

Intergenerational Relationships: Theory and Method

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[Note this is a talk and it has not been polished to publication standard]

Intergenerational relationships, the chains of relationships between parents and children, are potentially a strong source of data about social change since they are by definition data across generations –and can perhaps provide insight into the intersections of history and biography. I don't want to spend time here further expounding the difference between biographical time, generational time, and historical time. A number of writers of historical and sociological work have done that at length - Tamara Hareven, Daniel Bertaux, Paul Thompson.

Intergenerational relationships are sometimes treated as a barometer of social change. Events that seem to express the willingness of adults to bring up and cherish a new generation or to care for their elders are seized on as an indication of societal well being. For example, the fact that many elderly people died alone in the heat of Paris last summer or very low fertility rates and increased childlessness are treated as warning signs of societal health. But instead of a barometer, intergenerational relationships can also be treated as if they are the drivers of social change. This happens when parents are blamed for social problems such as crime, drug or alcohol abuse. The issue of when to see intergenerational relationships as a site of reaction to wider social change or a key site initiating change - action rather than reactions - is both a matter of theoretical taste – and my taste is to acknowledge the possibility of both - and an empirical question that will give different answers at different times and places.

Few social scientists would locate intergenerational transmission as the sole or necessarily even a key driver of social change. Even theorist drawing on the insights of Freudian psychology with its emphasis on emotional power of parent-child relationships to profoundly shape our psyche in the first few years of life seek to address accusations of ahistoricism and to acknowledge the effect of wider social context. Much of recent social theory emphasises the consequential power over everyday lives of sites of action and social actors that are well beyond personal relationships – often implicating global networks and flows in such consequential features of local context as the often still gendered opportunities for making a living, the welfare regimes put in place by the state and the dominant messages of public discourse. At the same time, there are theorists and researchers making fresh claims that key sites of resistance, resilience and creativity reside in personal life. But even in these accounts, in which personal relationships are key sites of action as well as reaction, inter-generational relationships are not the only story but stand alongside other personal relationships¹.

¹ For example, 'The constitution of so-called complex families in which more and more children are not raised by their procreative fathers leads us to have a closer look at the practical and symbolic

No social theorist could argue that intergenerational relationships play absolutely no part in social change. Almost no-one would contest the view that the familial intergenerational relationships – relationships up and down the generations between mother or father figures and son or daughter figures- play key roles in the psychological wellbeing and the social connectedness of individuals and therefore the basic human and social capital that makes a society possible. When people write biographies, mother and father figures are typically acknowledged as significant in the making of selves, even if only by being the people that the author was determined not to become. The key role of parents in socialisation – fitting people to their social world - is taken for granted in much social theory. There are bodies of research that try to evidence how young children learn from their parents. It is typically argued that tacit knowledge and unconscious dispositions are learned as well as language, a mother tongue, and more explicitly communicated skills and ideas. Theoretically a parenting generation has the possibility of playing a major part in social change by simultaneously and calibrated doing their parenting differently from they way they were parented by the previous generation. However, parents are not a homogenous group with a shared world view. Changes in parenting styles in turn have to be understood in their wider social context. Analysts trying to explain actual changes in the behaviour of mothers and fathers have often pointed to the impact of social and economic change elsewhere. Functionalist theory portrayed mothering and fathering as evolving in predominantly adaptive fashion into performing their specialist tasks to fit their more complex, specialised and inter-dependent social world. Contemporary theorists who are more critical of social inequalities and gender divisions and troubled by their persistence, describe how mothers and fathers try to do their best for their children from various gendered socio-economic positions.

I suggest that as researchers, who want to contribute to wider debates about the well being of society and the direction of social change, it is necessary to take a provisional position and keep an open mind on the range of possible parts that intergenerational relationships play in social change. This in turn means sensitivity to the intersections of biographical, historical and generational change. I want to leave the theoretical questions and shift to a brief discussion of types of data with which to examine intergenerational relationships and social change.

