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Learning, Identity and Agency in the Life Course

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GENERATIONS, THE LIFE COURSE, AND LIFELONG LEARNING

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Generations, the life course, and lifelong learning

This paper examines the concept of generation in relation to learning, placing this discussion within the context of the Learning Lives research project. Ideas of generations form part of popular culture as well as being a theme of social analysis. The term is used by some Learning Lives interviewees: Brother Raphael, just to take one example, described her mother as *late sixties mum*. In everyday language the word has at least two meanings: people speak about generations in terms of family connections, linking grandparents, parents and children; and they talk about the feeling of belonging to a particular period, such as the 1960s. These everyday meanings broadly correspond to the ways in which ideas of generation are used in the social sciences.

The paper is primarily concerned with the second meaning of generation – that is, the notion of an age cohort that shares certain experiences in common. Although I refer briefly to intergenerational relationships within the family, particularly in the context of intergenerational learning, the main aim of this paper is to summarise recent social research on generations, review some recent applications of the concept in studies of lifelong learning, and then explore its relevance to the data produced in the Learning Lives project. The main aim of the project has been to investigate what learning 'means' and 'does' in the lives of adults. We have used a broad conception of learning which includes learning in the context of formal education and work-settings and learning in and from everyday life. Whereas biographical and life-history methods have been utilised in researching adult and lifelong learning, the Learning Lives project is exceptional because of its scale, length and its longitudinal 'real time' design, and because it has combined analysis of interview data with analysis of quantitative longitudinal data. The paper draws

mainly on qualitative data collected through multiple life history and life course interviews with around 30 adults of differing ages in Scotland[1].

The paper therefore starts by summarising recent sociological research on generations. Since Mannheim, generational analysis has attracted considerable attention, particularly in northern Europe and above all in the German-speaking nations, where it has had a particular resonance as a consequence of the intense generational formation produced by reactions to the twentieth century experiences of extreme conflict and dictatorship (Bude 2000; see also the editorial introduction to a special issue on the "68ers" of the popular magazine *Stern* by Osterkorn, 2007). However, if research into generations has been particularly well developed in the German speaking nations, it has also acquired a new salience in recent years in the Anglophone and Francophone worlds. This body of work suggests that generation is an essential category of analysis, but also a somewhat slippery one. The paper therefore considers recent attempts to classify or categorise different generations in the contemporary Western world; in particular, I examine recent studies of 'learning generations'. I then follow with an empirical working through of examples of generational influences, as expressed by six of our interviewees. These are analysed in terms of people's working lives, cultural lives, civic engagement, sense of community, and experiences of education and training. The paper concludes with an attempt to summarise the relevance of generational analysis for people's participation in learning, as well as for the place and value that learning has in their lives.

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[1] For further information on the project, including details of methods and source materials, see www.learninglives.org

The sociology of generations

Generational approaches, after a number of decades of relative neglect, have recently resumed a central position in the social sciences. Sociological discussion of generations conventionally begins with Karl Mannheim's essay, 'The Problem of Generations' (1952). Writing a decade after the end of the First World War and at a time when Weimar culture was yet to enter its final crisis, Mannheim developed his analysis of generations as a parallel with Marx's concept of class, arguing that generations developed a social cohesiveness based on people's shared experiences of the social and political events that occurred throughout their birth cohort's life course. He argued that this meant going beyond a simplistic treatment of age as chronology or biology, and seeing generation as both a product of the social order and as one of its building blocks:

> Were it not for the existence of social interaction between human beings – were there no definable social structure, no history based on a particular sort of continuity - then generations would not exist as a social location phenomenon (Mannheim 1952, 290-1).

Generations therefore sustained continuity and underpinned social cohesion, by binding groups together in relation to other birth cohorts as well as within the cohort; and, because of different experiences and subjective realities, as well as struggles over access to resources, generations simultaneously enabled social innovation and change.

As with Marxist theories of class, generational location was for Mannheim both an objective fact, and also to greater or lesser extent a subjective reality. Just as Marx distinguished between class 'in itself' and class 'for itself', so Mannheim distinguished between potential generations characterised by an objective generational location (membership of a historically determined community, a process that he called *Generationslagerung*) and actual

generations, which were experienced subjectively as having shared interests. The latter was particularly likely to emerge as a result of traumatic collective crises, such as those that Germans were living through as Mannheim wrote his essay:

> A concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic de-stabilisation (Mannheim 1952, 303).

