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Talkin' 'Bout My Generation
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1. Introduction

A review of the generation research literature shows that at least two themes are focal concerns: cohort replacement as the impetus behind cultural change and intergenerational differences in life chances.

The first line of generation research is evident in the work of social scientists explaining cultural change. In many publications, Inglehart (1977, 1990, 1997) has defended the thesis that modern Western society is witnessing a structural shift from materialist to postmaterialist values as a result of the process of cohort replacement. His well-known theory of the 'silent revolution' states that older generations were socialized in periods characterized by economic insecurity. They therefore hold materialist values stressing physical sustenance and safety. Younger generations, were raised in relatively prosperous times and give greater priority to postmaterialist values as regards quality of life, self-expression, and esteem. Cohort replacement is a slow process, but if it is associated with a substantial change towards postmaterialist values, according to Inglehart this change actually marks a silent revolution. In this line of thought, the cultural paradigm shift in basic values in Western society is directly related to generational replacement. Numerous other researchers have studied the relationship between generational renewal and cultural change (e.g. Asford & Timms, 1992; De Moor, 1995; Dekker & Ester, 1993; Ester *et al*., 1994; Halman, 1991; Van Deth & Scarbrough, 1995). The basic idea underlying these studies is straightforward: old generations are replaced by new ones, which bring in their own values that differ from those of old generations.

The second focal concern in generation research involves tracing intergenerational differences in life chances, as is frequently inspired by a sociology of stratification perspective. A key notion in this conception is that post-war modern society features a fundamental shift from life chances based on ascription to life chances based on achievement. This shift is viewed first and foremost as a result of the mushrooming higher education evident throughout the Western world. This line of research has produced an abundance of studies, particularly on intergenerational mobility and educational attainment (e.g. Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993). Applied intergenerational research has also been conducted in this context, e.g. with respect to differences between generations regarding income (e.g. SCP, 1996; Rijsselt & Hermkens, 1990), pension schemes and social security (e.g. Jansweijer, 1996), social independence (e.g. Sanders & Becker, 1994), technology applications and innovation (Sackmann & Weymann, 1994), and intergenerational solidarity (e.g. Laslett & Fishkin, 1992; Rijsselt & Knipscheer, 1993; Tempkin, 1992).

Though focussing on a rather traditional operationalization of the concept of generations, these studies on values and life chances have undoubtedly produced many important insights and some have even become classics within their field. Methodologically the 'intergenerational' aspect in both traditions is usually analyzed by comparing different birth cohorts. A crucial sociological notion emphasized by Karl Mannheim, the founding father of generation theory, has been lost along the way. It is the notion that a generation is not simply a numerical clustering of birth cohorts, but a group of contemporaries who share a sense of *belonging* to a generation. They share this because

they experienced common societal events and circumstances that marked their formative period and had lasting effects on their individual life courses. From a sociological perspective, birth cohorts as such are not equivalent to generations. A consciousness of the shared history and destiny is a necessary condition if a generation is to emerge, a generational consciousness that separates one generation from the others. Mannheim made this very clear in his distinction between generation location, generation as an actuality, and generation unit. The sociological concept of generations orginally refers to individuals who think of themselves as members of a generation and who (either implicitly or explicitly) express the extent to which this sense of belonging leads to unique experiences and endeavors. The traditional Mannheimian sociological view on generation is central to this article, which is based on parts of our book 'My Generation. Self-images, Youth Experiences and Fortunes of Generations in the 20th Century' (in Dutch). It can be viewed as an effort to 'bring man back' into generation research.[1]

2. Mannheim's generations

Karl Mannheim can be regarded the first generation theorist who sociologically positioned the concept of generations. He discerns three dimensions: generation location ('*Generationslagerung*'), generation as an actuality ('*Generationszusammenhang*'), and generation unit ('*Generationseinheit*'). A generation location refers to individuals born in the same period and socio-cultural space, who are exposed to a common range of historical events. A generation location is a potential generation that may or may not materialize. This potentiality of generation formation becomes reality by way of a generation as an actuality, which is defined as 'constituted when similarly located contemporaries participate in a common destiny and in the ideas and concepts which are in some way bound up with its unfolding' (Mannheim, 1952: 306). The step from a generation location to a generation as an actuality depends on the recognition of common experiences during the formative period of individuals who are born in the same historical and cultural space or region, who feel connected with their contemporaries because of the common destiny of their 'historischen Schicksalgemeinschaft'. Thus a generation as an actuality exceeds the mere historical co-presence of individuals. To corroborate this view, Mannheim draws on Ditlhey (1875), who emphasized the importance of commonly shared experiences as subjective, mental elements and the impact of the youth period or formative years. Shared formative years as such are not enough to create a generation as an actuality, it requires consciousness of the 'Generationslagerungangehörenden Individuen' of a shared destiny resulting from the collective formative years. It is within this generation as an actuality that generation units may emerge. They are the most concrete manifestations of a generation, and develop a common vision on societal events. Often cultural vanguards, they form a crystallization point that attracts other members of the same generation as an actuality. Different generation units within the same actual generation might hold very different views on these societal events. A generation unit is usually a quantitatively limited group within a larger generation, and generations can include various generation units, sence people may react differently to similar societal events.

