Generational conflict and the sociology of generations: Mannheim and Elias reconsidered.

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Abstract

Since its publication in the 1920s Mannheim's paper *The Problem of Generations* has attained seminal status in marked contrast to Norbert Elias's theoretical formulations on generations. Despite Elias's close relationship over many years with Mannheim, and the symmetries in their sociological programmes, and, crucially, that Elias's work specifically addresses generational conflict, he remains invisible within the sociology of generations literature. Yet Elias's contributions on this subject are quite extensive traversing many of his major works. This paper begins by reviewing Mannheim's and Elias's formulations on generations and goes on to consider the relevance of Elias's theoretical ideas in relation to the contemporary work on generations. The paper contends that Elias has much to offer in this regard especially given, as van Krieken (1998) suggests, that Elias developed and advanced Mannheim's contributions on generations.

Key words: Elias, generational conflict, Mannheim, sociology of generations

Introduction

It is over twenty years since Pilcher (1994) suggested that the concept of generations was quite marginal within sociological theory. Indeed, a decade later Edmunds and Turner (2005) took a similar position but qualified it by claiming a change was at hand. It now seems that a change, at some level, has occurred with renewed academic focus on the sociology of

generations (see for example Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014; Brannen, 2005; Bristow, 2015; Edmunds and Turner, 2002; Purhonen, 2016; Turner and Edmunds, 2002); a conclusion also drawn by Bristow (2016a). Meanwhile, White (2013) has argued in the case of Britain[1] that the application of the concept of generation in narrating social and political changes is very much in vogue in public discourse. What is clearly discernible in much of this work is the issue of (inter) generational conflict. Furthermore, while different theoretical frames have been drawn upon to illuminate generational conflict, and the sociology of generations more broadly, it is the work of Karl Mannheim which is, in the words of Purhonen (2016: 95), 'the canonical, unifying point of reference in the field.' Any analysis of the sociological literature on generations ultimately leads one to the work of Karl Mannheim and the theoretical ideas he expressed in his essay *The Problem of Generations* (first published in 1928). It is consistently identified and presented as either the 'starting point' or primary lens to address the sociology of generations (see Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014; Bristow, 2015; Edmunds and Turner, 2002; Hayward, 2013; Higgs et al., 2009; Purhonen, 2016). Historical reviews of the literature on generations adopt a somewhat similar take (Redlich, 1976; Spitzer, 1973). Mannheim's influence on the sociological analysis of generations is not only evident from the application of his ideas across the social sciences and the specialised disciplines comprising it, but also from the fact, as Bristow (2016b: 2) suggests, that much of the work on the sociology of generations has been directed at either extending or challenging his ideas.

As has been well documented (see Goudsblom, 1987), Mannheim had for several years a close working relationship with Norbert Elias. While it is also recognised that there are close symmetries between their theoretical approaches (see Kilminister, 1993). Neither of these facts, nor the focus on intergenerational relations in Elias's works, have led those interested in the sociology of generations to Elias's formulations. This, as already noted, is in marked contrast to the status afforded to Karl Mannheim, and indeed to other sociologists[2],

though to a lesser degree. So although intergenerational relations, and intergenerational conflict specifically, forms a central aspect of several of Elias's major works, Elias's influence has been negligible within the sociology of generations; he remains pretty much invisible, with his work generally uncited and overlooked. In this paper I want to revisit this territory – the sociology of generations, and generational conflict in particular – and illustrate how the work of Norbert Elias could contribute to the contemporary study of generational conflict, and the sociology of generations more broadly.

Recent contributions to the sociology of generations follow on from several attempts over the decades to document the development of the concept of generations. The Spanish philosopher Julian Marías' (1970[1967]) work perhaps being one of the early examples. While Marias' text is primarily directed at explicating the work of the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, of whom he was a student, he starts by providing a chronological account of the evolution and development of knowledge around the concept of generations. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, his analysis is largely philosophical rather than sociological; though historical-sociological thinking does find expression, namely in the focus on the relations between generations and their social functions. However, scholars of Mannheim interested in the sociology of generations may be more inclined to find favour with the historian Friz Redlich's (1976: 253) unsympathetic quip that, 'While Marias devotes 49 pages to Ortega, Karl Mannheim gets 60 lines'. Both Redlich and his fellow historian Alan Spitzer (1973), whose works date to the 1970s, provide extensive historical overviews of those associated with developing the study of generations. What one can certainly conclude from the reviews and analyses provided by Marías, Redlich, and Spizter is the complete absence of any mention of Norbert Elias and his work. More contemporary summations of the sociology of generations differ little on that front (see Bristow, 2015, 2016b; Edmunds and Turner, 2002; Purhonen, 2016; White, 2013). For instance, Bristow (2015: 33–34) suggests that

notwithstanding the prevalence of Mannheim's ideas 'present-day interest in generations has led to a revival of other theories' including those developed by contemporaries of Mannheim; there is no mention of Elias though.

