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Changing intergenerational relationship

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This article explores the literature on intergenerational relationships within psychological and sociological disciplines. After a brief description of the different meanings of the term 'generation', two theoretical perspectives are discussed: Mannheim's theory of generations and Bengston and colleagues' theory of intergenerational solidarity. Particular attention is given to the process of intergenerational transmission. This is followed by a rereading of the concept of generation in light of the relational–intergenerational perspective. This perspective attempts to consider together family and social generations, taken to be interdependent. The application of this perspective to the transition to adulthood is crucial to an understanding of intergenerational dynamics, whether in the family or in the community. It concludes with reflections on the meaning of the intergenerational transmission as seen from the relational-intergenerational perspective and recent research findings.

'Generation plays a central role in understanding how a society inherits the legacy of the past, considers the present, and moves into the future'.[1] Through generational transformation and intergenerational transmission, the legacy of the old generation is inherited and recreated as it is passed on to the new. In this way, legacy is processed and transformed as both continuity and change in every day experience during the life course.

What do we mean by generation?

There is some dispute over the meaning of 'generation'. Studies of intergenerational relations have proposed four definitions[2]: generation may be defined as *cohort*, as a stage of life connected to styles of consumption, as genealogical lineage or, finally, as a group of people who have experienced similar historical

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events. The first definition, that is, generation understood as cohort (*demographic definition*), refers to a unit of developmental analysis founded on birth year or years.[3,4] The time period could be a year, a decade, or the average interval between the birth of an individual and the subsequent birth of his or her own child, usually taken to be 25 or 30 years. In this case, cohort is recognized to be a critical variable affecting the manner in which people understand self and social order. The second definition has to do with the concept of styles of consumption and categories of consumers (*economic definition*) by which we mean a set of individuals who, because they are of the same age, have similar tastes in consumption or engage in the same relationship with the system of production. In this case, we can identify at least three co-existing generations: 'youth', 'adults' and 'the elderly'. In the third, a generation may be defined as a specific type of family relationship (of parentage and kinship) (*genealogical definition*) and less in terms of the fact of belonging to a certain age group or of having lived through the same historical period.[5] Finally, the fourth definition of generation is founded on a shared socio-historical experience (*historicist definition*[6,7]). The supporters of this definition emphasize the particular historical event that conditions, in cultural and social terms, the subjects who have experienced it. According to this perspective, an individual belongs to a single generation for his or her entire life. This definition makes it possible to talk about the '1960's generation', for example, by which we mean those adolescents that lived through the 1960s, or the 'civic generation', that is, the generation that experienced the Great Depression and World War II.

In whichever way we understand the notion of generation, the definition is not purely formal: it has a profound meaning that derives from the cultural values sanctioned by members of a societal community, is connected to clear choices both in the area of research as well as in the context of psycho-social interventions and implies differing theoretical thinking regarding relations between the generations.

A substantial portion of the research makes reference to two theories in particular: Mannheim's Generation Theory, which maintains that significant discontinuity exists between the generations, and the more complex theory of Bengston, which posits the coexistence of elements of continuity with elements of discontinuity between the generations.

The theory of generation has a venerable history in psycho-social science, having 'originated as a part of Karl Mannheim's[7] search for an existential basis of social knowledge independent of social class'.[8] It is a cultural theory: Mannheim attributed cohort differences in behaviour to values and attitudes. He suggested that generation may be understood in three ways. First, he used the term '*generational location*' (*Generationslagerung*), to refer to what demographers today would call a birth cohort, adding that people who belong to the same cohort

are constrained by a similar historical and social situation. Second, he used the term '*generation of actuality*' (*Generationszusammenhang*), to describe people belonging to the same birth cohort who participate in a common destiny due to the 'concrete bond' that is forged between them by virtue of the cohort's shared exposure to 'social and intellectual' conditions. Unfortunately, this crucial distinction is not always observed and the terms are used interchangeably.[9] Third, he used the term '*generation unit*' to signify people who belong to the same cohort (*Generationseinheit*): this refers to a state in which uniformity of response to specific social phenomena has been established as a result of shared experiences among members. This uniformity implies similarity in consciousness and shared orientation toward historical problems, and creates distinctive value orientations and cultural styles specific to a generation. In Mannheim's theory, generation is a birth cohort that is aware of itself as being different from other birth cohorts due to shared events that occurred during its formative period. Thus, not every birth cohort becomes a generation. For example, the birth cohort succeeding the baby boomers has been labelled 'Generation X' because it lacks a generational consciousness: 'Few, if any, galvanizing events or movements occurred around which a special identity could be formed'.[10] 'Thus, those born at the same time may share similar formative experiences that coalesce into a "natural" view of world … People are thus *fixed* in qualitatively different eras'.[11]