Thus, the Mannheimian conceptualization of a generation stresses that a generation is not a mere statistical birth cohort. To begin with, a generation refers to individuals who are born in the same historical period, who live in the same socio-cultural space, and are aware of sharing similar youth experieces in their formative years. This conceptualization presupposes that generation members subjectively identify with their generation, are linked by a common biography, have an elementary sence of a joint destiny and of being different from other generations. Generation

membership assumes generation *consciousness* and a cognizance that one's generation is *distinct* from other generations. Generation membership thus depends on the subjective views of people in a particular social and historical setting. Analytically this implies that objective and subjective aspects should both be taken into account in empirical generation research. Much of the generation research aims at assessing the objective intergenerational differences by only examining differences between birth cohorts. A *subjective comparative* approach is needed to do justice to Mannheim's theory on the origins and emergence of generations. All things considered, this means that from a sociological point of view, birth cohorts are at best generation locations but by implication do not represent an actual generation. By merely measuring objective differences between statistical birth cohorts, generational accountancy has floated a long way from its sociological heritage. In our view, 'bringing man back in', is highly essential if generation research is to regain and refresh its intellectual roots.

In this article we present some empirical findings from a recent large-scale quantitative *and* qualitative generation study in the Netherlands that applied this subjective comparative approach by way of a straightforward reconstruction and empirical test of some of the core elements of Mannheim's theory. In essence, it incorporates the following research questions: Do people display generational consciousness? Do generations themselves perceive intergenerational differences in terms of values, norms and life chances? If so, do they attribute these differences to lasting effects of distinct formative periods?

First of all, we introduce the generation typology used in this study, followed by a description of the data and the main measurement instruments. Next we report the findings with respect to the three questions noted above. In the concluding section, we place the results in perspective and relate them to what we see as the main issues on the generation research agenda.

3. Generation typology, data and measurements

Primarily for analytical reasons, we have used the generation typology developed by Dutch sociologist Henk Becker (1990, 1992, 1997). Becker defines a generation as 'a clustering of cohorts characterized by a specific historical location and by common traits at the individual level (life courses, value orientations and behavioural patterns) and at the system level (size and composition, generational culture and generational organizations' (Becker, 1992: 23, our translation). In his typology he distinguishes five generations in the Netherlands who had their formative years in the twentieth century in quite different historical circumstances: *the prewar generation* (born between 1910 and 1930), the *silent generation* (born between 1930 and 1940), the *protest generation* (born between 1940 and 1955), the *lost generation* (born between 1955 and 1970), and the *pragmatic generation* (born after 1970).

The formative years of the *prewar* generation in the Netherlands were marked by the Depression in the thirties and World War II. Members of this generation grew up at a time of mass unemployment and devastating war, which severely limited their life chances. These dramatic experiences made this generation particularly apt to want to safeguard its financial security. Their norms and values stress a solid working ethic, sobriety, thrift and a desire for law and order. The formative period of the *silent* generation was in the postwar years of economic recovery and they entered the labour market at a time when jobs were amply available. Though on average, they had much better life chances, by and large members of the silent generation share the traditional norms and values of the prewar generation. The *protest* generation grew up in 'the turbulent sixties', a period of unprecedented economic prosperity and mushrooming higher education. In addition to

their generally excellent life chances, they are legendary for their political resistance to 'the capitalist system' and the *bourgeoisie*, and their experimenting with the icons of youth culture: sex, drugs, and rock and roll (cf. Righart, 1995). Members of the protest generation are assumed to have embraced norms and values that accentuate freedom, self-realization and self-expression, democratization, equality, and political involvement. The formative period of the *lost* generation coincides with the economic recession of the seventies and the mass youth unemployment of the early eighties. These circumstances negatively influenced the general life chances of this generation with lasting adverse effects over their life course.[2] Members of the lost generation share many of the values of the protest generation such as self-actualization and freedom, but embrace less exalted expectations, are less interested in political involvement, and exhibit a more down-to-earth 'no-nonsense' approach to societal issues. The *pragmatic* generation grew up in a period of economic recovery and is assumed to have better overall life chances than the lost generation. The alleged small size of this generation implies less severe competition for good jobs and incomes. In view of the recent formation of the pragmatic generation Becker does not speculate on possible distinctive norms and values.[3]

