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Generations, age and life course: Towards an integral social policy framework of analysis

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Abstract

This article examines how the relationship between generational processes and social policy has been studied. It identifies three main approaches: social policy's targeting of different age groups, social policy's role in shaping the life course, and the generational contract that leads social policy to recognise the claims of particular generations. Each of these perspectives has strengths and weaknesses but, if the goal is to understand how the welfare state embodies generational assumptions and affects the distribution of public and private resources and responsibilities across population sectors, then these perspectives need to be better integrated analytically. The article suggests two clarifications towards that end. The first is to recognise that together the concepts of age group, life course and generation capture the set of relationships involved and can therefore be built on and better integrated. Second, the article elaborates a multi-level understanding of generational processes in social policy to encompass both the effect of policy in structuring the life course and the welfare state's role in shaping obligations, relationships and exchanges associated with familial as well as public life.

Key words: Generation, life course, age group, social policy institutions, family relationships, care

Introduction

This article examines the scholarship on the relationship between social policy and generations. Its main purpose is to assess the concepts and theories used to study how different social policy models engage generational processes. From a social policy perspective, the key questions revolve around how entitlement to public resources is constructed on the basis of age, how countries respond to vulnerabilities associated with different stages of the life course and how the political economy is associated with granting financial and other social entitlements to different generations. The focus is not a study of any particular country; the analysis is pursued against the general backdrop of social

policies in the OECD welfare states, especially those in Europe, because these countries have the longest history of utilising social policy to engage with and manage generational matters. In terms of methodology, we rely on a literature review and an examination of secondary evidence sources, the aim being to characterise the conceptual and policy field generally rather than to undertake analyses of particular countries and policy models.

The article is organised in four parts. The first part sets out existing thinking on, and usages of, generation as a concept, focussing on some of the classic literature on generations and examining especially how generation has been defined. The second section reviews the literature applying a generational lens to the analysis of social policy and the welfare state. The third section addresses the question of how we should theorise generational relationships as embedded in social policies. The final section draws together the main strands of the argument.

Generation as concept

It is relatively easy to find generational references in popular and social science discourse: the ‘baby boomers’, ‘generation x’, the ‘millennials’, the ‘sandwich generation’, ‘population ageing’.

References to generation in the social policy lexicon are slower to reveal themselves, but common concepts or programme names like ‘child benefits’, ‘family allowances’, ‘old age pensions’ or ‘parental leave’ connote generation in pivotal ways. Even if not named as such, age and generation are implicit in the idea of horizontal distribution over the life course, a classic aim of welfare states being to ‘even out’ income need associated with different stages of the life course.

Turning to more academic usage, three main conceptions of generation stand out in the sociology and social policy literatures (following Purhonen, 2016, p. 97). One makes reference to familial generations, using generation in a genealogical sense and focussing especially on the relationship

between parents and children but also kinship more widely. This is very important for understanding the relationship between social policy and generation as we shall see below. In a second usage, generation consists of a group of people born at around the same time, or during a certain period. As used here, 'generation' is synonymous with age group or birth cohort. The third usage of generation conceives of generations as sociological, the underlying idea being of collective identity and generations as characterised by feelings of 'us' and 'we' generated by shared experiences. This is a more agentic and historical perspective and is, according to Purhonen (2016, p. 97), the only one of the three usages that draws on a background theory. The classic work in this regard is by Karl Mannheim (1952) for whom generation was essentially a social and potentially political entity, present when people born in certain circumstances developed a shared set of outlooks and interests, which differentiated them from those born at other periods. Mannheim was one of the first to elaborate generation as being something more than groups sharing a common time period. While social and political location is key in Mannheim's conceptualisation of generation, this is only as a jumping-off point. Not every age cohort is a generation and generations are internally stratified. Should members of age groups participate in the social and intellectual currents of their period and become conscious of their role in moments of significant change or participate in a common destiny, then generation can eventually result in a distinct self-consciousness and, ultimately perhaps, a political community. The likelihood of a generation developing a distinctive consciousness is seen by Mannheim to be dependent also on the tempo of social change (Pilcher, 1994, p. 483).

In the view of Higgs & Gilleard (2010, p. 1441), distinctive forms of such Mannheimian generational agency/conflict appeared only twice during the twentieth century: in the interwar 1920s and the cultural revolution of the 1960s. And yet the notion of generation is in relatively wide use. Why so? Pondering this question helps to reveal the merits and shortcomings of particular understandings and approaches. First, generation invokes a broad-ranging narrative in both a

descriptive and explanatory sense. In the former regard for example, generation has the capacity to countenance major social transformations; in the latter regard, it sits alongside class, gender and race as major lines of social categorisation, organisation and division. A related explanation for the popularity of generation in public discourse is that it picks up on, and expresses, a social problem of some kind, especially in a context of perceived rapid social change. Inequity or unfairness between generations is a ‘problem’ pervading public discourse today.