Despite the fact that Mannheim remains the primary point of inspiration for many contemporary scholars interested in generations it is also acknowledged that his theory is difficult to apply to the empirical study of generational relations (Bristow, 2016: 13). Elias's formulations are on the other hand are much more empirically employable, and as I will attempt to illustrate they can provide a stronger basis than those of Mannheim's for developing empirical-theoretical explanations. I also believe Elias's formulations on generations deserve examination and consideration by scholars of generations given, as van Krieken (1998) suggests, that he fleshed out and built upon Mannheim's arguments in relation to generations. Thus, the primary aim of this paper is to illustrate how Elias's formulations and observations provides a stronger theory for comprehending and explaining intergenerational tensions and conflict. To do so I will begin by comparing and contrasting Mannheim's and Elias's work on generations and generational conflict, tracing symmetries, overlaps and schisms. Following on from this I consider the recent contemporary work on the sociology of generations and how and where Elias's work could contribute to this. Of course there is considerable overlap and interconnections between the sections given that Mannheim's theoretical formulations on generations tends to be made visible through many contemporary studies.

Elias and Mannheim and the Concept of Generations

Many comparisons of Elias and Mannheim have appeared as part of various syntheses and introductions to Elias's theoretical approach (see Mennell, 1989; van Krieken, 1998) and in similar types of contributions directed at Mannheim (see Kettler et al., 2016). However, it is Richard Kilminster (2007), more than anyone, who has comprehensively brought to light the connections between Karl Mannheim and Norbert Elias's work. Kilminster, an Eliasian scholar, maintains that, 'Mannheim was a significant figure in shaping Elias's sociological outlook' (p.40) and his influence on some aspects of Elias's work can be clearly discerned. He documents in detail the relationship between the two men while providing a comparison of their sociological programmes. On that front, he contends that despite significant differences, there are similarities and overlap in their wider theoretical frames which he illustrates by exposing the common themes and ideas which infuse their works. Parallels between Mannheim and Elias have also been noted by Kettler et al. (2016). The more explicit explication and formulation of ideas on generations from Elias tends to emanate from his work published post 1960 (see Elias and Scotson, 2008[1965]; Elias, 2013[1989]) Certainly the most overt exposition of Elias's formulations on generations can be found in *Studies on the Germans* first published in 1989; an observation previously made by van Krieken (1998). Indeed, van Krieken is one of few to directly link Elias's formulations on generations with Mannheim's and to also identify the place of generations in Elias's work more generally (see also more recently Goodwin and O'Connor, 2009).

While neither Mannheim's or Elias's specific formulations around generations can be detached from their wider theoretical programmes, I want to focus more specifically on their treatment of generations; rather than comparisons of their wider theoretical approaches which already exist (see Kilminster, 1993, 2007). Mannheim's (1952) seminal paper seeks to address how to conceptualise or define a social grouping as 'a generation' – a recurring question for those interested in the sociology of generations (see for example Burnett, 2003).

Here Mannheim explicitly rejected the notion of biological determinism (pp. 290–291) while acknowledging that biological factors are interwoven or embedded in social and historical processes. For Mannheim, a central aspect of comprehending 'a generation', and distinguishing between generations, is the concept of being 'similarly located':

> The fact that people are born at the same time, or that their youth, adulthood, and old age coincide, does not in itself involve similarity of location; what does create a similar location is that they are in a position to experience the same events and data, etc., and especially that these experiences impinge upon a similarly 'stratified' consciousness. (p.297)

Thus, a generational location limits and predisposes individuals to specific 'modes of behaviour, feeling and thought' and facilitates a specific 'consciousness' – what could be termed a generational consciousness. He also placed considerable stress on the importance of childhood experiences in determining later behaviour and feelings (p.298). For Elias (2012[1991]), too, those comprising a generation are bonded through a similarity of experience and feeling and what he referred to as we-feelings and we-identity can emerge. He also links we-identity with social habitus (what he saw as a second nature way of thinking, feeling, and acting) – a point I will return to in greater detail later in this paper. Elias stressed that collective consciousness or we-identification has always been a feature of human beings and in more modern times these collective identifications have become more multi-layered (people have several layers of we-identification). He also identified the importance of childhood in socialisation processes.

