Exploring generational intelligence as a model for examining the process of intergenerational relationships

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine an emerging model of intergenerational relationships that takes as its starting point the degree to which it is possible to place oneself in the position of a person of another age, the 'age-other'. The paper explores an experiential approach that draws on both sociological thinking on 'generational consciousness' and a debate in family gerontology on the relationships between conflict, solidarity and ambivalence. The main emphasis is on the processes of generational experience, and a working distinction is made between the informational 'intelligence' that is culturally available to social actors and the degree to which it is possible 'to act intelligently'. The latter itemises the steps that would need to be taken to become critically self-aware of age as a factor in social relations, including the relative ability to recognise one's personal generational distinctiveness, acquiring understanding of the relationship between generations, critical awareness of the value stance being taken toward generational positions, and finally, acting in a manner that is generationally aware. The paper concludes with a consideration of how sustainable generational relations can be encouraged and the implications for future research into intergenerational relationships.

KEY WORDS – identity, ambivalence, solidarity, generation, ageing, critical theory, sustainability.

Introduction

How can we put ourselves in the position of someone of a different age? How far is it possible to understand the different influences on intergenerational activity? What resources do we have to make this possible? These are key questions for the 21st century as the numbers of older citizens have grown to equal those of children and adults in midlife, and as people

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live longer (Bengtson and Lowenstein 2003). Such a change in age structure is affecting both the developed and developing worlds (Aboderin 2004) and may be expected to provoke challenges to existing norms of intergenerational behaviour (Antonucci, Jackson and Biggs 2007). Further, several intergenerational social issues emerged toward the end of the 20th century, including age discrimination at the workplace, elder abuse in care, and questions of generational equity around pensions. Generation has itself been referred to as a 'packed social concept' (McDaniel 2008) with various social, familial and personal associations that influence personal identity. In this paper, we analyse what an increasing critical awareness of generation might entail; in other words, what forms of 'intelligence' are required to understand and act in the context of other generations.

The need for a form of critical empathic intelligence between generations is made more pressing in the light of comments by contemporary social theorists. Kohli argued that, 'in the 21st century, class conflict seems to be defunct and its place [has been] taken over by generational conflict' (2005: 518). Francophone writers such as Ricard (Olazabal 2005) and Chauvel (2007) have criticised the boomer or lyric generation for social selfishness and disproportionate cultural and economic arrogance to the disadvantage of succeeding generations, while Moody (2008) has charted what he calls the 'boomer wars' as a recurrent polarisation of discourse in North American popular literature. These social commentaries suggest a renewed aggression in intergenerational discourse, directed primarily against late-midlife. The cultural processes that have been available to date reflect attempts either to ensure continuity of social value in terms defined by a majority age-group or of the transfer of power from one generation to the next. Older adults may, for example, continue to be productive workers, either paid or unpaid (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong and Sherraden 2001), or they may find a role as consumers (Gilleard and Higgs 2005), in either way serving wider economic interests. These positions have now largely replaced attempts to ease a path of disengagement or of unspecified, yet morally-signified activity (Estes, Biggs and Phillipson 2003; Katz 2000).

It is arguably the case that two major theoretical traditions are available for the examination of intergenerational relations. One assumes conflict and is dominant in psychodynamic thinking and in European sociology (Biggs 2007). The other arises primarily from North American studies of the family that began with an assumption of solidarity between the generations (Lowenstein 2007; Silverstein and Bengtson 1997). While the two concepts interact, for example in the attempts of Bengtson *et al.* (2002) to include conflict within a solidarity framework, and in European social policy that emphases 'solidarity between generations' as in the European Commissions' Lisbon Agenda (Johansson *et al.* 2007), they have been

characterised as bipolar opposites. A third and less widespread conceptual position posits the importance of ambivalence, in which these polarities are both recognised (Lüscher 2002; Lüscher and Pillemer 1997). Taken together, these factors point to a re-examination of the degree to which it is possible to understand each other across generations and a reappraisal of the intellectual and cultural tools available for gerontological analysis.