Types of data suited to understanding intergenerational transmission and social change

- Cross sectional data- individuals sampled across a population at one time report on aspects of intergenerational relationships –this survey is replicated with an equivalent (but not the same) population at intervals over time - say every year over suitably long periods of time.
- Individual or linked life histories e.g. different generations in the same family, for example the work of Julia Brannen and colleagues, in the UK, and of Jean Kellerhals, Cristina Ferreira and David Perrenoud in France.

outlines of this intergenerational relation. This questioning points to the necessity to take conjugal identity and the dynamics of intergenerational relations into account in their reciprocal relations.’ (Bawins-Legros, 2002)

- Repeated intense ethnographies of particular communities and places looking at child-parent-grandparent relationships in a particular place in two different time periods. This has effectively been done in a number of pieces of British work going back to replicate intense ‘community studies’.
- Longitudinal studies of intergenerational relationships following generationally linked individuals over time - quantitative and/or qualitative. An example of the former is longitudinal households surveys which include examination of generational relationships within the household over time and hear from more than one generation BHPS EHPS. An example of a qualitative longitudinal study which includes information about intergenerational relationships is the repeat in-depth interviews over time, or ‘walking alongside’ of Janet Holland et al.

I want to use the example of two different types of research to discuss the interplay of theory and method in how authors invoke or demonstrate intersections between biographical, historical and generational time in their analysis.

- V. Bengtson, T. Biblarz and R. Roberts *How Families Still Matter: A Longitudinal Study of Youth in Two Generations* CUP 2002
- J. Brannen, P. Moss & A. Mooney *Working and Caring in the Twentieth Century: Change and Continuity in four-generation families* Palgrave 2004

Both are paying attention to the issue of social change and more specifically the extent to which younger generations are more individualistic and less likely to contribute to social cohesion, although this is more directly addressed in Bengtson than Brannen. In the first example, North American researchers have used a large longitudinal study to demonstrate continuity in processes of socialization and inter-generational transmission despite new family forms (Bengtson et al, 2002) The other is Julia Brannen’s analysis of intergenerational transmission in four generation families (2004, 2006). The choice is not arbitrary. These are both substantial pieces of research that have resulted in both interesting findings and a sufficiently detailed set of writings about its theoretical underpinnings and methodology to allow the reader to critically engage with their work.

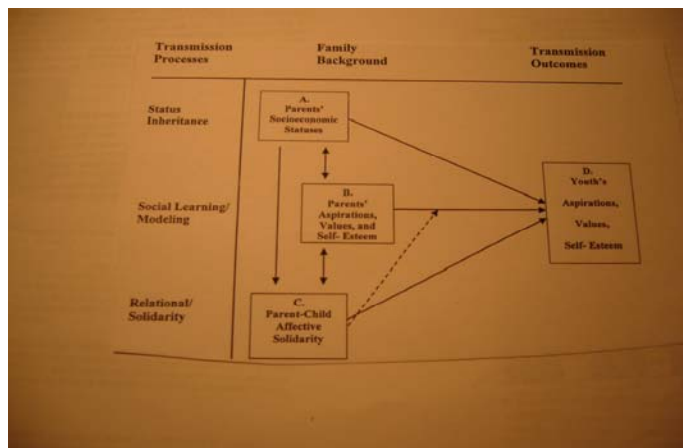
Bengtson et al’s ‘Longitudinal Study of Generations’ LSOG began in 1970-71 when individuals were recruited from 349 families with at least three generations seeking data from grandparents, parents and grandchildren over aged 16. A second survey took place in 1985 and thereafter there were surveys every three years. The book reports on six– the last being in 1997. As great-grandchildren reached the age of 16 they were also included. They gathered attitude data from different generations and information about their interrelationships. This was combined with ‘macro level economic data about educational and occupational opportunities’. The book I am drawing on, in particular compares the influence of parents on young adults born in the 1970s and 1980s (whom the authors refer to as Generation X) with family influences on their parents born in the 1940s and 1950s (whom the authors refer to as the Baby Boomers), looking at experience of divorce (comparing sons and daughters of ‘in-tact’ families and of divorced parents) and differences in socio-economic status as potentially key biographical differences within as well as across generations.

Bengtson et al. set out two alternative hypotheses of what is happening in intergenerational relationships. The first is ‘the decline thesis’ that intergenerational

transmission is weakening because parent-child relationships are indeed a barometer of the decline in the family. The second is an ‘adaptive theory’ which sees parent-child relationships as a source of adaptation and resilience. The possibility of parents effecting positive social change is not one of the options.