However, one should be aware that as a tool or frame of analysis, generation may be applied without significant depth. Critical reference is made to ‘generationalism’, meaning the use of generations as a general trope rather than a tool of analysis (Higgs & Gilleard, 2010, p. 1444). On the basis of a reading of recent trends in the UK, White (2013) sees the rise of ‘generationalism’ as a master narrative, viewing contemporary usages of the concept of generation as providing a licence for particular constructions of problems, by both left and right political actors, and for promoting certain types of economic reform. Other observers, such as Wohl (1979), counsel against the tendency to use a generic depiction and simplified view of generations. Purhonen (2016, p. 102) observes that those who embrace generationalism, *contra* Mannheim, tend to perceive generations as ‘ready-made’ and unproblematic entities or categories that have an existence of their own. Among other risks associated with the use of a simplified generational perspective, Purhonen (2016, p. 109) points to a totalising tendency in some usages, and White (2013) to the obscuring of intra-generational differences.

Generation, social policy and the welfare state

A review of the literature indicates that three main lines of analysis have been applied to study the relationship between generation and the welfare state, focussed respectively around the concepts of age group, life course and generation. These are not easily separated from one another – in many contexts they have overlapping meaning and application – but it is helpful to treat them separately

in a more fine-grained analysis since each carries forward different theoretical and empirical orientations in regard to social policy (summarised in Table 1).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The first approach focusses on age groups. The work of Hills (1995) and Lynch (2006), among others, underlines that age is one of the foremost characteristics governing entitlement to public resources. In most social policy systems, older people and children, however defined, are the main recipients or ‘clients’ of welfare state benefits and services, mainly through pensions and health services for the former and health and education services for the latter. Biological development and healthy progression as well as age group or population balance are important considerations here. As an analytic category, age group is mainly used in the service of a demographic-oriented analysis and has been found to have promise in revealing and illuminating social policy’s patterning in terms of the resources directed to different age groups and population sectors (Birnbaum, Ferrarini, Nelson & Palme, 2017; Lynch, 2006). Thinking in terms of age groups draws attention, for example, to the welfare state’s role in attaining levels of population health and demographic renewal and to income smoothing among different age groups. A concern with distribution of resources across age groups is to be found in the current emphasis on social investment, which seeks to reform the welfare state through better resourcing of the youngest age groups and a better balance between productive and unproductive (or so-called ‘passive’) redistribution (Esping-Andersen, 2009; European Commission, 2010). Age group can be a rather simplistic category though; it tends towards a static analysis mainly focussed on groups at singular points in time and lacks depth as a political category. As Kohli (2007) points out, age groups do not have fixed membership, and issues of distributional justice, redistribution and legitimacy are relatively unproblematic when applied on the basis of ‘age’ because we all (provided we survive of course) are potentially members of all age groups.

A second relevant line of analysis focusses on the relationship between the welfare state and the life course. The origin of much of this work is in the idea of the life course as a social institution (Kohli, 2007; Leisering & Leibfried, 1999). The life-course perspective conveys the notion of life as a sequence of organised stages based on the patterning of biography and associated economic and social roles and relationships, cultural expectations and legal obligations and claims. In a relational usage, the approach has an affinity with the idea of ‘linked lives’, a concept developed originally by Elder (1974) as part of a perspective to underscore, on the one hand, the interdependence of family members’ lives and, on the other, socio-historical influences as expressed through networks of shared relationships over time.

When applied to social policy, the focus is placed on social policy’s engagement with the temporal organisation of social life and the social risks associated with different life stages. Mayer & Müller (1986) have highlighted the role of social policy in terms of its contribution to constituting the individual through law, for example, and in connecting family, labour market, health and education as institutional spheres and systems. Social policy also engages with life-course related social risks, such as those associated with phases of family formation and child rearing for example and loss of earned income in old age (Birnbaum et al, 2017).