Toward a phenomenology of generation

Arber and Attias-Donfut (2000) observed that a feeling of generational belonging is created not just in the horizontal dimension of the birth cohort but also in a vertical dimension of familial lineage, and that questions of generational awareness exist at the intersection of these axes. To this can be added Biggs's (1999, 2005) distinction between the depth and surface dimensions of the mature self, which creates a third context, that of the maturation of personal consciousness. This third context is perhaps more difficult to explore empirically, yet exists tacitly as a growing awareness of one's progress through the lifecourse and the existential tensions that emerge as a result. This meeting point of birth cohort, familial lineage and personal maturation creates a three-dimensional space in which the phenomenology of generational identity and its immediate experience exist. It is the quality and critical consciousness of this space, we argue, that informs behaviour in intergenerational settings. The experience of that space, the degree to which people are aware of it, how they react to it, the effect it has on the sense of who they are and how they behave towards others, are the basis of what might be called 'generational intelligence'.

The pertinent point is not simply to rehearse the observation that changing adult demography brings cohort, period and lifespan effects, but to suggest that generation is experienced as a holistic combination of influences which give it its individual phenomenological flavour. To interrogate critically this experiential space, an individual needs to separate out these competing influences, and consciously return to them before genuine intergenerational understanding can emerge. The simultaneous occurrence of positive and negative emotional responses to the age-other may arise from the differential but unrecognised influence of positions, that, as our argument develops, might better be thought of as processes.

What is 'generational intelligence'?

In outlining a model that we have given the preliminary name 'generational intelligence', an attempt has been made to interrogate the processes

by which individuals or groups become capable of seeing from alternative age-perspectives. The question posed is what sort of 'intelligence' might be needed to engage with the age-other in a generationally inflected context. An initial description of generational intelligence might be, 'an ability to reflect and act, which draws on an understanding of one's own and others' life-course, family and social history, placed within a contemporary social climate' (Biggs and Lowenstein in press). As such, the processes identified as 'generational intelligence' apply to any age group and are constituted as different from another in the eyes of at least one group. Lifecourse refers to one's current position on a culturally-expected or normative lifespan, and the existential priorities associated with the point that one had reached. Family refers to one's position in terms of lineage, the roles and expectations associated with a particular age-position in relation to other family members. Social history refers to the significance that is culturally ascribed to a cohort that is growing older together. Each constitutes a particular element in the way that 'generation' is understood and used holistically in everyday life. The endpoint would be an ability to act knowingly in an intergenerational space. Because the label 'generation', as an amalgam of lifecourse, cohort and lineage is somewhat protean in everyday experience, we have tended to use the phrase 'age-other' to refer to identities that emerge based on generational location, rather than to identify particular ages or time periods that hold a specific generation in place.

Arriving at different forms of generational intelligence as applied to an age-group older than oneself is, however, more of a problem than when applied to younger ages. While most adults, under current conditions, can expect to achieve old age, they have not experienced it in the same direct way as has been the case for childhood or adolescence. A key source of empathic understanding is therefore missing. The presence of social ageism, and the problematisation of old age in terms of the care gap, the role of older workers, pension policy, age-unfriendly environments and elder abuse add extra barriers to the process of intergenerationally-informed understanding, negotiation and action.

It is useful at this point to distinguish two ways of using the term 'intelligence'. One refers to a way of seeing through generationally-tinted glasses in order to draw out how social reality has been generationally inflected. What sorts of information or everyday data become available in order to make sense of the world around us? In other words, how do we gather intelligence about it. A second use lies in working 'intelligently' with available data. This emphasises the degree to which actors and groups behave as if they are immersed in their own group-specific form of generational consciousness as compared to more complex forms that

include an understanding of multiple generational perspectives. By directing attention to such processes rather than generational contents, we can begin to outline a framework for understanding contemporary generational issues and point to novel solutions.