They lay out a theoretical map of intergenerational transmission and it seems that its conception is both informed by their data and tested against their data. (See figure 1) This starts with the widely accepted view that the social or socio-economic status of parents shapes their children’s lives. They note that parents’ socio-economic *status*, (their preferred term, although it is being used in much the same way as some British authors continue to use social class), determines particular socio-economic contexts in which children are situated. Socio-economic contexts in turn structure the resources, opportunities and constraints of children’s worlds including the family income and wealth they have access to, their housing, material resources, residential location, the networks of relationships which children can access through their parents and the potential friends, educational and social opportunities their social and geographical location makes possible. Parental status also shapes how parents invest in their children’s human, social and cultural capital and it shapes the particular values, aspirations and self-beliefs parents transmit to their children. The socio-economic status of parents is a partial predictor of what type of aspirations, values and self-images they will hold and seek to foster in their children.

Figure 1
Bengtson, Biblarz and Robertson (2002, p30)



Bengtson and colleagues argue however that parents’ own achievement orientation are not wholly determined by their socio-economic status but are also reflect their ‘individuality’. While they believe that children generally learn them from their parents and that this learning is shaped by parent’s socio-economic status, they also have to explain the empirical finding that not all children with parents from the same social status have the same achievement values. Their data has led them to conclude that about half of what is learned by children from their parents by way of achievement values is the result of parents ‘individuality’ rather than the influence of their socio-economic status. An example they give is of a high status parent with low self esteem having a different impact on children than the more typical high status parent who also has high self esteem. Moreover the learning process is also

influenced by gender and the quality of the parent child relationship. They draw on previous research to indicate that fathers are likely to have more influence on sons and mothers on daughters as the social emphasis on gender difference encourage children to seek gender-appropriate attitudes and behaviour. 'Affective solidarity' – emotional support, attachment, communication and respect – is seen as also playing 'a key role in shaping intergenerational transmissions processes and outcomes' (Bengtson et al, 2002, 28). They argue that affective solidarity directly influences children's psychological well-being and their willingness to embrace collectivist rather than individualist values. At the same time, they suggest that socio-economic contexts will modify affective solidarity between parents and children, for example by exposing them to stresses and strains which work against close relationships.

The questions which Bengtson et al seek to answer with their data include whether or not there has been a weakening in parents' influence over their children and whether increase incidence of divorce and mother's employment has produced more individualistic (versus collectivist) and materialist (versus humanist) children. One of the ways they chose to measure change and parental influence is by looking at the 'achievement orientation' of successive child generations. Achievement orientation is defined as 'a constellation of educational and career aspirations, prosocial values, and self-esteem' (2002, 3)². It is not made explicit in their account but one of the attractions of a focus on 'achievement orientation' 'individualism' and 'materialism' is methodologically driven. It is possible to build scales measuring 'achievement orientation', 'individualism' and 'materialism' through a series of question items that are taken as indicators.

They find that their theoretical model works as well for generation X as the baby boomers. Their conclusions stress that there is little evidence of the decline thesis: 'Our data indicate that Generation Xers – the first generation of youth to have experienced the fallout of the family upheaval that began in the 1960s, and to have come of age under the "culture for individualism" in the 1980s and early 1990s – appears to be more ambitious, more self-confident, and less individualistic than their parents at the same age. Rather than being "a generation at risk," they seem on track to surpass their parents' (2002, 139). But at the same time they note that this general trend masks differences between children who have experienced their parents' divorce and those who have grown up with the same two parents remaining together and complex gender differences that they cannot fully explain. Basically they suggest that the differences between generation X and the baby boomers would have been even more dramatic if it were not for rising divorce and that divorce somewhat dampens the historical advantages of being brought up by better educated parents in smaller families that the generation Xers have over the baby boomers. The experience of divorce did cause some reduction of children's educational and occupational aspirations³. It also had some gender-specific effects. 'Sons of divorce were more individualistic and materialistic than other sons, daughters of divorce were no more individualistic and were more humanistic than other daughters.'

² Note they are while educational and career aspirations and self-esteem can be read as about fairly individualistic achievement values, in including prosocial values in their definition, they explain that they are not looking to measure individualism by focusing on achievement values but 'value orientations that promote social relations and the creation of shared values'. Their focus is on the transmission of social integration or social harmony.

³ At the same time the authors distance themselves from the study of Wallerstein et al (2000) that claims divorce has very negative effects.