In these circumstances, Mannheim anticipated that generations would move beyond shared interests to become the basis of organised political movements, like the radical youth movements of 1920s Germany. Equally, he thought that some objective generations were likely to have very limited shared conceptions of themselves as having common interests, because they were not in a position to experience the same events at the same time, and their generational experiences did not impinge on an age-stratified consciousness (Mannheim 1952, 297).

Mannheim's approach can be summarised, then, as defining generations in terms of two dimensions. As with Marx's analysis of social class, generation has both an objective and a subjective aspect:

1. *Generationslagerung*, namely the shared exposure of a cohort to a historically specific context; and
2. Common awareness of a shared identity, expressed most clearly through cohort-based social movements, which sought to promote the interests of one cohort as against those of other generations.

While the first is ubiquitous, the second was for Mannheim also required for a generation to be fully developed, arising in conditions where there was particularly sharp competition for resources (such as jobs or houses) and overt conflicts of values and world view. In such situations, generation would be a particularly significant variable; where generational consciousness is weak, generation would be a comparatively insignificant factor.

Despite Karl Mannheim's early intervention, the idea was only taken up systematically from the 1960s. Mannheim's work was debated by researchers interested in emerging areas such as youth studies, gerontology and the life course (Alanen 2001, 16; Elder 1975). In particular, generational analysis lends itself readily to a life course approach. In a highly influential study, which was conceptualised in terms of cohorts rather than generations per se, Gielle and Elder (1998) emphasise the multidirectional nature of life course change. Societal contexts shape the life courses of different cohorts across time, but people in these cohorts may either conform to norm, or may challenge and deviate from them. Place matters, as does temporality: as Glen Elder puts it, cohort differentiation is sharpest when people are exposed to "the course of rapid change" (Elder 1975, 169). Cohort effects can then be reinforced by the presence of "linked social lives", when people's experiences are mediated by shared memberships of institutions and networks; by agency, as people adapt to circumstances and seek to exercise control over their lives; and by access to resources over time (Gielle and Elder 1998, 9-12).

Some sociologists have argued that the importance of generational identities has increased in recent years. In a contingent, late modern social order, where categories such as class or even gender have become more fluid, Martin Kohli suggests that for some people at least, generation constitutes an increasingly important framework for living our individual lives, and also acquires greater significance as a collective anchoring for our social identity (Kohli 2003, 4). Heinz Bude suggests that while people can deliberately change their class or even their gender, it is harder to find ways of escaping from one's age cohort; nevertheless, he also notes that the idea of generation, lacking the political baggage of class and the historical associations of nation, may hold an active appeal as a positive pole of identification (Bude 2000, 19-

20). Equally, it may provide an attractive negative pole. People develop an identity through what they do not share with others, as well as what they do share; and again the relatively 'clean' associations of generation may mean that people are comfortable to identify themselves as not belonging to "today's youth" or "the old sixty-eighters".

Clearly there are methodological and conceptual pitfalls associated with generational approaches to social analysis. First, Cavalli points to a need to distinguish clearly between three distinct effects that are associated with age cohorts: (a) the 'age effect', which arises from the ways in which people change – biologically, psychologically, culturally, socially – over time; (b) the 'generational effect', which is the focus of this paper; and (c) the 'time period effect', which arises from the contingent moment at which the researcher gathers the data (Cavalli 2004, 159). For example, in the Learning Lives project, we conducted fieldwork between 2004 and 2007 (the 'time effect'), involving repeated interviews with people who became older as the project went on ('age effect'), exploring formative experiences throughout each participant's life course ('generational effect', but probably also an 'age effect'). We also drew on data from the British Household Panel Survey, which provided longitudinal evidence on members of the same generation at several different points in time ('age effect' and 'time effect'), as well as cross-sectional evidence on people of different ages at the same points of time ('generational effect' and 'time effect'). In practice, though, these three effects overlap, and it may be impossible to do much more than be alert to the risks of muddling three different but related phenomena.

Second, as with all attempts at categorisation or classification, the boundaries between generations must be drawn with care. Otherwise they may be too broad to reflect internal diversity, or too narrow to allow for generalisation. Generational descriptors tend to be hampered by the breadth of everyday

categorisations; the so-called Boomers, for example, comprise a twenty-year birth cohort that includes many important generational groupings within it; Gen-X was born over at least a fifteen year period. Both groupings have been the focus of recent research, including a growing volume of attention from business and management studies – above all marketing (eg Littrell, Ma and Halapete 2005) - and policy research (eg HM Treasury 2006, 41). Martin Kohli, a prominent and experienced research in this field, warns that

> There are no simple criteria of rightness or appropriateness for delineating the borders of historical generations and distinguishing them analytically. The search for clear generational formations, which we can read off from cultural or social structural reality, meets only in the rarest cases with success (Kohli 2003, 3).