From holistic experience to critical generational awareness

Our argument begins, then, from the observation that generation is experienced in immediate action as a phenomenological whole. Even though it may include attitudes to the lifecourse, family and cohort, experientially speaking these are secondary constructs. For example, when UK baby-boomers were asked about their generational experience, they responded holistically, drawing intuitively on different aspects of generation as it is used in common understanding and moving freely between categories (Biggs *et al.* 2007). Generation, as a phenomenological unity, corresponds to what the psychoanalyst Bollas (1992) referred to as a simple or immersive state of mind. An individual may be in midlife in lifecourse terms but in family terms be part of a sandwiched generation and a member of the baby-boomer cohort. She or he may be changing from looking back to reference points in childhood, to looking forward to the amount of lifetime they might have left, wondering how competing family demands will allow them to use the time, how they can identify with younger rather than older generations, and how best to strive for self-actualisation. Their awareness of self and others is generationally inflected and an amalgam of influences which have yet to be designated or understood.

Unless certain disconfirming events throw individuals out of this immersion in everyday life, 'generation' is used but rarely reflected upon. Bollas argued that with increasing age, adults become increasingly aware that their generational identity is no longer at the cultural centre, and as such it becomes subject to critical self-awareness. A process of generational intelligence builds on the recognition of multiple and sometimes contradictory aspects of generational awareness, an ability to create critical distance from the influence of contributing factors, arising from family, lifecourse or cohort history, and a willingness self-consciously to return to them in order to act with understanding. The alternative would be to act out one end of a binary opposition, that is to emphasise either conflict or solidarity, rather than acting with both in mind.

Once social actors become conscious of themselves as part of a generation; as a parent, as a member of the 'war generation' or as being in 'adolescence'; the relative ability to put themselves in the position of other generations becomes an issue. Changing existential priorities at different

times in the adult lifecourse would contribute to this awareness (Dittman-Kohli 2005; Tornstam 2005), as would tensions around intergenerational care (Clarke *et al.* 1999; Giarrusso *et al.* 2005; Katz *et al.* 2005). The journey from immersion to a recognition of different influences, which may then be recombined into active intergenerational strategies, form the basis for generationally intelligent action. By addressing the process of generational intelligence in this way, and paying attention to degrees of self-conscious awareness of generational identities, our argument stands in an iterative relationship to at least two established academic themes. The first relates to the sociological debate on the importance of cohort-based generational consciousness, and the second arises from family gerontology and the degree to which generations act out of a sense of solidarity with each other. These two traditions will now be examined.

Generational consciousness, habitus and generational intelligence

In his 1952 essay 'The problem of generations', Mannheim began to outline the key elements in what has become, in sociological discourse, 'generational consciousness' (Edmunds and Turner 2005; Gilleard and Higgs 2005; Pilcher 1994). His principal focus was on the public sphere and social change, which was thought to occur through the emergence of collective experiences of generation in a similar way to which a social class moves from being 'in itself' to one that acts collectively 'for itself' (Turner 1998). Social actors moved from simply holding certain experiences in common, to a politicised generational consciousness, which Mannheim saw as contingent upon historical context at the time of emerging adulthood. Generational action, that is, acting with an awareness of one's own generational circumstances, is the strong suit, the ideal type for generational consciousness. A generation that becomes consciously aware of itself as a social or historical force can then become a motor for social change in its own right, especially during periods of social transition. Sifting through accumulated cultural knowledge, the main action identified as part of a generational transition would then take place in an enhanced form. The advent of any new generation gives an opportunity for 'fresh contact' with a culture's accumulated heritage, and a chance for re-appraisal. Subsequent authors have used Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' to explore certain forms of 'within-generation' consciousness and generationally distinctive lifestyles (Edmunds and Turner 2005; Gilleard and Higgs 2005). While this creates a more flexible generational space than historical context alone, it does not say very much about intergenerational relations, other than in the ability to recognise similar or dissimilar habitus-dwellers.

It is, paradoxically, given its strong social credentials, about the formation of identity within a newly emerging generation rather than empathic exchange between generations.