We would like to emphasize once again that we will mainly use this generation typology as an analytic tool, and not because we firmly believe in the sociological depth of this classification. Several objections to this classification can be and have been formulated (see Van den Broek, 1996; Van den Broek & Dekker, 1996; Dekker & Ester, 1995a+b; Diepstraten, Ester & Vinken, 1998; cf. Becker, 1995). By definition rigorous age boundaries between generations are arbitrary, and this is particularly true of adjacent cohorts.[4] But for our research purposes, the model suffices for the moment, since it is supplemented by a subjective comparative approach, i.e. our respondents themselves are asked to indicate whether they identify with a generation, what differences they see between generations, and whether they attribute intergenerational differences to distinct formative periods.

Our research design utilized a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures.[5] In late October 1996, we approached a representative sample of 770 respondents from the larger *Telepanel* of *CentERdata*, a survey research institute affiliated with Tilburg University.[6] *Telepanel* consists of a sample of 2,000 Dutch households who have a computer and modem at home and are interviewed on a weekly basis on a wide variety of subjects. Respondents are sent a questionnaire by modem, they fill in their answers on the computer screen, and then send them back to *CentERdata* by modem. On the weekend of October 25 and 26, a total of 770 Telepanel respondents above the age of 18 were sent the *Generation Questionnaire* by modem[7], and 500 of these 770 interviews were made available. This lower number is the result of making the total response representative in terms of age, sex, and education for the Dutch population.

The distribution of the respondents over the five generations is as follows: prewar generation (N=77), silent generation (N=66), protest generation (N=142), lost generation (N=150), and pragmatic generation (N=65). This nicely represents the age group distribution in the Dutch population.

A substantial number of issues related to intergenerational differences in life chances (in the fields of work, income, leisure and material possessions), and norms, values, and attitudes were addressed in the questionnaire. For the purposes of this article, we focus first on generational self-identification. Whether the generations themselves see generational differences has been tapped by looking at the perceived influence of one's own generation, the entry of one's own generation on the political arena, and the labour and income chances of one's own generation compared to older and younger generations. We assess whether or not the five generations explain cultural differences

between the generations by noting distinct youth experiences in their formative years. The precise wording of the questions will be introduced in the following section. In addition to the pre-structured questions, at several moments in the questionnaire we invited the respondents to freely reflect on a number of issues related to intergenerational differences and formative periods.[8] The respondents avid use of this possibility provided meaningful qualitative insights.[9] Some of their thoughts will be included when we analyze our main findings below.

4. Results

Generational and group consciousness
The core element of Mannheimian generation theory is that people have internalized a prime consciousness of belonging to a generation, and that members of the same generation share a fundamental sense of a common history, and of joint youth experiences marked by unique societal circumstances and events. Is generational self-identification widespread in the Netherlands, and are there differences in identification among the five generations? Our respondents were asked the following question: 'A generation is a group of people who grew up in the same period. Do you consider yourself someone who belongs to a particular generation?' Table 1 reports the results.

Table 1 about here

The findings clearly illustrate that generational consciousness is strong in the Netherlands, since 70% of the Dutch respondents feel that they are part of a generation. There are notable differences among the generations in this respect, though. In general it can be concluded that the older the generation, the stronger the generational consciousness. However, there is one exception to this rule: members of the lost generation least identify with a generation (albeit more than 50%). This result provides some support for the suggestions of Becker (1997) and the historians Righart and Luykx (1998) that in particular the image of the 'lost generation' is an alter image, making it an 'invented' generation as it were. The pre-war and protest generations, by contrast, seem to dwell more on ego images constructed on the basis of profound 'Schiksalserlebnisse' (World War II and the abandonment of outdated ideas in the cultural revolution of the sixties).