As noted already, Elias's main theoretical formulations and contentions on generations are most clearly expressed in *Studies on the Germans*. Within that work Elias repeatedly stresses the sociological significance of generations, particularly intergenerational conflict. This is a social conflict, which for Elias is a central aspect of all social relations; a

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position he shared with Mannheim (Kilminster, 2007: 54). Elias did not specifically define the concept of generation. His use of the term mirrors that of its everyday use – the older generations, the younger generations. Neither Elias nor Mannheim placed much emphasis on how generations are to be empirically delineated particularly in terms of temporal length, which appears to have been a significant concern for those involved in some of the early formulations on generations (see Marías, 1970[1967] for an overview of these). Spitzer (1973: 1358) makes an insightful observation on this very issue – and a point also emphasised by Pilcher (1994) – 'specifying generations is no more arbitrary than specifying social classes, or ideologies, or political movements where there is inevitably a shading off or ambiguity at the boundaries of categories.'

Like Mannheim, Elias (2013[1989]) maintains that generations are certainly bounded to a degree by biological factors as well as a similarity of social conditions and experiences. And while Elias does not explicitly state it, as with his overall theory of society, he conceives of generations as webs of interdependent people – figurations. Elias argued that younger and older groups are structurally bound to one another – the young dependent on older groups in the process of growing up. In that sense it involves a fluid power relation. The power gradient between them can decrease or increase. It is the rise in the power chances of the younger generations which can intensify the often latent conflict between the generations.

Perhaps one of the most important insights to be found in *Studies of the Germans* in seeking to understand intergenerational tensions and conflicts is Elias's emphasis on the opening and closing of channels of opportunity for younger generations. Here Elias was referring to the opening, widening, closing or narrowing of channels to life chances and chances for meaning. For Elias the narrowing of access to career channels, to upward mobility and positions at the top is largely an unplanned process as opposed to a deliberate strategy deployed by older generations to block or prevent younger groups accessing them.

Consequently, like some contemporary scholars of the sociology of generations (see Turner, 2002), Elias did see wars, revolutions, expanding economic opportunities, and peace times as significant, but primarily because they led, in conjunction with other social processes, to the opening or narrowing of channels of opportunity. It is important to stress that for Elias these events in themselves (wars, revolutions) were not the singular cause, but formed part of a constellation of long-term (and on-going) processes which generated generational tensions or conflicts.

In *Studies of the Germans* Elias also explained how the right-wing militant groups which sought to destroy the Weimar Republic of 1920s Germany and the militant leftist extra-parliamentary groups that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s aimed at overthrowing the established West German state were both manifestations of generational conflicts. He illustrated how the tightening of channels of opportunity, interwoven with other processes, acted as a stimulant to the uptake of violence by the extra-parliamentary youth opposition in the 1960s and equally in explaining recruitment into the Freikorps and their opposition to the Weimar republic in the 1920s. In stressing the importance of these empirical settings he wrote: 'This case is not without significance as a model for a theory of social conflict between the generations, centring on reopening and widening channels to life chances and chances for meaning which have become dried up or narrowed' (Elias, 2013[1989]: 352). In fact, in respect of the extra-parliamentary militants (the Red Army Faction) of the 1960s, Elias explained how the demand for both meaning and social opportunities were intertwined with the shame felt by younger generations arising from their knowledge of the atrocities of their fathers' (generation), whether they were directly involved or not, conducted in the name of Germany. This shame acted as a buffer towards greater mutual identification and communication between the generations. Older generations became more clearly, and in a more antagonistic way, a they-group associated with the Nazis. Mannheim also appears to

have alluded to the opening and closing of channels though to a more limited extent, or at least such an interpretation could be drawn. While seeking to dispel the idea that a particular ideological or value position can be attributed to either younger or older generations, which appeared as a footnote in *The Problem of Generations*, he noted:

> Whether youth will be conservative, reactionary, or progressive, depends (if not entirely, at least primarily) on whether or not the existing social structure and the position they occupy in it provide opportunities for the promotion of their own social and intellectual ends. (p.297)

In reading Elias one can see how he pushed such insight or theorisation forward. I am reminded of a previous observation by Kilminster (2007: 44) when comparing the wider theoretical frames of both men, and which I believe is rather apt here, 'Mannheim's formulations are not always identical with those of Elias, but often embody the same idea expressed differently.'

Both Elias and Mannheim envisaged particular generations as comprising divergent groups. Here Mannheim (1952: 306) deployed the concept of generational unit:

> Within this community of people with a common destiny there can then arise particular *generation-units* [original emphasis]. These are characterized by the fact that they do not merely involve a loose participation by a number of individuals in a pattern of events shared by all alike though interpreted by the different individuals differently, but an identity of responses, a certain affinity in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experiences.