While a discussion based on generationally-inflected intelligence would emphasise the relative ability of social actors to put themselves in the position of other generations, Mannheim appears relatively unconcerned with this issue. Rather, preceding generations are perceived to be the raw material for future progress and as social entities that one defines oneself in relation to. Older generations appear, in other words, as a foil to identity development. They provide the 'restraining other' that makes one conscious of the need for social change, but there is little consideration of whether one's perception of the other is accurate or of the degree to which understanding of the age-other is necessary or indeed desirable. The focus is on the way in which replacing the generational predecessor generates a sort of cultural filtering – through the priorities of the emerging generation, a jettisoning of outmoded cultural baggage and the development of new social constructs for novel circumstances. It is, perhaps, only intergenerational insofar as it conceives the relationship between generations as consisting, at root, of competing opposites. Generational consciousness returns to the expansion of one position (the emerging generation) in what is a shared generational context. Generationally-intelligent solutions would, by contrast, begin by acknowledging that different generational groups have different objectives and different things to offer. They would problematise the processes existing between generations and pose questions concerning the degree to which generational awareness is present and in what form. Variety, arising from a combination of lifecourse, family positions and social context, would provide the ground on which negotiated solutions may be achievable as each generation brings something different to the table.

Generational solidarity and the uses of ambivalence

The assumption that generational relations subsist on conflicting interests and questions of succession has, however, been questioned. Irwin (1998), in debate with Turner (1998), suggested that in the private sphere of the family there is remarkably little evidence of generational antagonism, citing evidence that economic transfers to younger generations and intergenerational care are important components of family relations. More recently, a cross-European study of intergenerational family relations found that the majority of respondents (aged 25 or more years) acknowledged some degree of filial obligation, although more so in 'familistic' countries like

Spain than in the Northern European countries with more developed welfare regimes (Lowenstein and Daatland 2006). Examining the relationship between solidarity, conflict and the quality of life of elders, it was found that emotional closeness between generations was strongly related to solidarity (Lowenstein 2007).

Bengtson and Putney took this argument further by claiming that intergenerational solidarity within families answers the question, 'how will the group deal with differences or conflicts that arise between generations and negotiate their resolution for the betterment of individuals, families and the social order?' (2006: 20). In a robust restatement of what is essentially the solidarity position that privileges family relations over social structures, they claimed that

intergenerational relations at the micro-social level within multigenerational families have a profound but unrecognized influence on relations between age groups at the societal level. The essence of multigenerational families is interdependence between generations and its members, and this will tend to mitigate schisms between age groups over scarce government resources. (Bengtson and Putney 2006: 28)

Solidarity, then, becomes a personal and social ideal type that teeters between scientific research and social expectation. Conflict and ambivalence, the latter being portrayed as a form of social paralysis, are simply way-stations on the path to the presupposed goal of solidarity (Bengtson *et al.* 2002).

This position has had its critics. Marshall, Matthews and Rosenthal (1993) have argued that the solidarity position pre-supposes its own normative underpinnings, suggesting that greater critical awareness of the value of research is required in this area. Connidis and McMullin (2002) demonstrated that alternative concepts, such as ambivalence, have been over-simplified and misunderstood in the solidarity debate. Lorenz-Meyer (2001) drew attention to the negative elements of family solidarity in the maintenance of social inequality through lineage and inheritance. The approach has little to say about people without families, or about the family retaining its longstanding attribute of being the principal site of inter-personal violence and mistreatment across the lifecourse (Kingston and Penhale 1995). Further, solidarity in the private sphere shows little evidence of mitigating social ageism in public (Bytheway 2005), which lends credence to the view that the potential for antagonism between generations is tacit but deep seated.

A point of particular interest for the process of generational relations is that arguing the case for either conflict or solidarity tends, conceptually speaking, to reduce the study of and debate about generation into binary oppositions. Most would agree, however, that the phenomenal experience

of social and family life is more complex. Lowenstein, Katz and Gur-Yaish (2007) argued that the 'problem of generations' becomes most apparent when faced with a personal transition toward dependency and care. Care for an adult older than oneself presents a challenge to norms of conduct in adult–adult relationships. These relations, reflecting the values of market economies often as not are based on exchange value (Dowd 1975; Phillips 1986), where reciprocity is based on the notion of instrumental benefit to two individuals entering into a bargain where the benefits to each party are clear and calculable. Generationally speaking, social expectations are that support flows from older to younger generational groups (Finch 1995). Care, in the context of adult intergenerational relations, challenges western societal norms of independence and of responsibility for the self. In this context, Bauman argued that, 'responsibility for the other is shot through with ambivalence: it has no obvious limits, nor does it easily translate into practical steps to be taken or refrained from – each such step being instead pregnant with consequences that are notoriously uneasy to predict and even less easy to evaluate in advance' (1995: 2).