This distinction between alter and ego images makes it mandatory to further investigate the ideas people themselves have about generational consciousness. Do the respondents refer to specific societal events in their formative years when they identify with a particular generation? To a large extent, indeed they do. The oldest and youngest generation, however, describe their generation based on a concept of their present life stage: 'we are the elderly' or 'youth, that's us'. The older generations refer to specific historical events that set their generation apart, including the Depression and the Second World War. 'As a young adult I went through the war' (female, 82), 'my generation started off in the Depression of the 1930s' (male, 67), and was always 'working hard and leading a sober life' (female, 89). The silent generation refers to the war and the postwar economic recovery. 'Evacuation from Arnhem' (female, 64), 'the years '40-'45 were the childhood years of my generation' (female, 62), 'my generation started rebuilding Holland' (male, 60). The protest generation views itself as the postwar generation of baby boomers, but refers less than expected to cultural changes during their formative period: 'flower power, sexual revolution' (male, 49), 'gap generation' (male, 51), 'provo, Beatles' (male, 49). The lost and the pragmatic generation do not so much portray their generation in terms of historical events as in terms of generational style features. It appears that the style preferences mentioned by the lost generation are rather

heterogeneous, varying from flower power to post-hippie and disco, and by noting values such as freedom and individualism. The lost generation hardly mentions the social events they derive their grievous label from. The pragmatic generation is much more homogeneous in its style pattern: 'rave generation' (male, 22), 'heavy metal' (male, 18), and refers to its large-scale use of computers: 'the first full computer generation' (male, 21).

The interviews also show that generational consciousness is more intense than group consciousness. The Dutch realize that generations are not homogeneous and consist of contrasting groups. Nonetheless, when asked about the groups they affiliated with in their formative years, only 20% on average mention some (less than 10% among the lost generation). The two oldest generations mention religious, institutionalized and adult-led groups, the younger generations mention loosely organized subcultural style groups (rockers, hippies, punkers, hard-core disco music-fans).[10] The question about the groups they did *not* affiliate within their youth yielded a large response. The negative identification with generational groups (units) is much higher than the positive one. The five generations recall an abundance of extreme political or style groups that established the image of their generations, and they almost all dissociate themselves from them.

Generational self-identification can thus be assumed to be quite strong in the Netherlands, particularly among the older generations that are also most likely to attribute generational consciousness to striking historical events in their formative years, whereas the younger generations focus more on style patterns.

Generational politics

Recent empirical research in the Netherlands has rejected the widely assumed thesis of profound intergenerational differences – frequently based on the Becker typology - in political orientations and values (see Van den Broek, 1996, and Dekker and Ester, 1995a).[11] But are these conclusions also valid for subjective differences between generations? Do generations attribute the same political influence to their generation as they do to other generations? The first question we asked our respondents in this respect was how they rate the political influence of their generation. Table 2 shows the findings.

Table 2 about here

The results appear to confirm common sense perceptions: in a political sense, the oldest (prewar) and the youngest (pragmatic) generation both feel substantially less influential than the other three generations. The protest generation ascribes the most political influence to itself, and thus strikingly confirms its image as pictured in the media and popular narratives about this generation: the former critics of the political establishment are now ardent representatives of the political elite themselves. These political self-perceptions clearly resound in spontaneous remarks made by members of the protest, the prewar, and the pragmatic generation. 'Politics is run by my generation' (male, 54), 'most MPs are of my generation' (male, 49), 'politicians are mainly members of my generation, they determine politics' (female, 43). Especially the prewar generation experiences a fading political influence: 'Politicians feel that our generation is too old and is played out' (male, 81), 'the elderly have no power position' (male, 76), 'the world of politics does not listen to people who live on a pension and thus on the poverty line' (female, 68). Members of the pramatic generation also experience problematic access to the political domain: 'There are hardly any politicians younger than 35, so it is difficult to voice young people's views' (male, 24), 'my generation often demonstrates but it doesn't change a thing' (female, 24). Respondents were also asked directly

whether they think the world of politics takes them seriously: 'Do you feel the world of politics listens to your generation?' Table 3 shows the outcomes.

Table 3 about here

Again a considerable majority of the protest generation states that politicians do indeed pay attention to their demands. 'My generation is in control, so they listen to us' (female, 53). Once more, the prewar and the pragmatic generation in both feel their voice is not heard. 'If government cuts down it is always the elderly who are the victim' (female, 79), 'everyone over 50 is considered useless' (female, 63), 'students are pushed in two directions: they have to finish school faster and they have to take part-time jobs' (male, 22).