Parents are not less influential in the sense of less likely to communicate a sense of achievement orientation and continue to pass on values but again this was weaker for children who had experienced divorce than those who had not.

The significance of the quality of relationship between fathers and children seems to have declined between the two generations while the quality of mother-child relationships is the main predictor and an even stronger predictor of self-esteem.

To explain their findings they need to draw on the work of other researchers both on families and on aspects of wider social change. They end by postulating three propositions which require further research

1. Families are adapting by expanding support across generations. There is increasing interdependence and exchange across several generations ...enhancing the well-being of children

However, it is not clear whether the stress on inter-generational relationships is partly an artefact of the data. It could equally well be argued from research such as Karen Hansen's that some families are expanding their support by use of non-familial members such as friends, siblings and neighbours.

2. Today's non-divorced, two parent families are more successful than their counterparts a generation ago.

3. Maternal investment in children has not declined over time.

Brannen et al have conducted a much smaller scale study of 71 four generational families using qualitative biographical interviews rather than a structured questionnaire. Researchers in France have also conducted something like the type of work conducted by Brannen with qualitative interviews from multiple generations within the same family or lineage but the work that is written up in English is not sufficiently detailed to allow this kind of engagement, for example, no data are actually presented to illustrate the claims that are made about patterns of intergenerational transmission.⁴

⁴ Kellerhals et al. (2002) conducted qualitative interviews with 75 individuals (55 female and 20 male) from 25 families in Geneva. In each family representatives of three successive generations were interviewed. Interviews lasted on average two hours each. They are interested in the modes by which families transmit identity and discuss the ways in which families create family cultures. These include laying down 'normative reference marks' and developing collective practices that mobilise normative reference marks. They claim is made to have discovered six systems of transmitting identity in their data, using different variations of elements of family cultures. The reader is asked to take all of this on trust as no data are ever presented in the article. They also claim a shift over time away from systems that align family cultures with external institutions such as family businesses, religious faith or political commitment and towards more privatised family cultures and a range of

The families participating in Brannen's study were found by first recruiting the grandmother as the key 'kin keeper'. Divorced grandparents were explicitly excluded from the study. This is also a study of contrasting generations living in very different historical times – the great grand parents born between 1911 and 1921, grandparent generations were typically born between 1940-48 and parents born between 1965-1975.

Brannen is interested in 'the transfer of material and care resources across the life course and across historical generations' Her theoretical tools are not as formally laid out as that of Bengtson but the reader is referred to the body of work by Pierre Bourdieu. The theoretical issues to which Brannen particularly attends include the relationships between practice and belief and the impact of changing resources (across the life-course, generations and historical time) on practices and beliefs. This is attended to empirically by looking at the relationship between practices of giving and receiving between generations and beliefs about giving, independence, dependence, and the resource context in which the practices and beliefs occur. She seeks to establish empirically who has vested interests in particular resources and what their sense of entitlement is and their comfort with being a giver and receiver.

Over generations practices of giving can create an ethos, a particular family culture of giving and receiving.

'It is the contention here that, over time, and successive family generations, practices of providing intergenerational support may constitute cultures which characterize how family members think about giving and receiving.' In other words, she argues as others have also argued that actions and beliefs tend to become aligned over time. Social change occurs because historical conditions can affect the availability of resources for different cohorts and/or change the cultures of giving and receiving. Just as Bengtson's baby boomers experienced greater educational opportunities and affluence than their parents, so it was for the post war generation of grandparents in Brannen's sample: 'increases in property ownership, rising property prices, and increased earnings and savings. These are likely to be reflected in a growth in gift giving during people's lifetimes as well as in legacies left to kin on death' (2006, 137) Grandparents of this historical generation were less likely to need financial support and at the same time their children had children young enough for them to be in demand as helpers in caring for grandchildren when they themselves did not yet need care. The balances between needs and resources between generations will shift for subsequent generation. Brannen also argues the beliefs about giving and receiving shift over the life course with capacities and needs to be givers and receivers. For example, in older age as people move from being givers to receivers of care, this may modify their willingness to express an obligation to care as this becomes the

systems associated with them, but particularly what they call the 'the maieutic logic'. This is a system of intergenerational transmission that is like a Socratic dialogue between an adult and a child or young person in that it seeks to enable the child or young person to reach their own potential. The family cultures emphasises the individual rather than the family. While reference is made at the beginning of the article to recruiting families from different socio-economic contexts, when findings are presented they seem to be stripped of any wider context. No doubt more is published in French and this is where I have to admit my own limitations.

obligations of others to care for them and may encourage an endorsement of a culture of personal independence.