The inability of Bauman's definition of responsibility for the other to encompass the phenomenon it addresses indicates that it attempts to define something greater than the stated problem. It may help to explain why ambivalence has been reported as difficult to operationalise (Lowenstein 2007). How to proceed under such circumstances – to reason about a phenomenon that is not containable – without regressing to one or other pole of a contradiction, requires bearing in mind simultaneously two seemingly incompatible aspects of that phenomenon. In other words, it is necessary to act knowingly or 'intelligently' by being open to the possibility that one can both feel conflict and solidarity toward a person of another age. One may feel both love and hate, be active and passive, and in different contexts be both young and old relative to other people. Lüscher and Pillemer explicated such ambivalence as 'contradictions in relationships between parents and adult offspring that cannot be reconciled' (1997: 3), and suggested that their designation offers a mechanism that potentially contains the process. Connidis and McMullin explained ambivalence as 'structurally created contradictions that are made manifest in interaction' and 'simultaneously held opposing feelings or emotions that are due in part to countervailing about how individuals should act' (2002: 558), while Pillemer and Suitor (2008) identified the location of ambivalence as within the mixed feelings of individuals that manifest in inter-personal relationships. Thus while the solidarity position is notable for the absence of any consideration of interiority, ambivalence offers a phenomenological insight that is compatible with a process of emerging generational intelligence. And while both Lüscher and Pillemer (1997) and

Bengtson *et al.* (2002) recognised the possibility of indecision and even paralysis arising from an ambivalent position, it also allows self-conscious action insofar as the complexity of mixed feelings can be overtly recognised. It offers a mature step toward acknowledging a more complex world of multiple perspectives and emotional ambiguity (Biggs 2007). In sum, ambivalence need not lead to paralysis or to a retreat into over-hasty action and rigid thinking. As is the case with generationally-intelligent processes, it requires holding seemingly incompatible desires together in mind at once, and in understanding them, promises action with maturity.

Steps toward generational intelligence

The process of generational intelligence would, then, move beyond binary thinking, such as conflict or solidarity, in terms of process, while at the same time recognising that, as part of the gerontological project, positions have to be taken. Positions that is, in Taylor's (1989) sense, that in the process of articulating claims implicit in our actions, we need also to become self-conscious of the place on which we make our stand. This section identifies steps that may help identify the degree to which a context, group or individual can respond 'intelligently' in generational terms. Insofar as generational intelligence identifies certain epistemological dimensions of becoming aware of generations, awareness of self as a member of a gen-erational group, recognising the existence of different generations and the possibility of action on that basis, it also suggests certain processes that one would need to go through in order to establish a higher degree of such intelligence. These can be broken down into identifiable steps that may increase the likelihood of generationally-intelligent understanding and action and that could be applied to everyday activities, policy-making and the research process itself. These steps would require breaking down im-mediate experience into more complex and reflective processes. Were there to be steps toward generational intelligence, they might look like the following.

Step 1: Recognising generational distinctiveness

This would be necessary in order to locate oneself within generational space and to identify different contributory factors that are expressed through generational identity. The degree to which one's immediate phenomenology is affected by cohort, family and lifecourse perspectives would need to be critically interrogated. Socio-historical attitudes to family influences thoughts and feelings, about oneself as a child, parent and

grandparent; or attitudes that change as individuals themselves move through the lifecourse, and which affect one's understanding of adolescence or the child-rearing years, would for example fold back into cohort identities, and would need to be disaggregated and understood. This may be primarily an interior process where parts of a holistic, yet immersive awareness of self are separated prior to being returned to a self-consciously aware whole.

Step 2: Understanding the relationship between generational positions

The purpose of the second step is to identify the key generational actors in any one situation and see them through generational spectacles, thus making intergenerational relations explicit. Generational relations include the positions that each social actor holds, and also the associations that each person brings with them about other generations, their internal and external sets of representations that are organised generationally. As part of this process, it would be possible to see the age-other as a person with priorities, desires, fears and reflections that may or may not overlap with one's own, thus engaging with the difficult task of placing oneself in the position of that age-other.