Generational opportunities
Now that we have some initial insight in whether the Dutch express generational consciousness and whether in their own view, generations play a different role in the political field, we move to the issue of perceived intergenerational contrasts in the domain of labour and income. According to generation theorists, life chances in this domain are the best indicators of intergenerational distinctions. Moreover, work and income are of essential importance to the life course of generations. In this context, the respondents were explicitly asked to rate the job and income chances of their generation as compared with older and younger generations. Table 4 and 5 summarize the findings.

Table 4 about here

In general the job and income chances of one's own generation are estimated as being equal or better than those of *older* generations. These estimates vary by generation, though. Members of the silent generation most frequently note that their chances are better. The protest generation comes second, and members of the lost and the pragmatic generation feel that their job and income chances are worse than those of older generations. 'At our age, the older generations had less difficulty finding a job' (female, 32), 'the elderly prospered during the postwar recovery when manpower was in demand' (female, 31), 'nowadays most young people have flex jobs, but the older generation usually had steady full-time jobs' (female, 21). What about the mirror image: job and income chances compared to *younger* generations? Table 5 shows the figures.

Table 5 about here

Almost half (47%) the Dutch respondents rate their job and income chances as roughly equal to those of the younger generations. Again, strong intergenerational differences are observed. Once again a relative large proportion (58%) of the members of the silent generation believe their chances are better than those of the younger generations, followed by the protest generation (42%). These optimistic views are illustrated by the following quotations. 'In the past there was always work for the older generations, and even though the younger generations are better educated, they rarely have lifetime jobs' (male, 61), 'my generation was lucky that there was labour scarcity, later generations were confronted with huge unemployment' (male, 50), 'the gap between well and poorly educated youth is becoming bigger, resulting in a poorer distribution of work and income' (male, 54). A majority of the youngest (lost and pragmatic) generations believes its chances are much the same as

those of younger generations. Combining Tables 4 and 5 leads to the conclusion that comparing the job and income chances of one's own generation with those of older *and* younger generations, the silent generation is clearly the most optimistic, and the lost and the pragmatic generations are the least optimistic.

Generational perceptions and youth experiences
So far we have detected intergenerational differences in generational consciousness, political influence, and life chances in the field of work and income. But generation theory, at least in the Mannheimian tradition, also stresses that generations differ as regards basic norms and values. Advancing our subjective comparative approach, we first examine whether the generations themselves perceive these differences between generations, and whether they attribute them to distinctive experiences in each generations formative years. Following Van den Broek and Dekker (1996) four fields have been selected that are the object in public debates and media stories of assumed intergenerational controversies: attitudes towards work, music, book or movie preferences, political attitudes, and norms and values with respect to raising children, family, and sexuality.These public debates and media stories often assume that younger generations differ from older ones in terms of a somewhat looser work ethic (less sense of duty, a stronger focus on self-realization), modern music, book or film preferences more progressive attitudes towards political and societal issues and more liberal views about raising children, family, and sexuality. We asked the respondents to indicate whether they think their generation differs in these respects from other generations. The results are given in Table 6.

Table 6 about here

In the minds of the Dutch, generations differ much more in terms of music, book, and movie preferences and values concerning raising children, family, and sexuality than in their attitudes towards work and politics. This is quite surprising, since most generation typologies underline differences in work orientations and political views. Ultimately, this reveals a striking contrast between the public disputes about intergenerational divergence and the subjective comparative judgements by the generations themselves. It is important to see whether the five generations vary as far as these judgements are concerned. This is indeed the case, as Table 7 shows.

Table 7 about here

The majorities of all generations believe that generations differ substantially in their music, book, and movie preferences. No significant intergenerational differences have been observed in this respect. The same holds true for political views, but in the opposite way. All generations state that their generation does not essentially differ as far as these views are concerned. Opinions about differences in attitudes to work do exhibit contrasts between the generations. Though the generations feel that attitudes to work do not mirror intergenerational dissimilarities, this notion is somewhat less shared by the prewar and silent generation. The reverse is true with respect to norms and values related to raising children, family and sexuality. Though all generations do experience strong intergenerational differences in this field, these differences are particularly stressed by the two older generations.

The key issue is whether the respondents attribute their attitudes to work, style preferences, political views, and values and norms concerning raising children, family and sexuality to their

formative period, the years when they grew up. In order to see whether the respondents apply a generational perspective in explaining the intergenerational differences, they were asked how important personal experiences in their youth were for each of the four fields. The outcomes are presented in Table 8.