While Elias did not use the concept generation unit, he did distinguish between groups/members of a generation and specifically in the case of the intra-generational class differences of the 1960s youth movement in West Germany. Throughout Elias's extensive body of work, he was keen to stress and illustrate that no social unit was a unified and harmonious grouping. He also envisaged individuals as full of contradictions (see Elias, 1994). Elias (2013[1989]) raised an important issue concerning class and generational conflict. He suggested that generational tensions were more closely connected with middle-class groups rather than working class groups. He argued that the generational problem tends to be manifested relatively weakly within those comprising the working class. Elias explained that the reason for this was that they (the sons and daughters of working class parents) tend to follow in the footsteps of their parents in terms of living and working. And, even allowing for some material improvements in their overall standard of living, they remain in what he called 'the cultural and social conditions of the working class' and it is this tradition that gives them, and satisfies their desire for, meaningfulness. He argued that the situation for those young people comprising the middle-classes is entirely different. They are more individualised and the problem of meaning-fulfilment is more acute and problematic. Indeed, it was this longing for meaning amongst the young post-war generations in West Germany, interwoven with other dynamics, which led to a conflict of the generations.

Elias linked what he argued was a more strongly experienced need for meaning by rising generations of youth, a process which had advanced over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to individualisation processes, greater secularisation, and security from hunger, violence and other threats to their physical security and existence. For Elias it is the greater emancipation from these constraints which permits individuals to attach greater importance to meaning-making and meaning-fulfilment practices in society at large. Elias (2013[1989]: 343) saw this as part of a constellation of social processes which forms the

'background framework' from which generational conflicts express themselves. In that way Elias widened the explanation for generational conflicts beyond that of a contest over economic, social and cultural resources. It was this issue of loss of meaning which was a feature of the extra-parliamentary groups that struck at the German state in the 1920s and 1960s. In both instances they were 'predominantly middle-class movements of the rising generations, who by choice or fate, adopted an outsider position in relation to the established middle-class generations of the Germany of the time' (Elias, 2013[1989]: 333). Thus, for Elias, there is a relationship between middle-class youth, generational conflict, the channels of opportunity for career chances, and 'the problem of extended youth' particularly in contemporary societies. The extension of life generally (which extended youth is a feature of) in modern industrial societies, owing to greater physical security, and the knowledge and technology to prolong life, mean older generations occupy and retain occupational and career positions for longer. Consequently, the career channels are narrower and take longer to open up. In this way Elias's work on generational conflict differs from the emphasis given to class in more contemporary studies where generation is presented as superseding class as a determining factor in social conflicts (Purhonen, 2016).

We can see too in *Studies on the Germans* how Elias's formulations on generations are empirically grounded. His writings are vivid and very precise in locating and connecting generations in terms of social position, the opportunities open or closed to them, their values and interests and when and how these where shaped. This is in contrast with Mannheim's paper on generations which is more at the abstract level. In fact, this deviation mirrors the differences between both men's work more generally; a position previously alluded to by Kettler et al (2016: 79) in their appraisal of Mannheim and his contemporaries, including Elias:

what Elias brings to the wider research project is, first, a curiosity and capacity

for detail that stands in productive tension to Mannheim's more sweeping and

occasionally more essayistic constructions, something that brings Elias

consistently closer in the actual body of his work to the shared programmatic

commitment to empirical sociology.

The interplay between theory and empirical data, which is central to Elias's overall

sociological approach, is clearly evident in his work on generations. For Mannheim it is

primarily through others that his formulations are subjected to greater empirical analysis and

application (see Bristow, 2015; Eyerman, 2002; Turner, 2002). What is also worth

considering is the lucidness and vividness of Elias's empirical-theoretical contributions. Elias

used mainly historical sources. However, those unfamiliar with Elias's work will be surprised

by how the reader is brought into the empirical scene(s), to see and feel as if one were there.

His skill in achieving this has been greatly underestimated. My reason for raising this is that

Elias brings the reader into the world of specific generations and permits the reader to

experience the constraints and contradictions of those involved, even for social groups one

might not generally identify with for social or political reasons.

Elias was quite explicit about the sociological significance of generations over two

decades before *Studies on the Germans* appeared. In his 1960s work with John Scotson, *The*

Established and the Outsiders, which is often identified as one of Elias's few 'present'

orientated studies, he stressed the need to study behaviour across a chain of generations.