Of course, there are undoubted historical turning points, as Kohli recognises, which may well allow us to speak of a clearly defined generation, but it is still necessary to encompass the range of experiences and responses to these events.

Third, the category of generation is itself the subject of historical change. A number of recent commentators argue that here as in other areas of contemporary life, the pace of change is becoming faster. It has been suggested that the new technologies 'may shape and give meaning to generational boundaries in a more accelerated fashion than in the past', giving rise to increasingly fine distinctions (McMullin, Comeau and Jovic 2007, 299). Similarly, Edmunds and Turner note that the heightened role of broadcasting and other communications media in spreading news and disseminating cultural trends on a global basis may also speed up the process of generational change (Edmunds and Turner 2005, 568-70).

Fourth, the symbolic markers of generation may hold different meanings for different individuals in the same birth cohort (Kohli 2003, 3). Cavalli gives the

example of fascism and resistance in Italy: the same events and situation produced “deep splits in public consciousness”, memories of which continue to divide the same generations (Cavalli 2004, 163). In a much less charged context, the student protest movements of the 1960s touched only a minority of students, who themselves were under one tenth of the age cohort. Nevertheless, in this case the movements were widely covered by the media, and formed part of a wider public discourse about rebellion and youth culture.

Fifth, Mannheim’s distinction between the objective and subjective dimensions of generation leads to some practical difficulties. A generation ‘in itself’, according to Mannheim, has not solely undergone a number of common experiences that have shaped its attitudes and behaviour, and influenced its access to individual and collective resources; it also displays a shared awareness of the events and views them as important, and has some degree of consciousness of its collective interests. This is an important distinction conceptually, but in practice the picture is likely to be a complex and messy one, with different degrees of collective awareness among different parts of the population. This is complicated further by evidence that although there are indeed important generational distinctions in terms of life experiences and world-views, the very discourse of generations is an important component of generational awareness (Roos 2002, 133). Public debate over ‘baby boomers’, for instance, has helped to create common experiences and feelings among the group’s members.

Sixth, it has been argued that Mannheim’s account tells us that generation is very significant for some age cohorts and less so for others, but does not explain why this comes about (Edmunds and Turner 2005, 561; Kohli 2003, 7). Mannheim suggested that generationally based social and political movements arise from a sharp process of collective and public sharing, in the

period of adolescence and young adulthood, of traumatic experiences that in some way require people to challenge the existing order. Thus the various nature-oriented youth movements of early twentieth century Germany could be seen as a collective reaction to rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, and the constant threat of German participation in a European war. But Edmunds and Turner suggest that as well as incentives, generational movements also require access to resources (Edmunds and Turner 2005, 562). So the 1960s generation benefited from the social capital forged in the protest movements of the time, as well as the economic security that it enjoyed as a result of full employment and well-defined career paths.

Seventh, there is limited empirical evidence to confirm that people do view large scale experiences such as war or economic crises as fundamental to their identity. A survey of self-defined 'life turning points' among Finns from three broad generational groups – those born before 1944, those born between 1945 and 1950, and those born after 1951 – showed very considerable divergences between the groups in respect of the transitions they had experienced, as well as their attitudes towards them, though often the variations were greater between genders and socio-economic groups than between generations. But significantly, the vast majority of turning points that people identified were not large scale shared public experiences such as war and occupation, or large scale unemployment, but rather private and personal turning points (Roos 2002). Of course, some of these were related to wider socio-economic and political trends; thus separation and divorce, which a quarter of the sample identified as an important negative turning point (and by a rather smaller proportion either as a positive one, or as both positive and negative), are associated with the liberalisation of social attitudes and legislation during the 1960s and 1970s, and can therefore be seen as generational in the Mannheimian sense. Similar considerations apply to several of the significant turning points mentioned in this study (including

economic problems, educational transitions, and housing issues), all of which reflect wider social, economic, cultural and political changes. Yet even if we qualify Roos' conclusions in this way, the fact remains that in people's memories, these tend to be articulated as private events rather than public experiences.