How does Mannhein's theory answer the crucial question regarding continuity and change between generations? To explain continuity and change between generations, Mannheim proposed the construct of 'structures of memory' at individual and social levels: the differences between generations are produced by the differences in 'the stratification of experiences and memories'. An experience may create only one of the stratified memories for the older generation, whereas the same experience creates a memory that comes to form the fundamental consciousness for the younger generations.

Mannheim's theory of generation has been extensively criticized: if it provides a strong foundation for the study of generation, it also reveals several weak points.

Mannheim paid little attention to the fact that the culture created by the new generation encounters control by the older generations.[1] He emphasized that the culture created by the new generation constitutes an entirely new social order and assumed that the differences between generations are permanent. However, he forgets that the generative process in part entails the passing on of that which is valued from one generation to the next. This results in each generation becoming extremely self-referential in this theory. Mannheim's concept of stratification of experiences in the memories structure is too simplistic.[1] Generation Theory predicts that culture will be transformed with each successive generation but fails to explain the process of continuity and change within society.

In contrast to this view, which emphasizes *differences* between generations, Bengston and Kuypers[12] underscore the *sharing* and *continuity* of culture between generations.

Bengston, Marti and Roberts[13] first assert that 'the term generation should be reserved to represent role status within a family hierarchy. In contrast, the term cohort should be used only to represent a group of people born within a specified range of years who move together through time. It is often assumed that these individuals experience a series of developmental and historical events at approximately the same time. A generation is not synonymous with a cohort. […] Generations apply to families and micro-level interactions, whereas cohorts reflect societal and macro-level dynamics.'

According to them, if we are to understand transmission between generations, we must consider the interface among several processes – those outside the family in the society at large as well as those within the family and even within the individual.

In their work, the genealogical definition is especially prominent: the social context is not accorded the same value and interest as is given to the family context. On the contrary, the former is somewhat relegated to the background. Central to Bengston's thought is the desire to understand perceptions of distinctiveness and influence,[14] similarity and contrast among generations.

With a view to explaining a process that stretches across generations, Bengston and Kuypers[12] propose that as people age, they are concerned about the myth that the significance of their existence will be lost. In order to avoid such a loss and reduce to a minimum the differences with following generations, they endeavour to transmit to following generations the values and traditions that have shaped their everyday life. By engaging in such generative behaviours, the adult generation seeks to achieve a symbolic immortality.[15] In contrast, young people have a strong desire to assert their own identities and fear that the previous generation's desire could lead to a loss of their identity. For this reason, young people tend to discard the values and traditions of the older generation. If adults stress the importance of transmitting their values and institutions, the young steer clear of them. This leads to what Bengston and Kuypers called 'generational stake' or 'generation gap', to indicate a basic difference between older and younger generations.

In order to understand the 'generation gap', Bengston and colleagues studied the components and stability of intergenerational *solidarity* and the socialization of *value* in the family.

In their studies of ageing parent-adult offspring generations, they[16] divided the concept of intergenerational solidarity into six independent dimensions (affect, association, consensus, exchanges, norms and structure). They arrived at the general conclusion that dimensions of solidarity remain remarkably stable over

time – even, for example, in grandparent–grandchild relationships, where change might be the most expected. On some issues, such as global values, intergenerational congruence existed, whereas on other issues, such as child-rearing attitudes, marked differences seemed to exist.[17]

These studies revealed more homogeneity between generations than was previously thought, even if Bengston also cautioned that, sometimes, similarity between generations may be a reflection of a common social location and not the direct transmission of values.

Both approaches are important because they clarify significant aspects of the phenomenon of generation. Nevertheless, we must not forget that each of these theories has been influenced by the historical context in which it developed and, especially in the case of Mannheim by the ideological framework which in his case is strongly Marxist with an emphasis on class struggle. In any case, these approaches also turn out to be one-sided and simplistic in many respects.