What Elias was highlighting here is in many ways what he later explained and illustrated in

Studies on the Germans – the specific pattern and mechanisms of transmission of sociological

inheritance over generations (Elias and Scotson, 2008[1965]: 149–150). Indeed, as I discuss

later, this issue of intergenerational transmission is a recurrent theme within the

contemporary sociology of generations. The empirical context in Elias and Scotson's study

concerned the behaviour of young people in 'disordered families.' Elias and Scotson explained how (and why) the specific character patterns, or part of them, of one generation tended to perpetuate themselves in the next generation. This too was a qualification to the largely present orientated nature of this study and its conclusions. I say largely because when one looks closely at the empirical data drawn upon (and theoretical formulations) in *The Established and the Outsiders* chains of generations are a significant part of the overall analysis; an observation that often goes unnoticed. Furthermore, the intergenerational transmission of social dispositions is implicit within what is seen as his magnum opus, *On the Process of Civilisation*.

Elias did not in any way, as far as I can deduce, refer to Mannheim's work in relation to his own thoughts and formulations on generations. I believe this may, in an unintended way, have contributed to the contemporary ignorance of Elias's work on generational conflict by preventing contemporary scholars of generations, unaware of Elias's work on the subject, from been being drawn to him via Mannheim. This tendency of Elias not to refer, or see, some of the influences that shaped his ideas and formulations has been commented on before (see Kilminster, 2007: 15; van Krieken,1998: 27).[3] Furthermore, awareness of Elias's formulations on the generations many also have been obscured by the fact that they tend to be overshadowed by the focus on other aspects of his work – namely civilising processes, power relations, and established–outsider relations rather than generational conflict. That said, there are certainly some figurational studies which have drawn upon Elias's formulations on generational relations (see Dolan, 2009a; Wouters, 2004, 2007; Goodwin and O'Connor, 2009). For instance, in his comparative studies of changes in codes, manners and emotion management in relation to dating and sexual relations over the course of the twentieth century, Wouters (2004) explains how these changes were connected to shifting power relations between different generations, classes and genders. As part of his analysis he

documents several waves of decreasing power differentials and accompanying phases of functional democratisation in which social controls exerted on younger generations by older generations softened and the social codes around emotion management and dating changed. More recently Gabriel and Mennell (2011), while drawing attention to the concept of generations in *Studies on the Germans*, illustrate how Elias's formulations in *The Symbol Theory* can explain intergenerational processes of learning. Rather interestingly, Goodwin and O'Connor (2009), in exploring issues[4] on intergenerational work relationships and transitions from youth to adulthood, allude to Elias's potential relevance to the sociology of generations (and youth).

Contemporary Work on the Sociology of Generations: Bringing Elias in

Given, as noted already, that many of Mannheim's theoretical insights were made more empirically visible by contemporary scholars I now turn to a consideration of contemporary work on generational conflict, the sociology of generations more broadly, and Elias's formulations. In doing I will also demonstrate how and why Elias provides a stronger theory than that of Mannheim for explain intergenerational tensions and conflict.

In reading much of the more contemporary literature on the sociology of generations I was struck by the themes and issues raised and to which Elias's work seems so relatable. And while there are certain symmetries – not surprising given that much contemporary work is influenced by Mannheim – significant differences also exist. Edmunds and Turner (2005) reject in their work conceptualisations of generations as age-cohorts in favour of one 'that stresses the role of social relations and processes' (p.561). This is certainly in harmony with a

figurational approach but Elias stressed the importance of historical processes, and of conceiving of people in processual interdependent relationships (figurations).

Following Mannheim, Turner (2002) examines the role of cultural trauma in creating a generational consciousness; the lag in social opportunities between generations; and the struggles between the generations connected with this – all processes that Elias addressed. Turner maintains that the social effects of a traumatic event such as war (though not exclusively wars or violent events) are central to the emergence of a generational consciousness cutting off and buffering that generation from past and future generations. Turner takes this somewhat further by distinguishing between active (strategic) and passive generations. Here a strategic generation is deemed to be one which given specific, favourable, circumstances 'can create a potent generational consciousness or ideology of political change that is sufficient to bring about potent social change' (p. 16). There are strong undertones of a rationalistic approach to social change in his account; perhaps indicative of Mannheim's influence. Social change could be conceived as the direct outcome of the intended, planned, actions of a specific generation. Thus, for Turner, there is a greater connection between the deliberate intentions of a generation and the outcome. Change too is conceived as more of an abrupt rupture or moment – a relatively sudden transformation from a steady state to a new order. For Elias change is a far longer and slower process (see Elias, 2012[1939]). There is no starting point,

> The structural change in this conflict in the course of social development makes
> nonsense of any attempt at explanation in terms of causal sequence. People's
> expectations are still largely directed towards the idea that the explanation of this
> intensification of the conflict between the generations has just one cause, or
> perhaps ten causes. But there are no absolute beginnings, and therefore no causes,

in continuing processes; there is actually only a complex human web, in unbroken

movement and transformation as a whole (Elias, 2013[1989]: 343).