Further, it is sometimes difficult to tell whether attitudinal and behavioural differences are produced by generation or life stage. Some accounts have tended to conflate the two, treating generational cohorts primarily as groups sharing a particular position in the life course, such as youth, parenthood or retirement (Lunt and Livingstone 1992, 105-32). Hammarström (2004, 51) suggests that one solution might be to distinguish between position within family generation and position within life course generation, with the latter referring to wider social networks than the family. But while her intention is clear, Hammarström's terminology seems likely to reproduce the confusion rather than remove it. Elder prefers to use the term cohort for what in Mannheimian terms are socio-historical generations, reserving the word generation for family location, using cohort specifications within particular generations – such as grandparents – in order to locate each generation in a concrete historical environment (Elder 1975, 179-80). Again, this solves one problem while creating others; in particular, it introduces a new source of confusion, arising from the specifically educational usage of cohort to describe a student year group.

So the importance of generational affiliation should not be overstated. Plenty of people reject membership of generational categories. Some interviewees in Bude's study of the 68-er generation in Germany, for instance, were reluctant to be seen as 'real 68-ers', while some others rejected the description altogether (Bude 2000, 24-8). While he notes that even in such cases, people nevertheless use their contemporaries' life courses as "an

obvious horizon for comparison with one's own life chances" (Bude 2000, 28), he concludes that it is rare for generational affiliations to have far-reaching consequences. However deep the sense of common feeling, he suggests, generational affiliations rarely imply meaningful shared action: "seen this way, generational self-identification creates not a lasting, but an opportunistic orientation" (Bude 2000, 33). In short, generational affiliations may generate some resources that widen people's scope for agency (social capital, cultural capital, identity capital), but we should not exaggerate their role.

It is perhaps better to maintain an analytical distinction between generational position, using a broadly Mannheimian definition, and position within the life course, which may or may not relate to family relationships along with other things. In practice, operationalising the distinction may be difficult. The Finnish authors of one survey-based study noted that their data did not allow for precise distinctions between generation effects, life-phase effects and point-in-time effects, for example, but they also noted that their data could be analysed most plausibly in terms of generational differences in norms and beliefs; neither point-in-time nor life phase was of much help in explaining the differences that were found, which related clearly to the shared generational experiences of the subjects (Aro et al 2005, 472).

Finally, generation should be seen as one among a number of bases of social differentiation (Kohli 2003, 7). A generational approach may be particularly enlightening for research that draws on life history methods, but it needs to take account of other processes of social cohesion and social closure, as well as other dimensions of social inequality and differentiation such as socio-economic position (or class), gender and ethnicity – to take only the most obvious.

Defining the boundaries

Generational membership is closely bound up with questions of identity. People feel themselves to be 'a sixties person' or a 'Nintendo person', and they tend to compare their experiences and achievements with those of people from the same cohort. Such categories also represent elements of social closure – for example, the creation of collective generational identities will mark one group off from other age cohorts. It may indeed involved well developed collective economic interests, which are defended against other generational groupings. This aspect, claims Vincent, tends to be underplayed in accounts that define generations primarily in cultural terms (Vincent 2005 587). Defining the boundaries of generations is bound to be complex and messy, reflecting the many ways in which different events and processes impinge on the lives of different individuals.

Collective cultural identities may be overlaid with more material foundations of generation, which can entail denial of opportunity to others from older or younger generations. This is made highly visible in current debates about access to housing for those who came of age at a time of rapidly rising prices, who find the housing market dominated by members of older generations. But if we look at education, then it is older generations who are excluded from parts of the labour market that are open to the beneficiaries of the educational expansions of the 1970s through to the 1990s. The expansion of graduate occupations may provide welcome opportunities to those who have been through today's mass higher education system, but it is closed to those who came of age in the period of minority, even elite, higher education.

So the creation of generational identities is partly agentic, and partly the outcome of history. Law, as a number of writers remind us, can also play a part. The welfare state created a system of rights and obligations that by and

large rested on strictly chronological definitions of age, and in turn led to a marked chronological standardisation of the life course (Kohli 2003, 8). Age-based procedures for defining access to and exclusion from public resources were as important in education as in any other area. This had limited significance while the system was stable, so that the access rules did not change over time and all could expect the same treatment in the future as others enjoyed in the present. But it has increased significance once particular groups appear to pull the drawbridge up as soon as they have crossed it themselves – as, for example, has been the case with recent changes in student funding in higher education. The post-grant-and-fee generation is not only different from the Boomer generation in its experience of higher education – it is likely to resent the way that politicians from Boomer age groups treated those who came afterwards.