Each of them focuses on a specific context – the first social, the second familial – ignoring that the two contexts are mutually interdependent and beneficial to one another. We will see that the relational–intergenerational perspective gains its impetus precisely from this consideration in defining the concept of familial and social generation.

Mannheim and Bengston's opposing approaches indicate a difference in the way the concept of generation is developed: the first focuses on change, the second on continuity. Mannheim's theory emphasizes the inevitability of differences due to different locations in developmental and historical time: each cohort must deal anew with issues of identity, intimacy, values and appropriate behaviours as it moves into adulthood. The second position minimizes generational contrasts: differences between generations are apparent and temporary. However, just as each approach focuses on one of the two conflicting perspectives, neither can sufficiently and clearly explain the generational dynamics that lead to societal changes and continuity.

Looking for evidence of continuity or discontinuity between generations means paying attention to the process called transmission.

The intergenerational transmission of values: continuity or discontinuity

In an overview of the literature on intergenerational relations, one notices that much of the research conducted on this topic has been concerned with transmission and continuity/similarity or not transmission and change/dissimilarity. The processes of transmission of values between familial generations have been especially investigated (see, for example, Bengston and colleagues).

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The empirical studies conducted so far have almost exclusively emphasized the content of the transmission (*what* is transmitted), often neglecting the modalities (*how* it is transmitted), which are more difficult to study from the methodological point of view. When seen as a process, intergenerational transmission does not appear to be rigid, but is dynamic: the generations, dynamic entities embedded in a changing socio-cultural context, are differentiated by the characteristics and style of the transmission.[18] Thus, transmission is never absolute, but is variable. That which is transmitted is liable to continual negotiation and redefinition and, whenever it is not sufficiently reinforced, disappears or is substituted by something that is even quite different in nature.[19]

The intergenerational transmission of values and traditions – of everything that is symbolic – is by nature bi-directional: while we should not underestimate its substantially hierarchical (*up-down)* arrangement, which means that previous generations constitute the matrices of influence (whether by means of discursive modalities or through referential models), the transmission of values is characterized by '*reciprocal influence*' between the generations.[14,20–22] In this respect, Lawrence and Valsiner[23] distinguish between *transmission*, understood as a unidirectional process that does not entail reorganization of whatever is transmitted in which any changes are explained as 'error' in the process, and *internalization*, defined as a process characterized by the reworking and transformation of whatever has been transmitted. This is not seen as an automatic operation of copying or transmitting, but rather a process involving coordination of the new with the old and the recombining and restructuring of both. Internalization, in turn, is closely connected with *identification.* Parents unconsciously transmit values to their children (by an *automatic process*) who then *identify* with their parents and with the models they provide (adopting an *active role*), and *internalize* the transmitted values.

Grusec, Goodnow and Kuczynski[24] have introduced the concept of *agency* with respect to parents and offspring in the transmission/internalization of values to highlight the active role played by both parties in this process. It is therefore not by chance that it is precisely the contribution of factors attributable to parents and children's characteristics, as well as to the bond uniting them, that influences the outcome of the transmission, usually judged in terms of the similarity/difference existing between the generations. Arguing for the existence of a two-phase process (perception and acceptance) that is anterior to the agreement/disagreement between the generations, Grusec and Goodnow[25] have demonstrated, on the one hand, the importance of the coherence and constancy of the messages transmitted by parents and, on the other hand, the influence of variables, for the most part relational and affective in nature, connected to the offspring's acceptance/rejection of what is perceived.

Over and above the specific features of the model proposed by Grusec and Goodnow (recently taken up by Knafo and Schwartz[20,26,27]) this concurs in showing the complexity of the transmission process, which fits well with the hypothesis that it is divided into phases,[28,29] and is impacted by variables linked to family functioning and dynamics.