It is this interweaving of the actions of many diverse groups and individuals – 'the

complex human web' – which leads to largely unplanned and unintended outcomes. So for

Elias although there is a structure to change, and outcomes more favourable to some groups

and individuals more than others do come into being, social change is neither the intended or

planned outcome of the strategies deployed by any specific individual or group (including a

generation). A further feature of Elias's approach to social change is his tendency to avoid

both mono-causal explanations and the classifying of a specific process, within the complex

of interwoven social processes which explain social developments, as central or key. Even

the well-known process of the shift in the balance between social and self-restraint associated

with his theory of civilising processes (Elias, 2012[1939]) was no more than one interwoven

process – it was not 'the' process.

There are other observations by Turner that will resonance with those familiar with

Elias's work. Turner suggests that social change can be connected with the tensions and

contests between an established 'strategic' generation and a rising generation and he goes on

to claim 'that the psychological struggle between "fathers and sons" is a psychological

product of the structural struggle between rising and failing generations' (p.14). Again there

are parallels with Elias (2013[1989]: 345) who also linked individual parent-child conflicts

(and the psychological transformation of children and parents) with higher tier generational

conflicts and balance of power changes:

The *structure* of the tensions and conflicts between individual parents and

children also changes in accordance with changes in the parent-children

relationship, whether in the wider society or in particular strata. The influence of

these tensions and conflicts on the drive- and affect-modelling of children changes correspondingly.

What Elias was hinting at here was that the nature of conflicts between individual parents and children or within families is 'determined by the structure of the relationship between the generations in the wider society' (p. 345).

Elias does not discount or ignore the significance of war (both the First and Second World Wars for instance) as a contributing process to generational conflicts. In *Studies on the Germans* he explains clearly how the Second World War was interwoven with other processes in the emergence of a post-war generational conflict in Germany. For Elias the Second Word War, unlike the previous European wars, signified a deeper break in the development of the various states involved. The European states and their peoples, irrespective of size, fell from the positions they previously held in the global rankings of states, becoming 'second rank' powers. The effect of this loss of status, and national pride connected with it, on the members of these states had different consequences for the generations within the respective states, though this varied between nations. As Elias argued in the case of Germany, the loss of pride and even of a positive image of the nation for younger generations led to anti 'national' sentiment, to negative associations towards the very concept of 'nation'. But the decline in status was felt in other European states too, leading to 'serious conflicts between the younger post-war and older pre-war generations' (pp. 390–391). The diminished power position of European states was experienced individually by members of the younger generations. Older generations (their fathers) had occupied a hegemonic position in relation to those in other non-European (and some European) states and in relation to social groups within their own states – women, lower social class groups, other ethnic minorities. Those older men of these older generations accepted their social supremacy; felt little or no need to mask their sense of superiority and suffered little from any

sense of guilt or shame in respect of this. The decline in dominance of European nations post World War Two forced the younger generations of this period to re-examine their relationships with these groups. In tandem with this, the more even power relations between various social groups at this time also lead to greater identification, and in a more pronounced and deeply felt way for those younger generations, with 'outsider' groups. They experienced greater shame feelings towards displays of social superiority (see also Wouters, 2007). Overall, for the younger generations, it found expression in different spheres – in a reaction to established formalities around social etiquette, opposition to authoritarian views, in sexual relations, in social protest at the organisation of society and in the support of, and identification with, geographically distant outsider groups.

Elias's work also addresses what Edmunds and Turner (2002b: 6) call 'the question of how culture is transformed and transmitted across generations'. As I mentioned earlier, the issue of cultural transmission – largely informed by Mannheim – remains a significant element in the work of many contemporary scholars (see Brannen, 2003; Bristow, 2016). For instance, Brannen (2003) suggests that continuities and discontinuities in the transmission of material and social resources between the generations within individual families may be the outcome of socially ingrained habits and dispositions as much as strategic choices. That such issues are identified and framed within the agency-structure dilemma, and left unanswered (see Brannen, 2003: 11), also opens a space in which Elias's theoretical formulations can be utilised to considerable effect. While Elias used a different nomenclature his formulations have much to offer on this front. In developing a theoretical approach which explained how and why the social dispositions of one generation are transferred to the next, he also explained how generations come to reject established patterns of behaviour and feeling and embrace and develop different codes. Elias explained through empirical-theoretical interplay how the development and appropriation of specific ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, or

indeed the development of new codes in opposition to older established forms, are directly connected with the nature and structure of social relations and state-formation processes. In so doing he reframed the dualism of structure–agency pervading many sociological approaches through the concepts of figuration and habitus (Elias, 2012[1970]; 2012[1991]).

