

# Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Judith Burnett. *Generations: The Time Machine in Theory and Practice*. Surrey, UK: Ashgate Press, 2010

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It is widely agreed that the sociological concept of generations can contribute to our understanding of social change, continuity, stratification, identity development, and the life course in historical context. In this book, Judith Burnett echoes the voices of many others (e.g., Eyerman & Turner, 1998; McDaniel, 2001) who have suggested that the concept needs theoretical development and greater usage in sociological research. Burnett first traces the roots of the concept to ancient societies (chapter 1), and outlines Mannheim's sociological contributions to generation theory (chapter 2) and subsequent approaches to the study of generations (chapter 3). In the introduction, Burnett unites two different conceptualizations of generation – the vertical, kinship definition based on lineage and descent, and a horizontal, cohort-based social location definition – in a conceptual model. However, in the rest of the book, Burnett primarily focuses on the latter, cohort-based definition. As noted by Pilcher (1994), Mannheim (1963) himself tended to use the term *generation* synonymously with *cohort*. As a result, social gerontological research on intergenerational relations within families does not feature prominently, and Burnett's initial conceptual framework is not fully developed.

Burnett contributes extraordinarily detailed descriptive accounts of the history, emergence, and activities of the First World War or "epic" generation (chapter 4) and the first and second generational waves of "Baby Boomers" (chapters 5 and 6). She also raises interesting ideas in chapter 7 about the implications of an aging population for generations and generation theory. The book is rich in detail, and depending on the reader, perhaps overly detailed in some parts (and as a result, is dense to read). The strength of the work is Burnett's development and illustration of the concept of generations and generational theory. A key message is that self-conscious generations both create, and are created by, social change. Social, cultural, political, and economic changes create new opportunities and challenges that require new interpretive frameworks. When these situations are encountered by youth, there is opportunity for a distinctive generational consciousness, style, and response to emerge. The social agency of one generation then affects the situations faced by the next set of young people, and so on.

Despite attempts to differentiate *generation* and *cohort*, Burnett's descriptions at times reproduce a positivistic view of generations similar to self-aware birth cohort, and a view of generational identities as universal, relatively stable, and empirically observable – this is in tension with the idea that generations, and generational identities, are constantly in flux (McDaniel, 2001). And although Burnett states that generations, in contrast to cohorts, are defined through the self-identification of generational members, Mannheim posited that generations are not necessarily self-aware, and that when collective consciousness occurs, this is more appropriately termed a "generational unit."

There is a relative lack of critical discussion of generation and its ideological use in policy and practice. Eyerman and Turner (1998) drew on Bourdieu (1977) to argue that generations are socially constructed as a result of conflict over scarce economic and cultural resources (highlighting the role of generations in inclusion and exclusion), yet Burnett does not critically assess how particular groups come to be labelled as generations, by whom, and for what purpose. McDaniel (2001, 2004) has suggested that in a neoliberal political and economic paradigm, the concept of generation can be used ideologically, to label, divide, and promote false perceptions of competing interests between birth cohorts. For instance, Rozanova, Northcott, and McDaniel (2006) illustrated a media emphasis on intergenerational conflict and inequalities that perpetuate ageist ideas about the elderly as a burden on younger generations. Therefore, a closer study of sites and topics around which intergenerational conflict occurs and is expressed might have been useful in this work.

Burnett also does not explore how negative or positive qualities or attributes become associated with certain generations, or why this occurs. Participants in my own research (Funk, 2010) tended to identify younger generations as more selfish, indulgent, and uncaring. These generations have been blamed for a perceived decline in filial responsibility in Canada. Such talk can be viewed as an interpretive process whereby participants used the idea of other generations as a point of contrast against which to define themselves as responsible adult children. Indeed, the concept of generations

is widely used in everyday language. However, there is relatively little examination of the interpretive functions of the concept, nor, as I have noted here, their potential ideological functions.

Despite the inclusion of immense historical detail, at times, Burnett advances more abstract or unclear generalizations or claims with little empirical evidence or supporting examples. As a result, it sometimes feels like there is too much detail in some places, and not enough in others. In addition, an analysis or description of more recent generations (Generations X and Y are mentioned only in passing reference to “bookend” or “buffer” generations) could have enhanced the book’s appeal for students themselves from such generations. Generational identity formation could also be explained more clearly. What is it, how does this emerge, where do we see it expressed, and why does it develop at particular times (e.g., for some generations and not others)? A clearer explanation can be found in the work of Eyerman and Turner (1998) who described how a generational cohort can maintain a sense of collective solidarity and identity over time and space through collective memory and cultural embodiments, facilitated through media communication and the globalization of popular culture.

In sum, Burnett’s work is more appropriate for graduate students and academics specializing in generational or life course studies, than it is for undergraduate students. Readers will strongly benefit from first becoming familiar with Mannheim’s work (reprinted in 1963). Though the work is relevant to gerontologists, policy or practice implications are not considered. In focusing on examples drawn primarily from Europe (especially the UK) and the United States, the book’s suitability for an international (and Canadian) audi-

ence is dampened. It is unfortunate, in particular, that Burnett did not draw on the theoretical work by Canadian sociologist McDaniel (2001, 2004) on gendered generations. An integration of this work would have provided greater insight into “how women born at different times interact with generational webs of entitlement and responsibilities” (McDaniel, 2001, p. 194) and how *generation* should be considered a relational construct. In short, “women’s relations with those in previous and subsequent generations matter” (McDaniel, 2001, p. 198).

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Julie Ann McMullin and Victor W. Marshall, eds. *Aging and Working in the New Economy: Changing Career Structures in Small IT Firms*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2010.

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This book provides a good overview of the issues that arise for aging workers in the information technology (IT) field. While it fills an important gap in a specific industry, it also covers issues, such as worker stress and job training, which are relevant to many other industries. The book draws on data obtained from an international research study, “Workforce Aging in the New Economy

Project (WANE): A Comparative Study of Information Technology Firms”, funded in 2002 by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The project was conducted by a team of researchers in Canada, the United States, Australia, and England, and is therefore globally relevant. The book deals with economic and personal struggles for both employees and employers in the