In particular, the presence of loyalty, openness and credibility in relationships results in parents being perceived by their children as models worthy of imitation, which promotes values transmission and internalization.[30]

Child-rearing styles greatly influence this process: in particular, the authoritarian style (based on respect for rules that are only minimally negotiable) goes hand in hand with less adhesion on the part of offspring to parents' values. True adhesion to parents' values (which can be viewed in terms of sharing) presupposes, in effect, that the child experiences as his or her own the values that the family proposes but does not impose.[31] Moreover, it should be pointed out that each child-rearing style already carries within itself, more or less implicitly, a series of values (for example, the authoritarian style emphasizes the values of obedience and respect for authority)[27,32] and that it is inevitably embedded in a wider and more complex relational and familial dynamic.[33]

Intergenerational transmission is usually measured in relation to the *degree of agreement/disagreement* or *similarity/difference between the generations.* Goodnow[19] emphasizes in this connection that the detection of agreement or similarity between the generations is not automatically synonymous with transmission, just as the lack of similarity is not synonymous with the failure of transmission. In reality, she argues, the relations between the generations are characterized by the presence of a *dialectic* between continuity and novelty, between production and reproduction and the presence of transformative processes is inevitable. Whenever two generations exhibit total agreement about the importance they attribute to a particular value, this does not at all mean that they expend the same *commitment* in defending and supporting this value and in carrying out the actions that it implies.

The relational–intergenerational perspective: a new conceptualization of generation

A new understanding of the concept of generation and how relations between the generations evolve, is provided by the relational–intergenerational perspective.[2,34] From this point of view generation can be defined as:[35]

> the social *relationship* that binds those who share the same location in the family lineage (offspring, parents, grandparents) with respect to the manner in which this location is treated by society through the social spheres that mediate these relationships inside and outside the family.

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According to this perspective, the construct of generation is based, on the one hand, on historical–biological age in conjunction with the relationships of descendancy–ascendancy (familial axis) and, on the other hand, on the mediation that society, and particularly welfare programmes, bring to bear on these bonds (social axis). Thus, the definition of generation emerges as the synthesis between the familial sphere and the social sphere and allows us to locate generations in the complex dynamics having to do with the allocation of resources and generalized exchanges. It is therefore possible to capture both horizontal (intra-generational) and vertical (inter-generational) relationships. Within this theoretical framework, the meaning of the concept of generation therefore lies in the *bond*, enacted inside and outside the family, which is to say, in the community.

Analysing the intergenerational relationships from this perspective also means taking into account the bonds between family and society, since familial generations and social generations, being interdependent, cannot be considered separately. In the literature, the relationship between the family and society is often in the background and treated in a generic way. The social realm has been defined as the environment outside the family and parallel modalities have been found in the inner functioning of the family and its way of relating to society.[36,37] Others have taken a socio-cultural perspective, seeing the social environment as cultural history to be considered in parallel with family history and genetic influences. A good example of this approach is McGoldrick, Heiman and Carter's[38] model that hypothesizes the existence of an inclusive relationship between a person, family and cultural context and accentuates the central role played by socio-cultural events for individual and familial trajectories. This model acknowledges the family's function in mediating the exchanges that occur between individuals and the socio-cultural context.

The relational–intergenerational point of view challenges us to further enrich this perspective and to read the social realm not as a generic context or as a cultural context that surrounds the family, but as a social context that has been organized by multiple generations.

The current individualistic conception of post-modern society, essentially centred around the individual, makes it very difficult now to read either the family or society in terms of generations. In families, today, the new born child is represented as something possessed and produced by the couple rather than as a new generation on the threshold of history, destined to renew the family legacy and to contribute to society. To conceive of one's child as a new generation confers a strong identity upon the family, as was the case in our culture not so long ago. At the opposite extreme, losing a sense of multiple generations means that families have weak identities. In the same way, society is conceived of as a 'society of individuals'[39] rather than as being composed of generations.

The intergenerational dimension does not only concern the bonds and exchanges between the generations within the family and between the generations within the society, but also the bond between the family and society. Both in families and in the society, therefore, generative and/or degenerative processes can be set in motion: the former produce well-being, allow for the development of identity and enhance family and social histories while the latter produce distress, undermine family history and can cause the deterioration and disappearance of social traditions and even of civilization itself. The exchanges between family and social worlds are closely connected and whatever takes place between the generations in families influences whatever occurs between the generations in society, and vice versa. This is an aspect that is often neglected or, at the least, undervalued. Adult generations may not take into consideration the effect their behaviour in the family has on society. On the other hand, society may repress the fact that the generations are an extension of a reality that originates in the family and may not emphasize the connection between social and family generativity.