In what is perhaps one of the most important aspects of his work, Elias (2012[1939]) explained how tensions and conflicts (and the power relation connected with this) at a higher tier of social integration (social structures) come to be channelled into the individual habitus through the channel of shame and embarrassment for instance. Here too we can also witness the connection between the concepts of habitus and power in Elias's theoretical work. Both are processual concepts and related with the concept of figuration. Elias maintained that as social interdependences expand (figurations) enveloping more people across different classes, genders, generations and ethnicities within and across nations, those involved are subjected to considerable pressures to exert greater self-control over their emotions – their habitus comes to exhibit these new constraints and emotional demands. These expanding social interdependences, and the more equal power relations they involve, tend to generate, over time, greater levels of identification between social groups including the generations[5]. This also involves a lessening in the social and physic distances between these social groups. What Elias does, in a very careful and detailed way is explain how these figurational shifts reshape the habitus of different groups.

In the hands of Elias habitus connotes a second nature way of thinking, acting and feeling and it always involves a set of shared characteristics (Mennell, 1994). In explaining the rise of the Nazi's and the violence that came to be directed at others both within and outside Germany, Elias (2013[1989]) drew attention to how aspects of past social conflicts and tensions, the power struggles involved, and the success or failure of the nation come to be

sedimented within the 'national' habitus of successive generations. I should stress, as others have previously done (Mennell, 1998), that although Bourdieu is traditionally credited with the concept of habitus its origins predate him and the concept is very much part of Elias's oeuvre also. More significantly though, Elias's figurational approach, which has certain symmetries or congruencies with Bourdieu's relational sociology, is also seen as overcoming some of the shortcomings associated with Bourdieu's approach (see Dolan, 2009b; Dunning and Hughes, 2013; King, 2005). I allude to this because where contemporary scholars of the sociology of generations have attempted to use the concept of habitus they tend to follow Bourdieu and integrate his approach more broadly (Purhonen, 2016). In their study of older people's consumption in the UK covering the period 1968 to 2005, Higgs et al. (2009) claim that consumption patterns are just as likely to be affected by a generational habitus as a class habitus. A particularly revealing insight from their study identifies a distinct difference in the level of expenditure on leisure consumption between those born during the period 1929–45 and those born between the period 1906–1925. However, while Higgs et al. allude to the link to habitus there is little in terms of a detailed theoretical explanation in their account as to how or why a generation consumes in a particular way and how a different habitus may have led to different types or levels of consumption. This can be contrasted with Dolan's (2009a) study of consumption in Ireland which documents changes in both the meaning and pattern of consumption over the course of much of the twentieth century. Dolan, following Elias, details expanding and changing social interdependences and increasing individualisation processes through empirical-theoretical elaboration in explaining how and why the habitus of Irish people changed and how this affected the meaning and types of consumption that became more socially acceptable.

The notion of a habitus with a greater global consciousness has also been a feature of contemporary assessment within the sociology of generations. Bristow (2016), and Edmunds

and Turner (2005) in an earlier work, contend that the Baby Boomer generation could be considered an example of a cross-national or global generation. Here too Elias's formulations could prove rather insightful in light of possible transnational or global forms of generational consciousness and the conflicts this might engender. In *The Society of Individuals* Elias drew attention to the lag between changing social conditions and the social habitus required to be in tune with these changes. Elias discusses how (and why) the habitus of specific individuals and the social groups they comprise can be ill suited to newly emerging social transformations. The contemporary issue of climate change is perhaps an interesting case in point where specific (younger) generations may have a greater feeling of 'global' concern and a more enhanced felt connection to others across the planet. While the integration plane of the global may have taken on the necessary emotional charge and function as a survival unit in the consciousness of some generations this is clearly not the case for others. The social habitus of some people does not concord with an emerging global 'we' consciousness or we-identity either inter- or intra-generationally. Thus, in many ways Elias's formulations can also contribute to sociological investigations of the formation of specific forms of generational consciousness and the emotional charge it generates.