Table 8 about here

Attitudes to work and norms and values with respect to raising children, family and sexuality are the most strongly related to experiences in one's formative years. It is mainly in these two fields that the Dutch indicate that youth experiences still influence their present attitudes. This is far less true of political views and style preferences. Politics not only plays a rather limited role in the perception of intergenerational differences, *but* also as regards the influence of dominant youth experiences. This nicely concurs with the conclusion drawn by Van den Broek and Dekker (1996: 20) that 'some form of generational thinking can be observed among a large part of the population, but the political field only plays a minor role in the subjective experience of generations' (our translation).

Comparing Tables 8 and 7, it follows that attitudes to work and style preferences change places. Though the majority of the generations indicate that their style preferences strongly differ from those of the other generations, they hardly attribute these differences to any crucial experiences in their formative years. Conversely, though generations only perceive small intergenerational contrasts in attitudes to work, they do feel that youth experiences are quite crucial with respect to these attitudes. In short: the Dutch primarily emphasize the relevance of their formative period to their present attitudes towards work, and their norms and values in the domain of raising children, family and sexuality. Do some generations perceive a stronger importance of youth experiences with respect to these attitudes, norms and values? Table 9 outlines the answer.

Table 9 about here

All generations believe that theirs is distinct from the other generations as regards style preferences, but at the same time they feel their formative period is of limited importance to their present style preferences. These preferences thus are important intergenerational cultural markers, but the markers are not interpreted in a generational perspective by generations themselves. Norms and values as regards raising children, family and sexuality truly differentiate the generations, and this is all the more true of the older generations. Moreover, all generations feel their formative period is crucial to understanding their present norms and values, which is indicative of a subjective generational perspective. This is especially the case with the older generations. Political views are not viewed as features that set the generations apart. Although as such formative period experiences are not felt to be of great importance to present political attitudes, the generations differ slightly in their emphasis: the older generations emphasize the relevance of the formative period in this context. A similar conclusion holds true as regards attitudes to work. In general, the respondents argue that these attitudes do not reflect a generation gap. They do however believe that formative period experiences substantially affect their present attitudes to work. This biographical notion is particularly shared by the older generations.

There is thus no reason to conclude that there are strong intergenerational differences in all four fields, or that they are equally strong with respect to unique aspects of one's formative years. The findings provide mixed support. The Dutch most clearly feel that norms and values with

respect to raising children, family and sexuality differentiate their generation from the other generations, and they relate this to their formative period. In short, the clearest differences between generations are felt to be the ones pertaining to family values, and this is something that is explained in terms of a generational perspective. This perspective is particularly stressed by the older generations. It has to be noted, though, that given the non-longitudinal nature of our study, there is no way of knowing whether the observed intergenerational differences are a direct consequence of generation membership, period effects, or age effects.[12]

Generational consciousness effects

One issue remains. We have observed that generational consciousness is quite substantial in the Netherlands. We can hypothesize that intergenerational differences are more pronounced among generation members who display a firm sense of belonging to a generation than among members who do not. We can argue that generational consciousness thus sharpens intergenerational contrasts within generations, although this has generally not proved to be the case. Generational consciousness has a limited added value when it comes to detecting stronger differentiations between generations.[13] There are some interesting exceptions to this rule though. Some important effects of generational consciousness over and beyond objective generation membership have been observed: individuals who identify with their generation are more optimistic about their work and job chances compared to younger generations, feel that the world of politics listens to them, are more politically interested, and exhibit more political trust. They seem to connect better with the outside world. This finding can well be understood in the framework of the Mannheimian concept of generations. Generational consciousness assumes that the members of a generation are aware of sharing social circumstances and events. In this sense, generational consciousness presupposes societal commitment based on active cognizance of these circumstances and events. Awareness of being part of a generation is fed by an explicit and shared focus on basic social and political developments in society. Generational consciousness substantiates social involvement.