Brannen describes some situations of disjuncture between generation as a result of the combination of different positions in the life course and different historical circumstances of different generations. For example, the generation with young children are typically focused on caring for their children and their preoccupations as well as historical circumstances may make them take the care and assistance they receive from their parents as a normal extension of their parenting/grandparenting role. The life course stage and history of their parents, however, may result in them seeing the assistance they give to their parenting children as going beyond what should be expected and therefore something for which their children should be much more grateful.

Within her data she describes different cultures of giving and receiving and different degrees of family continuity across generations within these cultures. The Brand family are used to illustrate continuity in solidaristic pattern in which the expressed belief was that 'families ought to provide for their own' and that this was not 'dependency' but 'what families do' (2006, 141). Three generations of men in this family worked in a family business and therefore experienced continuity of occupation and were bound together through their work. However their expressed ethos was of offering resources 'without calculation or expectation of return and justified in terms of love. Intergenerational support was given not only in response to need; beliefs in family mutuality were embedded in social relationships and in the material interests of the family' (2006, 143)

The Samuels family are used to describe a different pattern of discontinuity and less solidarity. In this family, the middle generation has been upwardly mobile through educational opportunities - a result of grant supported university places - and also residentially mobile and no longer live near the older generation. The middle generation stressed a culture of independence from family rather than mutuality. Brannen suggests that this historically specific biographical experience of state support has helped shape expectations of independence from the family. Richard Samuels from the middle generation only reluctantly supported his own son financially when he was at university and did so on the understanding that he had to repay the money. He also argued that his sisters should not feel obligated to care for their mother and that 'I don't think I would want my children to feel they had to look after me' (2006, 144). Brannen goes on to show that his son Stephen who is now himself a parent expects much less of the state than his father did, having had less, albeit, in continuity with the values of his father, Richard, he remains committed to free education and a national health service. Stephen puts more stress on 'individual responsibility' an attitude which 'accorded very much with the ideas of the 'enabling state' in vogue in Britain in the late 1990s... the state should be there for those unable to support themselves' (Brannen, 2006, 147) and is consistent with a pervasive 21st century discourses emphasising individual choice.

Conclusion

Both pieces of empirical research that I have focused on provide engaging accounts that use intergenerational relationships to address issues of social change. Bengtson et al. and Brannen et al. both have rich data sets although very different data, the former

a large set of 'variables' and the latter more discursive interview material. It is no accident that more structured data are associated with more structured theory, which can be represented diagrammatically in lines and boxes. The interview data that Brannen and her colleagues have means that voices necessarily come through more clearly in Brannen's account. In telling the story of their data, both have to go beyond the data set itself to talk about the wider social contexts in which their respondents are embedded.

While Bengtson et. al. can make more focused comparative statements than Brannen et al., they are not necessarily making any stronger claims about laying bare the process of how intergenerational transmission works in the context of social change. They have to admit to bafflement concerning some aspects of the data and their work gives rise to many new questions. Both sets of authors make statements about interrelationships between the economic and cultural context in which parents and children operate and the content of intergenerational transmission. Brannen uses here detailed case studies to suggest theoretical generalisation. For example, the detailed case of the Brand family, showing that the economic context of a three generation family business, a relatively unusual circumstance within the UK, supports a particular solidaristic culture across generations, demonstrates the possibility of family cultures that are relatively deaf to the stock of more individualistic discourses in wide circulation. The account of the different generations of the Samuels demonstrates both the responsiveness of personal brands of individuals to wider economic and cultural contexts and the fact that some inflections of individualistic discourse continue to fit comfortably with a strong sense of responsibility to other family members across generations. However, despite enabling us to hear more of the voices of the participants in the research, it is not clear how far Brannen and her colleagues would go towards describing the research participants as enactors of rather than adaptors to social change.

While both pieces of empirical research make very significant contributions in helping us think through biographical, historical and generational change, I would like both to have gone further in considering more directly the extent to which intergenerational transmission enacts as well as adapts to social change. Moreover, in this task, I would also have liked them to have both to have been able to draw on each other's data or rather its equivalent for their national context.

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