Step 3: Awareness of the value stance of different generational positions

Knowing that generational distinctiveness and difference exist is no guarantee of the quality of the relations that emerge. Knowledge of the age-other in itself could serve rivalry or solidarity. It is quite possible that participants take an antagonistic position, one based on harmony, on mixed feelings or on indifference. Therefore it is necessary to introduce an analysis of a value dimension at this stage; which may create different problems for social scientists, advocates and helping professionals; to critically assess the moral positions that tacitly underpin intergenerational behaviour. On a personal level, this would include locating the ground on which we stand in terms of intergenerational relations, and as critical gerontologists the ground requires examination of existing power relations and how they might be rendered harmonious. This is, however, consistent with a generationally-intelligent response as, rather than being immersed in a value position, the position is recognised as an element of a self-consciously gerontological approach.

Step 4: Acting in a manner that is generationally aware

Once a value stance has been clarified, the ground on which action can take place is made much clearer. Generationally-intelligent action that is reflective rather than immersive would take place in the knowledge of

one's own contribution and those of others. Action would work toward situations that move from immersion to the creation of a critical space that takes generationally-inflected meaning into account. Keeping alternative generational perspectives simultaneously in mind moves the intergenerational terrain on from fixed positions, toward a consideration of how one can flexibly encounter the perspective of the age-other.

Mapping generational contexts

The four steps outlined above might also be used to facilitate the mapping of particular generational encounters, as they arise in organisations, social institutions and policy arenas. It would be necessary to determine who the generational actors are, ascertain what their dominant generational identity might be given the parameters of the situation, and examine how this combination influences the value attributed to other generational groups. Mapping would also identify when and where decisions and behaviours take place. Mapping the generational constituencies would firstly require identifying which generational groups and positions are tacitly or explicitly involved. This would include those who hold an interest in the outcome and who may or may not be in direct contact with the generational actors in any one context. Second would be to discover or create facilitative spaces for intergenerational communication and decision-making, where the different constituencies can come together to negotiate a mutually compatible solution. There is no guarantee that a solution will be found that satisfies all the needs of all parties, but the possibility of such a space allows voices to be heard in the round and makes it less easy to ignore generational issues. The third stage would be to clarify generational priorities. Each party would have the opportunity to critically reflect upon their own generational position, its key features and priorities, establish the degree of overlap with other perspectives, and establish similar or complementary roles. Finally, it would be possible to analyse functions and problems through an intergenerational lens. By bringing the diverse generational perspectives together, a more complex understanding of the issues emerges, which is likely to lead to sustainable forms of generational collaboration.

Building sustainable solutions

The Second World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid, convened by the United Nations (UN) in 2002, noted 'the need to strengthen solidarity

between generations and intergenerational partnerships, keeping in mind the particular needs of both older and younger ones, and encourage mutually responsive relationships between generations' (2002: 4). In 2009 the AARP[1] underlined in evidence to the UN that, 'because the rapidly increasing numbers of older citizens are presenting our nations with enormous new social and economic challenges, we have been compelled to better promote intergenerational contracts, solidarity, and mutual support systems' (2009: 2). Attempts, however, to identify the contours of a sustainable intergenerational understanding have been limited. While the content of sustainable solutions would be difficult to determine in advance, it may be possible to outline what a high or low generationally-intelligent response might be like. Sustainability in this context would rely on solutions that will endure, where the costs to parties are not too great, are balanced by compatible activities and where tensions, between lifecourse, cohort and family priorities, can be contained in a viable phenomenal space.

Different elements of generational intelligence (GI) may contribute to high and low states of generationally-sustainable solutions. Elements reflect contributions to generational phenomenology which, when recombined would build toward a novel process of understanding intergenerational relations and to engage empathically with the age-other. Starting from the personal lifecourse, high GI offers an insight that people develop and change with particular priorities that arise from where they are as their own life progresses; to which one can add acknowledgement that family roles differ according to age and position in the family, an understanding of which enhances communication and shared problem-solving. Further, being aware of one's own cohort membership or the salience of cohort for the participating generations may facilitate balancing the cultural and historically-shaped expectations of different cohort groups. Taken together, insight into one's own position, an understanding of generationally-inflected relationships to others, and an understanding of the power of the social context in which relations take place, increases the likelihood of generationally-intelligent solutions.