5. Conclusions

Generational consciousness appears to be widespread in Dutch society, and not only among the older generations. Dutch generations do experience a shared destiny, but this strong awareness does not necessarily create a sharp generation gap. On the contrary, intergenerational solidarity is greater than is often assumed (Diepstraten, Ester & Vinken, 1998). What then does it mean if people identify with their generation? Generational consciousness seems to reflects a need to bestow a positive structure upon one's personal biography and feel connected with one's contemporaries, rather than a strong emphasis on lasting intergenerational demarcation lines. Our interviews clearly demonstrate that the Dutch like to talk about their formative years and do so in imaginative and somewhat nostalgic terms. They experience a shared destiny without perceiving any unequivocal difference in the objective and subjective chances, norms and values of various generations. Moreover, generational consciousness seems to indicate social commitment. Individuals who identify with their generation are more likely to be interested in politics, to trust politics, to feel their voice is heard in the political arena, and to be more optimistic about their work and job chances compared to younger generations. And people with low generational awareness exhibit greater social isolation and indifference. It seems that generational consciousness is a prerequisite for social cohesion and social action.

Generational consciousness may be strong, but it does not penetrate all the areas of society

in the same way. Contrary to popular media narratives, attitudes to politics and work do not dominate the intergenerational debate. People themselves feel that generations are much more divided by style preferences (music, books, movies) and contrasting norms and values with respect to raising children, family and sexuality. The private domain appears to be more important than the public one when the Dutch contemplate intergenerational differences.

Studying generations by focusing on personal experiences and perceptions has three important theoretical consequences. Firstly, it necessitates a thorough examination of the differences between ego and alter images. Our subjective comparative approach shows that the ego and alter images of generations can be traced and portrayed. The approach moves beyond the trend toward objective 'generational accountancy' that dominates much of mainstream generation research. Though we do not dispute the importance of mapping objective intergenerational differences in life chances, we emphasize that the generational ego and alter images of these chances exist by virtue of the perceptions of the generations themselves. It does not make sense to look for a lost generation, for instance, now that we know this generation perceives itself as very advantageous in almost every way. The emphasis on ego and alter images is also very much in line with the classic Mannheimian generation approach, which holds that people *conscious* of sharing historical and societal 'Schicksale' feel part of a generation. Moreover, it is in keeping with the sociological tradition that views human action as meaningful and explains human behavior on the basis of values, norms, goals, preferences and of course restrictions. Secondly, an important task is to further theorize generational consciousness as a sensitizing concept. It does concur with a clear repudiation of a cutting 'generation gap', but does not seem to have a presence in all the various fields of life. Thirdly, including a subjective comparative dimension implies that other issues become more relevant. Research on intergenerational differences should devote more attention to the private domain, especially to norms and values regarding education, family and sexuality. Our findings indicate that it is particularly in this domain that generations experience the large differences they attribute to the period they grew up in. But has this always been the case and will it continue to be in the future? How are youth experiences in the private domain related to events and circumstances in the public domain? Are the experiences the strongest that directly connect personal histories to national history or are they non-related?[14] The three consequences strongly underline the future responsibility of 'bringing man back' into generation research. Adressing these consequences requires thorough and by all means longitudinal studies that make it possible to examine age, period, and cohort effects.

Notes

1 See internet: http://drc3.kub.nl:3269/generaties/mg.html. A revised version of this article was presented at the XIVth World Congress of Sociology, July 26-August 1, 1998, Montreal, Canada. We especially thank the participants of the RC34-session 'Citizenship and Participation' for the positive dialogue and their very helpful comments.

2 Recently, though, Becker re-evaluated the life chances of the lost generation and concluded that they are better than was estimated some years ago (Becker, 1997).

3 See for an internationally comparative trend study about social and cultural positions of this generation *The future of young generations* (Van Bommel, Ester & Vinken, 1995).

4 To avoid this problem, Becker distinguishes between 'core cohorts' and 'boundary cohorts'. This yields the following core cohorts: prewar generation (1920), silent generation (1935), protest generation (1947), lost generation (1960) and pramatic generation (undecided).

5 The study was commissioned by the Dutch Associated Press (GPD), and we thank them for their financial support. We also thank Dick van de Peyl and Karin Swiers of GPD for their support and crucial input.

6 See Diepstraten, Ester and Vinken (1998: 31-36) for full details on the sampling and data collection.

7 See Blankert *et al*. (1998) for detailed information about *Telepane*l.

8 Space was limited to one computer screen per issue.

9 See Mackay (1997) for an interesting qualitative study on three generations in Australia, and Miedzian and Malinovich (1997) for an extensive study of three generations of women in America.

10 For an elaboration on the value impact of the informal affiliations of young people as opposed to older generations, see the study *Political values and youth centrism* (Vinken, 1997).

11 Recently, the political profile of Generation X, the 'twenty something' generation, became a new issue on the generation research agenda, see e.g. Craig and Bennett (1997).