Following a generally similar perspective, Leisering & Leibfried (1999) offer a more detailed analysis of how social policy engages with the life course in the context of poverty in unified Germany, especially revealing how social policies structure and integrate the different life-course phases and lay down normative and institutional models. They highlight social policy’s role in shaping both the typical routines and overall timing of different life-course phases and transitions. Among many possible examples are the standardisation of schooling systems or the integration of age and status-related conditions for the purpose of receiving pensions, family benefits and other

benefits which have the effect of conferring a particular status on people (child, student, mother, pensioner). Moehring (2016) takes this line of thinking forward by identifying different life-course regimes in fourteen countries in Europe from an examination of older people's life histories, especially in regard to employment. She identifies three sets of social policy-related factors at work. First, social security institutions impose a structure on individual life courses: classically youth, mid-life and retirement. Secondly, they integrate the different parts of the life course and thereby produce continuity over it, for example the co-ordination of the move from education to employment or that from employment to retirement. Thirdly, they create and generalise social norms and modify the opportunity structure associated with different aspects/stages of the life course.

This work is valuable in alerting us to the welfare state's role in the temporal organisation of life and the ways in which it affects the structure, sequence and ordering of transitions. In this and other ways, attention is drawn to the social organisation of biographies and life events. The approach also picks up on the notion of transitions and trajectories as at once ordered and time bound, with social policy playing a key role in institutionalising and supporting different statuses and transitions. An affinity exists between this approach and the new social risks literature in social policy (Bonoli, 2005), which critiques the classic welfare state as being insufficiently attuned to new social risks that are associated with particular stages of the life course and particular demographic arrangements, exemplified by the early phases of family life, including lone parenting. The idea of life course as a given structure runs through a lot of this work leading to some recourse to functionalism in explaining social policy. Moreover, since it relies on a standardised life-course biography it potentially overstates the degree of life-course homogeneity and has few if any terms to deal with social policy as engaged with political-economic conflicts between age groups or life stages.

This brings us to the third relevant concept: generation. Following Kohli (2009, p. 67), generation can be defined in terms of position in the familial lineage and/or, at the societal level, being born in a certain time period and sharing historical and political experiences that affect outlook and access to resources. The concept differs from that of age group in that societal generations have a fixed membership, and generation has a stronger conceptualisation of agency and of generational identity/shared circumstances as a potential source of political engagement around welfare (reminiscent of Mannheim's perspective). When applied to social policy analysis, the welfare state as a generational contract is a prominent idea. As developed in the work of Laslett & Fishkin (1992), Kohli (1987), Walker (1996), and most recently Birnbaum et al (2017), income transfers among age groups are said to take the form of a social contract between generations. While there is no generally agreed upon or common definition of generational contract, the term is generally used to depict how social policies, in validating and granting claims to public resources, express and consolidate intergenerational cooperation or competition (Birnbaum et al, 2017, p. 3). Social policy then tends to grant social rights on the basis of generational membership. The construction of retirement and pension rights has been especially prominent in the scholarship (Quadagno, 1989). Pay-as-you-go pensions are a classic case here, whereby the extant generation of workers pays for the existing generation of pensioners on the understanding that they, in turn, will be provided for on a similar basis once they reach retirement age. The granting of maternity and paternity rights – very prominent today in relation to leave from employment for child-birth and early child rearing – is another example (Daly & Ferragina, 2017). So too is the increasing move towards children's rights. In particular, some eight EU countries now guarantee a legal right to early childhood education and care for each child soon after their birth, often immediately after the end of parental childcare leave (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2016). While such guarantees are often rhetorical and have been criticised for treating children's development as a form of human capital, they are evidence of concerted investment in the youngest generation.

This generational contract approach has the advantage of identifying some of the political economy and interest coalitions associated with social policy, detailing how programmatic provision reflects and takes forward norms around intergenerational sharing and the extent to which particular groups are seen as ‘deserving’ of public resources. It also has an advantage in its capacity to flesh out a broader story of welfare state origins and impact than the dominant social class narrative. However, comparative work shows that the commitment to the protection of retirement varies between countries, at its strongest in the continental European countries like Austria and Germany, compared to the countries such as the UK and the Nordic welfare states with their more balanced age structure (Birnbaum et al, 2017; Blome, Keck & Alber, 2009; Lynch, 2006; Myles 1989). Furthermore, in much of this work the over-riding focus is on one set of benefits, namely pensions (although see Birnbaum et al, 2017, for an analysis that considers social insurance and social assistance benefits across the age spectrum in eighteen OECD welfare states). This scholarship also tends to lack a differentiated understanding of generations; the focus is mainly on the distinction between those at work and those in retirement, with some limited attention to childhood or children as an age group. It tends, furthermore, to overlook the point that resource transfer is only one aspect of social policy’s effect on generational relationships, missing the implicit social norms concerning obligations and commitment to the care of older people and children (Attias-Donfut & Arber, 2000; Walker, 1996).