At a personal level, low GI would be reflected in immersion in one's position, either by acting within a role, asserting the primacy of that personal position without taking other ones into account, splitting off or rejecting ambivalent feelings. The personal phenomenology is presumed to be universally valid. In terms of family relations, there would be an unwillingness or lack of interest to reflect upon or recognise complex relationships between social actors, resulting in low-quality exchange relations marked by a lack of reciprocity. In terms of cohort culture, if one's own age group is in a contextually-dominant position, this can lead to an

assumption that generations are essentially the same. Thus low GI fails to travel beyond its own cohort experience, showing little interest in alternative perspectives. Generally speaking, a low GI phenomenology would be unable to reflect on its own position and thereby recognise that it may be different from other ones. Immersion in simple unreflective experience results in a failure to distinguish between lifecourse, family and cohort influences.

In terms of ambivalence, low levels of generational intelligence may result in intergenerational relations that do not take multiplicity into account and thereby act out one pole or another as if it were the only and natural way to behave. A middle level would include awareness of conflicting alternatives, but without a clearly articulated understanding of generational influences, lead to psychological paralysis and inaction or behavioural avoidance. A high-level response would keep alternatives simultaneously within the same mental space, so that the intergenerational participant can act with both in mind. The journey from unselfconscious immersion to generationally-intelligent action creates a critical distance between self and the other that allows experiment with alternative generational strategies to take place. Previously-fixed positions then have the chance of becoming one of various alternative styles of engagement. Concepts common in the literature, describing conflict, solidarity and ambivalence, each referring to lifecourse, lineage or cohort contexts, could then be thought of as strategies that are adopted toward intergenerational relationships, rather than embedded characteristics. This would constitute a first step not only to empathic understanding but also to the creation of mutually-compatible policies and intergenerational activities.

Research implications

Finally, if the argument above is accepted, it may be possible to sketch some implications of a 'generationally intelligent' approach for critical gerontology. Here it may be helpful to return to the distinction between 'intelligence', as the search for data, and behaving 'intelligently' with respect to generational difference. A focus on the intelligence data needed would draw attention to the different perspectives that generational actors have and the degree to which they are aware of them as influencing the decisions they take and their attitudes toward the age-other. Here a research agenda would include the contents of each self-identified generation and the processes each generational group uses to make sense of their everyday world. It would include an analysis of the relative salience

of generation as a means of categorising interaction, the relative influence of family, cohort and lifecourse perspectives in the creation of identity and how this might change given different social contexts. Specifically, the interaction between different age-groups, in families, neighbourhoods and in residential settings, should be seen through the lens of generational salience.

A study of generationally-intelligent behaviour would concern the degree to which social actors and groups behave as if they were immersed in their own generational consciousness as compared to a more complex understanding of intergenerational relations. Such an agenda would lead to the critical analysis of forms of dominance based on generation, the generational position of decision-takers and their relative openness to alternative generational perspectives. One example where this process could be valuable would concern the politics of ageing and questions of generational equity mentioned at the very beginning of this paper. A generationally-aware mapping of policies and perspectives could be one result.

These processes also reflect back on the research process itself. Here it would be important for research training to include a critical evaluation of the researcher's own generational assumptions and the effects that their generational position would have on data collection and analysis. An awareness of generational difference would be a necessary source of rapport within the research process; in other words, that research is not 'age-neutral' and that generational relations may affect the content and quality of data itself. This is not to privilege one age or generational position over another, but rather to suggest that the generational relationship between a researcher and a respondent is an important variable that should be self-consciously used in the generation of different forms of knowledge. Thus, the interaction between generational peers may create different contents to interaction based on age difference, and that different combinations of generational position would deepen and enrich the understanding of the topic under study. These are preliminary conclusions and have yet to be fully worked out. The aim in writing this paper was primarily to offer a conceptual development. It is hoped that it has provided a contribution to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of intergenerational relations, a task that can only become more pressing with current demographic change.

NOTE

1 AARP is now the self-designation of the former American Association of Retired Persons.

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