Most definitions of generation tend to follow Mannheim. For the purposes of this paper, I will take the definition offered by Antikainen and colleagues:

> A generation consists of a group of people born during the same time period and who are united by similar life experiences and a temporarily coherent cultural background. People belonging to the same generation have the same location in the historical dimension of the social process (Aitkainen et al 1996, 34).

This begs some obvious questions. Precisely which 'time period', for example? And how temporary, and how coherent, is the cultural background? How can these broad generalisations be turned into categories that

Generational categories tend to be rather broad, and their boundaries are fuzzy. My own deeply-held feeling, for example, is that the 'sixties' as cultural period did not really start until 1962 or 1963, and ended some time in the early 1970s. These were, it probably goes without saying, the years of my adolescence and early adulthood. General definitions of generation tend to

be clear about what it is that people have in common, but not about where the lines are drawn between different generational groupings.

The most common approach in the literature is to define generations in terms of birth cohorts. Terms such as Baby Boomers (used generally of people born between 1945 and the early 1960s) and Generation X (born mid-60s to late 1970s) are used widely in everyday life. Conventionally, the two are contrasted sharply: Boomers came of age at a time of post-war political optimism, economic prosperity, social change, technological innovation, and visibility of previously established social and racial inequalities. They are supposedly characterised by their iconoclasm, idealism and investment in permanent youthfulness, and have a strong sense of collective identity born of rock music, social movements, fashion, and consumption. Generation X, by contrast, are perceived as sceptical individualists who came of age surrounded by economic uncertainty, the decline of the welfare consensus, rapid expansion of higher education intakes, and the informatisation of every day life (Edmunds and Turner 2005; McMullin, Comeau and Jovic 2007).

Significantly, both the Boomers and Gen-X can be seen as transnational phenomena (Edmunds and Turner 2005). Some, though, suggest that birth cohort and nation together are likely to create similar experiences at similar ages/stages of life (Hammarström 2004). Typical is an Australian study of generation and identity which took the Boomer generation as a 'watershed' (Phillips and Western 2005). The authors produced a tripartite categorisation grouped around this pivotal cohort:

- The Baby Boom cohort, born 1946-60
- Pre-Boom, born before 1946
- Post-Boom, born after 1960 (Phillips and Western 2005, 173.

Interestingly, drawing on survey data, the authors found relatively little difference between the self-identities of the three groups, which perhaps confirms the difficulties of defining boundaries in terms of birth cohorts.

Many researchers prefer not to use birth cohorts as the basis of generational analysis, but rather to look at the years when people came of age, passing through adolescence and early adulthood. Indeed, Vincent recommends that the term 'cohort' should be used for chronological, observer-defined categories, while 'generation' should always be used with a qualifier (historical, political, familial) that denotes the existence of continuing relations between the groups over time (Vincent 2005, 582). Alanen adopts what she calls a structuralist approach, defining generation as:

> a socially constructed system of relationships among social positions in which children and adults are the holders of specific social positions defined in relation to each other and constituting, in turn, specific social (and in this case generational) structures (2001, 12).

But this begs the question, to use Mannheim's terminology, of whether we can then distinguish actual (subjectively felt) generations from potential (structurally defined) generations. While a strong relational element is highly plausible, and structural factors are certainly a necessary precondition, we also need to look for shared experiences and a degree of cultural unity as further conditions of any definition of generational groupings.

Take a further example. From a relational standpoint, McMullin, Comeau and Jovic have developed "a set of objective generational locations based on the computing technologies that were popular when birth cohorts came of age" (2007, 299). They distinguish five basic groups:

- *The Pre-ATARI generation*, which came of age before computing held broad appeal;

- *The ATARI generation*, which came of age in the 1970s as home video games became popular and PCs entered the workplace;
- *The console generation*, which came of age in the 1980s when home computing was widespread;
- *The Windows generation*, which came of age in the late 80s and early 90s, when email was spreading rapidly and more sophisticated games were popular; and
- *The Internet generation*, who came of age in the decade from the mid-90s, when search engines, messaging and portable technologies became widely available, and prices began to fall significantly (McMullin, Comeau and Jovic 2007, 303-5).