12 See Diepstraten, Ester, and Vinken (1998: 26-29) for this classic problem of unraveling age, period, and cohort effects in non-longitudinal studies.

13 Use was made of analysis of variance and covariance (ANOVA).

14 See the work of Schuman and Scott (1989).

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Tables

Table 1. Generational consciousness by generation: percentages*

		prewar	silent	protest	lost	prag-matic	all
yes	91	86	75	51	65	70	
no		5	8	18	28	19	18
don't know		4	6	7	21	17	12

* Significant (p<.01)

Table 2. Perceived influence of one's own generation by generation: means[a]

	prewar	silent	protest	lost	prag-matic	all
my generation has much influence in society	2,6	4,1	4,8	4,1	3,6	4,0 *

* Significant (p<.01)
[a] Scale ranging from 1 (very little) to 7 (very much)

Tabel 3. Does the world of politics listen to your generation?: percentages*

		prewar	silent	protest	lost	prag-matic	all
yes	36	56	63	55	29	51	
no	64	44	37	45	71	49	

* Significant (p<.01)

Table 4. Labor and income chances of one's own generation compared to *older* generations by generation: percentages*

	prewar	silent	protest	lost	prag-matic	all
better	30	59	45	23	28	36
worse	13	14	16	40	39	25
no difference	57	27	39	37	34	39

*   Significant (p<.01)

Table 5. Labor and income chances of one's own generation compared to *younger* generations by generation: percentages*

	prewar	silent	protest	lost	prag-matic	all
better	34	58	42	28	19	37
worse	21	26	16	11	14	16
no difference	45	17	42	61	67	47

*   Significant (p<.01)

Table 6. Perceived differences between generations in four fields: percentages

	none	somewhat	strong
attitudes towards work	23	47	30
music, book or movie preferences	11	28	61
political and social views	17	48	35
norms and values regarding raising children, family and sexuality	6	24	70

Tabel 7. Perceived differences between generations in four fields by generation: percentages strong difference

	prewar	silent	protest	lost	prag-matic	all	
attitudes towards work	49	41	25	23	18	30	*
music, book or movie preferences	67	59	63	54	69	61	
political and social views	52	28	37	28	33	35	
norms and values regarding raising children, family and sexuality	93	79	67	58	67	70	*

*   Significant (p<.01)

Table 8. Present importance of experiences during one's formative years in four fields: percentages

	not important	somewhat important	very important
attitudes towards work	4	31	65
music, book or movie preferences	26	46	28
political and social views	13	56	31
norms and values regarding raising children, family and sexuality	6	26	69

Table 9. Present importance of experiences during one's formative years in four fields by generation: percentages very important

	prewar	silent	protest	lost	prag-matic	all	
attitudes towards work	80	75	67	56	48	65	*
music, book or movie preferences	28	34	23	26	39	28	
political and social views	39	38	29	24	33	31	*
norms and values regarding raising children, family and sexuality	81	80	68	63	62	69	**

*   Significant (p<.01)
** Significant (p<.05)

Abstract

In this article, based on parts of our book 'My Generation' (in Dutch), we show that 'bringing man back ' into generation research is not only needed to do justice to Mannheim's generation theory, it also yields remarkable and essential information about generational distinctions. Actual generations, according to Mannheim, are cohorts that are conscious of belonging to a group with similar formative experiences, experiences with lasting effects that set them apart from other generations. Tapping this sense of belonging calls for research into subjective heuristics that reflect how generations estimate their life chances and basic values vis-à-vis other generations and the extent to which they relate these estimates to their formative experiences. We analyse these heuristics by combining quantitative and qualitative data on five Dutch generations: the prewar generation (born between 1910 and 1930), the silent generation (born between 1930 and 1940), the protest generation (born between 1940 and 1955), the lost generation (born between 1955 and 1970) and the pragmatic generation (born after 1970). Results show that generational consciousness is strong in the Netherlands. Only the 'lost generation' seems to be an 'alter image': its members have a relatively weak sense of belonging. Values as regards upbringing, family life and sexuality, set generations apart rather than political values, labour orientations and cultural styles that are most commonly used to stereotype generations. Generations identify different formative experiences with respect to these values. People conscious of generational belonging hardly experience stronger differences between generations. They do seem to be more involved socially. Generational consciousness is a prerequisite for social cohesion and social action, perhaps even for action linked to a 'generational cause'.

Who is who

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