Generations should be conceived as intersecting points between the family's status role and the social status role linked to society. The key words of the relational–intergenerational perspective are *generativity* and *identity*. 'Thinking in terms of *generations*' in light of the definition just mentioned means focusing on *generativity*, which pertains to the interrelationship of different generations and is expressed in the 'care' that is given to the generation succeeding one's own and in the process of identity construction that this new generation undertakes.

Erikson[40] originated the concept of generativity developed recently by McAdams and de St.Aubin,[41] Kotre[42,43] and Snarey.[44] Erikson[40] defined generativity as 'the widening concern for what has been generated by love, necessity, or accident; it covers the *ambivalence* adhering to irreversible obligation'. Generativity represents support and assistance expressed in activities such as taking care of children, mentoring and engaging in volunteering.

'The virtue of care ties together different generations, promotes exchange between generations, and passes on values from generation to generation. Thus generativity includes both *creating* and *caring*. The entire expression of generativity requires *letting go* in addition to creating and caring'.[1]

The Eriksonian notion of cycle of generation is extremely useful for understanding the problem of generations. The cycle of generation starts when the preceding generation (adult) interacts with the needs for *identity* formation in the next originated youth generation. Generativity does not mean controlling the next generation or demanding adherence to the preceding generation's values and traditions. Generativity provides support to the next generation in forming its own identity by letting go of what has already been created. The new generation

will adopt or modify the values of the preceding generation and, in so doing, will develop its own unique identity.[43,15] Thus, generativity allows for both continuity and change between generations and the relationships between generations are converted from controlling to caring.

'Thinking in terms of *generations*' in light of the relational–intergenerational perspective, implies clarifying the concept fleetingly alluded to by Erikson of the *ambivalence* that is inherent in the relations between generations.

In Bengston's approach, intergenerational solidarity – in its six dimensions – serves to maintain cohesion within the family; the negative aspects of the family are considered to be the absence of solidarity. The research on intergenerational relations demonstrates that even within families in which all the dimensions of familial solidarity are present, we also find dissatisfaction with relationships, conflicts (sometimes even serious conflicts) and the desire for independence, which cannot simply be labelled as the absence of solidarity. In order to understand the reality of intergenerational relationships in light of these considerations, Luscher[45] has proposed the concept of *ambivalence.*

The idea of ambivalence, used for the first time by Bleurer,[46] was defined by Freud[47] as the simultaneous presence of feelings of love and hatred for the same individual (usually a parent). Luscher[45] proposes instead a definition of ambivalence that includes both the socio-structural as well as the individual level. Accordingly, ambivalence occurs when the dilemmas and polarization of feelings, opinions, actions and even the contradictions in social relationships and structures, which are important for personal and societal development, are interpreted as being fundamentally irreconcilable. Ambivalence should not be confused with ambiguity, which defines a situation of uncertainty and lack of clarity within the family and may also contribute to ambivalence, but does not necessarily imply opposing perceptions or feelings. In this view, ambivalence is the result of the intertwining of two key dimensions that define the 'Cartesian space' of the intergenerational relationship: the institutional aspect and the cultural, interpersonal aspect.

In the institutional dimension, an opposition may exist between a strong link with the past (reproduction) and the desire for change (innovation). In the interpersonal dimension, there may exist opposing degrees of affinity between individuals of different generations: if similarities are found, they are referred to as convergences, if differences are found, as divergences. Combining these two polarized dimensions of ambivalence results in four types of intergenerational relations that correspond to the same number of strategies for coping with ambivalence:

(1) solidarity, or the conservation of consensuality: a situation in which both convergence and a link to the past are present;

(2) emancipation, or reciprocal maturation: in this case, reciprocal affective attachment (convergence) and openness to institutional change are uppermost;
(3) atomization, or conflictive separation: a situation in which there are fragmentations in the family, divergence in interpersonal relations and conflict on the institutional axis;
(4) captivation, or reluctant conservation: a situation in which there is high divergence and reference to the institution is used to champion the rights of one family member against another.

The concept of ambivalence thus attempts to take into account the simultaneous coexistence and opposition of harmony and conflict between the generations. We propose a definition of ambivalence that sees it as the aspect of complexity inherent in the relations between the generations. Indeed, each generation has a degree of freedom in dealing with the legacy of values: it can accept this legacy, reject it or transform it. The ambiguity is not in itself either negative or positive but simply part of the social task to bind together the lives and histories of successive generations.

