights Era) or the emergence of some new ideologies (e.g., Roosevelt’s New Deal of the 1930s, or the environmental movement of the 1970s) provide distinctive experiences for youth during particular times. As Norman Ryder put it “the potential for change is concentrated in the cohorts of young adults who are old enough to participate directly in the movements impelled by change, but not old enough to have become committed to an occupation, a residence, a family of procreation or a way of life” (Ryder, 1965, p. 848).

In this chapter we focus not only on the potential of the concept of *generations* to reveal how societies change, but also on some of the major problems with trying to make sense of the social world in this way. In order to do so we first distinguish the concept from other related concepts, and in our next section (Section II) we review the multiple meanings of the concept of generation. We focus on how it is different from and related to other concepts used in the analysis of social change. Following this initial effort to reduce what we consider to be a prevalent terminological confusion in the area, we examine in detail the two major ways in

which the concept of *generation* is employed in contemporary social science: first referring to a position in the natural line of descent within families (Section III) and second the *historical timing of birth* (Sections IV and V). Given the prominence of theories of *cohort replacement* (as distinct from generational replacement) in the study of social change, we review the essential assumptions made by the theoretical framework and discuss some of the difficulties involved in employing the theory in life course research (Section VI). We examine the evidence for the theory and discuss several empirical examples from recent research to illustrate the prospects and pitfalls of the proposed conceptual apparatus. We end the essay with a brief consideration of a third meaning of the term *generation* (based on the theories of Mannheim and Ortega y Gasset) which is distinct from the others, but which has the unrealized potential to help understand the origins of social change. This concept of *generation* (referred to in what follows with a capital “G” or *Generations*), while related to other uses of the term, is quite distinct, referring to historical phenomena that are not as easily located and quantified as are cohorts and cohort effects. Still, we argue that such phenomena may have as much, if not more, potential for understanding the origins and nature of social change. Generations, in this sense may be more a matter of quality than of degree, and their temporal boundaries may not be as easily identified as is sometimes assumed. We conclude the essay with a summary of the territory covered, along with a call for more research on generations that will improve their usefulness as a tool in the study of life course processes.

## GENERATIONS AND COHORTS—SOME DEFINITIONS

One of the first difficulties we encounter in studying the phenomenon of generations is with the term “generation” itself. This is because the concept of *generation* has more than one legitimate meaning and this multiplicity of meanings can produce confusion. It is first and foremost a kinship term, referring to relationships between individuals who have a common ancestor. As a term denoting kinship relations, a generation consists of a single stage or degree in the natural line of descent. Thus, within a given family, generations are very clearly defined, and while *generational replacement* is more or less a biological inevitability *within families* (assuming continuous life cycle processes), the replacement of generations in this sense does not correspond in any neat manner to the historical process at the macrosocial level because of individual differences in fertility (i.e., parents do not all replace themselves at the same rate) and the fact that the temporal gap between generations is variable across families.

The term *generation* is also frequently used, as we ourselves have used it in the introductory paragraphs, to refer to the people born at about the same time and who therefore experience historical events at the same times in their lives. This meaning of the term was popularized by Mannheim’s classic treatise on “generations” in which he used the term to refer to the unique influences of historical location on the development of the shared meaning of events and experiences of youth. As we discuss below, many sociologists understandably confuse this meaning of the concept of “generation” with the concept of “cohort”, since they share a historical referent. We hope our discussion will reduce the confusion rather than add to it.

The fact that there are at least two accepted meanings of the concept of generation has been a source of confusion, and various authors have tried to resolve the seeming incompatibility of these meanings. Indeed, some have argued that Mannheim, Ortega y Gasset and their followers have usurped what may be thought of as principally a kinship term to inappropriately refer to groups of people who share a distinctive culture and/or a self-conscious identity



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