In sum, each of the three perspectives has merits as well as shortcomings and is utilised for somewhat different purposes. In particular, age group is oriented to population age profiles and the state’s role in biological development; life-course analysis aims primarily to understand how social policy affects the structuring of biographies and transitions; and generation has tended to pivot on the differential recognition of needs and claims and the granting of social rights on a generational basis.

Towards greater clarity and depth

When thinking about the utility and application of the different concepts described above, it is important to bear in mind the desired scale or reach of the analysis and the various contexts in which it might be applied. Not every concept must be able to countenance all areas of social policy, but a narrow or very particular focus is a potential limitation. Furthermore, analysis needs to be able to account for those aspects of welfare states that are most pertinent to intergenerational processes. These, we suggest, are primarily income redistribution and the provision of services and leave from employment. All are kept in mind in the discussion that follows which juxtaposes the three approaches and seeks to elaborate a more integrated framework.

As noted above, age group is the most straightforward of the approaches and, from the perspective of both income redistribution and service provision, analysis by age group or cohort can be a very focussed lens. The precision of age group lies in its capacity for detailed focus and decomposition of age categories and cohorts. This has merit especially because social policy's focus is sometimes on very specific age groups. For example, much of the social policy attention of the EU for the last ten years or so around early childhood education and care is on children aged 0–3 years, which, for the purposes of policy, are differentiated from the older cohort of pre-school children (those aged 3–5 years) (Daly & Ferragina, 2017). The intent is not intergenerational transfer but rather age group targeting and investment in very young children. Hence, age group as a category of analysis has both utility and relevance but only in certain circumstances. For a more in-depth analysis, we need to turn to the other two concepts.

We suggest that life course and generation may be seen as complementary concepts for three reasons, the first two of which are theoretical. First, the concept of life course conveys the temporal, organisational pattern that provides the foundation for generations to emerge and coalesce. Its focus on structure and structuring processes therefore deepens the sense of generation as a social (policy)

phenomenon. Second, while life course tends to be an apolitical concept, generation has strong political resonance – because generations are circumstantially and potentially politically situated – and therefore can augment life-course analysis. Together they have the advantage of bringing time and patterns of biographical and socio-political circumstance to the forefront. Third, methodologically the kind of institutional analysis of social policy that is suggested by a life-course approach can also extend the methodological repertoire of generation-oriented studies. However, both the life-course and generation concepts require more elaboration.

As we have seen, existing work from a social policy perspective tends to view generation in the sense of contract, examined in terms of whether and how the political claims of different age-based actors are recognised in gaining access to public resources. While this is valuable, for a number of reasons, the central place accorded to the ‘generational contract’ as between workers and older people or young and older dependants, for example, needs to be rethought. The applicability of this perspective in today’s context has to be questioned, with social rights less and less guaranteed, obligations predominating, and entitlements less stable. Second, since the idea of ‘contract’ was developed and applied mainly to social security, it has a limited reach for a broader social policy analysis, ignoring both social services, which are rarely based on the notion of contract, and discretionary and social assistance benefits, which almost never are. Third, generation can be and has been used to downgrade other differences and, in this and other regards, we should be wary of the assumption in the approach that the most significant differences lie between, rather than also within, generations. Above all, a too narrow perspective on how social policy engages with generations misses the degree to which this engagement pivots on family as a set and site of (desired) generational and other inter-relationships.

We suggest, therefore, that a generational analysis should be deepened and extended and that this can be accomplished in two main ways. First, there is the possibility of thinking in terms of

intergenerational relationships. Brannen (2014) has made a case for this view, suggesting that intergenerational relationships may be a more useful concept than generations in that the latter is often applied in a way that obscures intergenerational inequalities and underestimates intergenerational transmissions. We may add further depth and clarity here by following Leisering's (1994, cited in Blome et al, 2011 p. 2) suggestion of thinking of relationships between generations in a two-fold way: intergenerational relationships in a family setting and intergenerational relationships as the institutional differentiation between age cohorts. Second, we should think of generations in terms of agency and especially agency in private life. Such elaborations lead us towards a broader understanding of the way that social policy engages with generations, and offers a more comprehensive and meaningful conceptualisation of the relationship between age, life course and generation and social policy.

Millar & Warman (1996) provide a classic composite analysis that helps us to see how the welfare state can be analysed for its institutionalisation of life course and generation as structural concepts, and its shaping of generation as a set of relationships and agency located especially (but not exclusively) in a familial or kinship context. Theirs was a comparative study of sixteen European countries with the focus of analysis on how family-related institutions (like marriage and kinship) and obligations are defined by family law, social security and social care-related services. They looked at 'familial generation' in terms of three types of relationship: partnerships (marriage and unmarried cohabitation); parenting (parents and their dependent children) and caring (adults with additional care needs and their care). Their focus was not outcome-based but rather on the obligations to provide financial support and care, including both explicit legal obligations and more implicit expectations and assumptions underlying policy.