Different or the same? The case of the generation of young adults and that of their parents

The generational perspective's loss of importance has meant that it is now very rare that social processes are read in conjunction with the relations between the generations in the family and in society: indeed, they are often considered as two completely self-sufficient domains. In our opinion, however, a joint consideration of the generations in the family and in society allows for a reading of social phenomena and processes that is not only more productive but also more appropriate. A process in which what we are asserting is easily verifiable can be seen in the transition to adulthood, which takes the form of a clear transfer of the baton between the generations.

In this way, parents and offspring face each other as *family generations* (qualified by ascendancy–descendancy, by roles, and by family members' status) and adults and young people do the same as *social generations* (qualified by age, status, and social roles).

The relationship between generations always presents ambivalence: the preceding generation often fears, but also cares for, those that follow. In the past, this fear was expressed by subjugating the younger generations, denying their demands for differentiation and underestimating the value of personal growth. Today we are in an opposite situation: the younger generation is guaranteed ample space for personal development and differentiation, but a new and devious kind of ambivalence has appeared, in the form of ambiguous intergenerational stability.

The ongoing family, particularly in the south of Europe, may offer excellent opportunities for dialogue, exchange and emotional warmth, as well as an opportunity for young people to fulfil themselves in the personal sphere, but it could also become closed and inward-looking if it breaks generational continuity by discouraging young people from leaving the nest and accepting parenthood, which is to say, from acquiring full adult identity. If this is the case, we are witnessing the emergence of a form of *intergenerational impasse*.

McAdams and de St.Aubin[41] have pointed out that it is possible to see the failure of generativity coinciding with excessive self-interest. Even parents' attitudes towards their offspring may draw upon the logic of self-interest if, as often happens today, the parents are tempted to see mirror images of themselves in the few children they produce, considering them to be 'their' children and not new family and social generations. Parental generativity can thus acquire strong protective tendencies and weak emancipatory elements. Nevertheless, we must remind ourselves that this attitude cannot be understood in isolation from the realities of the social context. Society presents us with a dynamic between the adult and youth generations that is decidedly unfavourable to the latter and has been justly labelled as *generational unfairness*.[48] This is especially true of some of the countries in the south of Europe, such as Spain[49] and Italy, in which the Welfare State has generously supported the active generation, now adult or elderly, in past decades and is no longer able to do the same for the younger generation, which is about to acquire the status of adulthood. The younger generations must make a difficult entry into an environment that is both competitive and greedy in the way it divides up resources that are securely in the hands of the adult and elderly generations. It is as if adults, in the social context, have acted in ways that neglect their role as parents: they have lost sight of the generative quality of investment in future generations. Thus, the generations appear solidly united within the family and solidly opposed to each other and competitive in society. The dynamic underlying the intergenerational exchange between family and society is therefore founded on processes of *division* and *compensation* rather than on those of *transformation*. Parents, by prolonging the protective aspects of family life, compensate for the injustice present in society that they have unconsciously contributed to.

Young people find it difficult to make the generational leap and adults find it difficult to exercise responsible social generativity, it is a short distance from a developmental slow down to the obstruction of identity. The result is that the needs of distinctiveness are scarcely taken into consideration at an intergenerational level: the generations turn out to be confused, in the sense of undifferentiated, in families and *opposed* in society.

How can this risky intergenerational game be stopped? As Snarey[44] observed, parents are called upon to undertake a specific transition, and that is, to move 'from

parental generativity to *social generativity*, thus augmenting their own culture's symbolic system and passing it on to successive generations'.[42] In this way, while parents enact parental generativity with respect to their own children, however, social generativity implies that they are committed not only to raising their own offspring, but also, on a larger scale, to actively contributing to the realization of the generation to which their children belong. Social generativity is aimed at the future of all young people who are on the threshold of adulthood: it promotes an ethical cycle of generational inclusion and supports the establishment of *intergenerational equity.* As we have repeatedly said, this movement away from purely parental generativity to social generativity is particularly critical today in a cultural climate that is decidedly individualistic and that permeates both the parent–child relationship and the relations between the generations of adults and youth in society at large: we believe, however, that it is absolutely necessary.