The Baby Boomer generation has been a focus of particular emphasis within the sociology of generations – it was also addressed by Elias, though he did not identify the younger generations involved in the 1960s and 1970s as 'Baby Boomers' (See Elias 2013[1989]: 376). Bristow (2015), in particular, whose work is also underpinned by Mannheim's ideas, addresses the issue of generational conflict within the wider context of how Baby Boomer generation(s) were recently constructed as a social problem, in a cultural and economic sense. In her analysis, Bristow suggests that this construction of the Baby Boomer problem was an attempt to mask and/or justify other socio-political decisions around pension, housing, and healthcare provision. As she concludes,

this vision may be a correct one. But it is not brought about by

generational conflict, the behaviour of the Baby Boomers, or the emergence of a

gap between young and old; it is better understood as an expression of economic

stagnation and ideological confusion (Bristow, 2015: 188).

Bristow is most likely correct in suggesting that blocking of access to social resources

mentioned above was not caused by a specific generation as the 'cultural script' claims.

Nonetheless, it does not mean that generational tension or conflict is absent either. Following

Elias, it would be interesting to examine the career channels open to younger generations as

well as access to desired life chances, and the extent to which older (Baby Boomer)

generations may currently monopolise these. That younger and older generations remain in a

constant and dynamic power relation in respect of the opening and closing of career channels,

and in regard to chances for meaning-fulfillment, necessitates that greater consideration be

given to how these connect with open or latent generational tensions involving those

commonly identified as millennials, Generation X or Y, the 'pivot' generation.

Bristow's (2015) study also brings into focus a much broader issue of concern, how

do we identify a conflict between generations? This task, in identifying and conceiving of

social conflicts as generational conflicts, as Elias (2013[1989]) himself alluded to, is not easy.

Elias felt that this was due (especially in more contemporary times), in part, to the tendency

to see interdependent generational processes as natural and relatively harmonious rather than

ones that 'nearly always entails open and latent struggles for power' (p.374). The endeavour

is also challenging because of the interwoven nature of social processes. Even what Elias

described as one of the simpler examples of an intergenerational struggle can remain

concealed by other overlapping processes. Here Elias was referring to the contest for access

to occupational positions which involve the holders having a monopoly over chances for decision making and the issuing of orders at the highest levels, and to which younger generations are generally excluded.

Conclusion

Overall then, it is fair to suggest that contemporary scholars associated with the sociology of generations have done much in highlighting how many of the social tensions in contemporary life relate to intergenerational dynamics. Such a stance has parallels with Elias's views on the subject – that intergenerational tensions and conflict remain at the heart of many social developments. Consequently, it is my contention that many contemporary scholars of the sociology of generations may find an engagement with Elias's work fruitful. The concepts within Elias's synthesis can act as important conceptual tools of navigation in the study of intergenerational relations and conflict: helping to overcome overly rationalistic accounts of social change; avoiding simplistic causal theories that over-emphasize the importance of single events; explaining how a generational habitus is shaped and re-shaped – what is often referred to as the process of generational transmission; and in explaining how and why a generational consciousness develops and the strength of the emotional charge connected with it.

Basically, I am suggesting that Elias's approach may not only be a more empirically employable theoretical frame but also a stronger one for explaining intergenerational conflict. In advocating such a stance, I feel it is equally important to stress that any engagement or turn to Elias does not equate with an outright rejection of Mannheim's work in this field, not least because of the intellectual legacy of Mannheim which is echoed within some of Elias's theoretical formulations on generations. As I illustrated earlier in this paper, there are some

overlaps in how both men considered the issue of generations, and in that regard this paper finds favour with van Krieken's (1998) previous assessment that Elias built upon Mannheim's work in this field. For this reason alone, I believe Elias's formulations deserve greater consideration within the sociology of generations.

To conclude then, I would go as far to submit that Elias's sociological programme is very much a sociology of generations. He was at the forefront of identifying the problems presented by what he called the retreat of sociologists to the present and the short-term empirical studies invoked by this (see Elias, 1987). Thus, chains of generations remain at the core of what he considered should be the focus of social scientific studies. I was going to finish by suggesting that Elias has been written out of research on the sociology of the generations, but a more apt appraisal is that Elias has yet to be written in.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] This pattern may not be unique to Britain, in Ireland the recent referendums on same-sex marriage and abortion have been subject to the frame of generational analysis in public discourse.

[2] These include the likes of Parsons, Eisenstadt, Foucault, Bourdieu, Collins, and Giddens (see Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014; Bristow, 2016b; Edmunds and Turner, 2002; Purhonen, 2016; Turner and Edmunds, 2002).

[3] Van Krieken (1998: 33) also notes that he was not unique in that regard with the tendency at the time to focus on one's topic rather than other scholars.

[4] Interestingly the empirical data they use is from a study undertaken by Elias in Leicester between 1962 and 1964, the 'Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles'.

[5] Initially though it can also lead to increased tensions as the changed power relation can cause some groups to feel resentful at their declining power position.

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