Part of the significance of the Millar and Warman framework is that it incorporates care- and relationship-sustaining activities as a direct and/or indirect concern of social policy, and is applied

to particular contexts. Many examples can be cited to illustrate how this plays out in practice.

Bordone, Arpino & Aassve (2017) show that the likelihood of grandparents providing care to their grandchildren in European countries is strongly linked to the availability and organisation of supportive policy arrangements. This is true also of care at the upper end of the life course: the type and degree of contribution made by relatives varies depending on how much a welfare state subsidises care and ‘socialises’ it through public services. Hence in countries with generous public provision of paid care, adult children are more likely to provide practical, more ancillary help (shopping, filling in forms, and so forth) to their parents, whereas in countries with a low-paid care workforce they are more likely to provide care as such (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2016).

The elaboration of generation in the more relational and agentic perspective that we are suggesting also highlights a sense of the practice (the ‘doing’) of intergenerational relations in a more micro-sociological sense. Generations are never just structural categories but are loaded with many kinds of normative attribute and meaning (Purhonen, 2016; Timonen & Conlon, 2015) that play out in everyday life. Welfare states play a key role here as well, especially when social policy becomes more oriented towards shaping behaviour. Again many examples can be found of specific policy measures. One such example is parenting support as a social policy focus. In the UK, more than twelve years of New Labour government between 1997 and 2010 saw a huge growth of policies which, under the nomenclature of ‘parenting support’, sought to change how (especially poor) parents carry out and view their parenting role (Daly, 2015). Despite the gender-neutral language, the motherhood role and how it affects intergenerational transmission of norms and values was key here. Policies aspiring towards work–life balance also aim to affect the practice of intergenerational relationships. Among the key policy measures enacted for this purpose are so-called ‘daddy leaves’ and the introduction and reform of parental leaves designed to engender a better sharing of parenting on the part of both parents. For some observers, this is evidence of a greater

familialisation of intergenerational relationships wherein social policy is playing a highly-influential role (Saraceno & Keck, 2010).

Conclusion

This article has shown that the study of the relationship between generation and social policy has been organised around three main concepts: age group, life course and generation. These concepts – all closely related – vary in terms of their theoretical orientation and analytical depth. Each serves to highlight particular aspects of the complex set of relationships involved. Surveying and reviewing relevant work in the field overall helps identify problems, *inter alia* in regard to unclear definitions and conceptual boundaries, underdeveloped theory, and fragmentation in the usage of the different concepts and approaches.

We have argued, first, that the three perspectives are all useful but for rather different purposes. In particular, the study of age group is oriented to population age profiles and the state's role in biological development and wellbeing; life-course analysis helps us to understand how social policy affects the structuring of biographies and transitions; and work on generation has tended to examine the recognition through social policy of generationally-based claims and relative inequalities. A second key argument is that, if age and life course are each used in association with generation, they are rendered more powerful. In particular, associating or combining age group and generation helps to identify precise targeting on the part of social policy and to show how demographic concerns are addressed through social policy. When the life course and generational perspectives are combined, the potential is opened up for analysis of particular forms of institutionalisation and political and other types of agency associated with social policy.

However, a framework integrating all three concepts needs further elaboration and, in doing so, a broader understanding of generation is especially helpful. In contrast to the rather static and quite

institutionalist use of generation in the work on the generational contract, we suggest a multi-level understanding of generation for social policy, where the concept is defined to have both structural and relational dimensions. While the former focusses on how the welfare state constructs generations through granting access to public resources, the latter homes in on the welfare state's role in shaping obligations, relationships and exchanges associated with generational membership and family-related and other obligations and how these might be enacted. Thinking in this way allows us to recognise that generation is only one axis of social division or social cohesion, and that it has to be set alongside other lines of potential cleavage associated with social policy.

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Table 1. Different approaches to the relationship between generation and social policy.

Concept	Key reference	Main social policy role
Age group	Biological development and population age profile	Income smoothing across age groups, services oriented to health and education development; fertility/population balance
Life course	Social organisation of biography and life events and transitions	Institutionalisation and protection of age-related social risks management of life-course transitions
Generation	Generation as linked to family and public resource access, generational contract, social rights	Pension rights, social rights for parents, children's right to early education and childcare