Conclusions: to value or devalue the generational legacy

All the above highlights the complexity inherent in the relations between the generation of young adults and that of their parents. More than focusing on the issue of continuity, it seems to us that the problem lies in how to deal with the transfer and reception of the legacy of values. It should now be taken as a given that elements of continuity and discontinuity are embedded in a transformative process that each generation is expected to undertake.

The questions become: *how can each generation construct a generational identity – personal, familial and social – that succeeds in combining innovation and conservation*, *that is able to make use of the most up-to-date symbolic, values-imbued legacy in order to build generational identity, the individual's own well being and that of others and that knows how to develop and propel this legacy into the future? How can each generation succeed in being generative on the shoulders of a values-imbued and symbolic legacy received as a gift (transmitted) from the preceding generation and then rewrite and transform this legacy? How can it assume a historical-transformative identity?*

An interesting example of this process is to be found in the studies on pro-sociality and civic commitment in the younger generations, a concrete expression of the generative attitude.[8,50]

Rotolo and Wilson question the solidity of the thesis of Putnam[51] and those in agreement with him who have suggested that younger generations of Americans are simply not as civic-minded as those who experienced the Great Depression and the Second World War: 'Unlike this older generation, younger Americans have not acquired a sense of civic duty. They have not been taught that the nation has pulled together in order to survive. As the older generation departs the scene, volunteerism will fall out of favour'. [8] This view contrasts the 'long civic

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generation' characterized by a strong pro-social attitude, with the present one characterized by individualism and materialism.

During the past 25 years a decline in social capital and erosion of community involvement is thought to have taken place. Decline in civic orientations and behaviours is viewed as a setback to democracy and to well being. If we limit ourselves to the point of view provided by volunteerism – which is important, however, if we consider it to be one of the contexts in which people's pro-social motivation is most clearly expressed – in Rotolo and Wilson's opinion a glance at the data does not seem to support and even contradicts Putnam's generational theory. Oesterle, Kirkpatrick Johnson and Mortimer,[50] in a study on volunteerism during the transition to adulthood, also report the same findings: 'The empirical evidence for the perceived disengagement of young people is mixed, however. While trust among people has declined and materialism has grown, rates of volunteering and community participation have remained stable or even increased over the past two decades'.

Rotolo and Wilson[8] argue that the 'generational differences' between the cohorts, in the tradition of Mannheim, are not enough to explain the situation and that it is necessary to take into account structural changes that modify the forms and the type of community involvement. For example, volunteer work is one way of providing help to others: it is thus part of the 'care work' people do and a concrete manifestation of a pro-social attitude. It is also one way of being engaged in the civic life of one's community. Women born in more recent cohorts are more likely than those born in earlier cohorts to serve as caregivers in their family: lengthening life spans mean that women in the younger cohort are more likely to have elderly parents to care for. Thus, they may dedicate relatively less time to volunteer work but that does not signify a weakening of pro-social values and a decrease in community involvement, but rather the concretization of these values and attitudes on different fronts, with continuing positive implications for the community. Thus, the relative decrease in volunteer commitment in present-day society is only a change in the form in which the pro-social attitude is manifested.

These findings lead to the conclusion that the younger generation is not as lacking in civic-mindedness, but that the manifestations of values and pro-social attitudes can translate into different modalities and actions. We therefore have simultaneously the acquisition of a legacy transmitted by the previous generation and innovation and the transformation of that same legacy: this process could be seen as being 'two way', and obtains as the outcome the construction of the new generation's own generational identity.

In light of the above, we can safely say that the findings that reveal similarities and differences provide useful information for understanding the generational gap, but that they say very little about what the generations actually exchange between each other and how each builds its own identity.

It appears that, instead of limiting ourselves to detecting similarities and differences between the generations, it would be more fruitful to probe the process of valorization or devalorization of what is exchanged between the generations and how this is used for the construction of generational identity. In particular, that which should be valued – and which, when disempowered, undermines identity and survival – is precisely the *intention*, *desire* and *capacity* to *transmit* and hand on. That which is transmitted may change form in times of great change, but what must always be safeguarded is the desire and commitment to be generative. This means that, starting with the acknowledgement of whatever has been received, there is the desire to transform the symbolic, values-imbued legacy and to pass it on to the following generation. The key element that should be accorded value in the relationship between the generations, therefore, is generativity, with its aspects of *creating*, *caring* and *letting go*.

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