So where some researchers would see only two generations – boomers and Gen-X – this group distinguishes five. No doubt further fine-grained distinctions could be drawn within each of these five groups. Generational analysis, then, is no place for researchers who like their concepts defined with certainty, clarity and precision. Operationalising the concept for research purposes therefore requires a number of pragmatic decisions.

This is particularly significant when we come to consider learning and generation. The relationship between generation and learning has a long history in educational thinking, principally in terms of intergenerational transfers of knowledge and values so that children acquired the abilities to function in their parents' society (Eccarius 2002). This 'classical' view of interegenerational socialisation as a one-way process, where the adult generations teach the young, has its roots in antiquity and survived the modernisation processes until relatively recent times. Some now suggest that 'inverse socialisation' – defined as the transfer of knowledge and skills from children to their parents – has become a marked feature of the information society (Cochinaux and Woot 1995); and indeed we may add the transfer of values and lifestyles from adolescents to adults, as parents try to retain the

lifestyle of the perpetual teenager. These processes can be overlaid with more or less overt conflict between generations, material as well as cultural. McMullin, Comeau and Jovic (2007, 308) noted that many of the younger IT workers in their sample thought that their generations tended simply to 'pick up' computing skills, believing that older ones had to work at it; their interviewees routinely used the language of generations, sometimes with slightly abusive overtones ('old farts', 'youngsters').

Generationally-oriented research has made limited inroads in adult learning. This may seem surprising given the importance of life history methods in the field, as well as the rich tradition of research into patterns of participation. For people do not live out their biographies as atomised subjects who exist in splendid isolation from a changing world. Whether workers or bosses, men or women, black or white, they live through war or peace, hunger or plenty, mass unemployment or full employment, revolution or stability, democracy or dictatorship, justice or oppression. They also live through small changes and major upheavals in educational systems; and they learn their ways through these changing experiences. Individuals' biographies are "localized historically, influenced and conditioned by the historical context" (Cavalli 2004, 157). We might add that individuals also shape the historical context, and the intertwining of agency and structure also forms an important – and historically specific – part of the context in which generations are formed, and form themselves. Generations are made through the interplay of individual and collective lives, and they therefore form a natural and obvious focus for life history research. The relative neglect of generations in lifelong learning research is therefore somewhat surprising.

Defining learning generations

Several studies have examined the relationship between generations and education. A number of Finnish studies have become particularly influential in recent years, particularly since the publication in English of a landmark study by Ari Antikainen and his colleagues (Antikainen et al 1996). Accepting that of course there are huge variations in the experiences of different socio-economic groups and between those of the genders, different generational cohorts have distinctive experiences of the education and training system both in their youth and subsequently, both in early adulthood and later in their life course. Examples include changes inside the education system itself (such as the raising of the school leaving age), those that are external (such as the disruption caused by the total wars of the twentieth century), and those that concern the system's relationship with its immediate environment (which include transformation in family structures, or sharp variations in the youth labour market). For a variety of historical reasons, these changes have been unusually sharp in Finland, leading some researchers to conclude that "the educational gaps between different age groups are very wide in international comparison" (Olkinuora et al 2008, 42). This distinctive generational pattern may mean that the Finnish case is atypical, but the existence of a body of related studies is nevertheless significant for researchers working on different European contexts.

In their major study, Antikainen and colleagues identified four generational groupings (1996, 35). How they did so is not entirely clear from their account, at least in its English language version. The four categories appear to be based on relational and historical factors, and in three cases are defined by their shared educational experiences:

- Cohort with little generation (born before 1935)
- Cohort of educational growth and inequality (1936-1945)

- Cohort of educational growth and welfare (1946-1965)
- Young people (1966-)

The last grouping is anomalous, in that it is initially defined by relative age rather than relationship to the educational system. The study is particularly concerned to consider the different orientations of each cohort to the possibility of learning in adult life.

A similar approach has been adopted by a group of researchers from the University of Turku (Aro et al 2005). Basing their analysis empirically on a large scale survey of adult education participation in Finland, this group also distinguishes between four groups:

- The cohort of war and scarce education (born 1921-39);
- Structural changes and growing educational opportunities (1940-55);
- Welfare and abundant educational choices (1956-69); and
- Forced individual choices (1970-82).

This model is based partly on prior work by Kauppila and Roos, but the Turku group add a fourth generation, whom they describe as facing "not only the freedom but also the necessity of continuous choices", arising partly from marketisation, with pupils being portrayed as clients faced with a variety of curricular options (Aro et al 2005, 465). As with the Antikainen study, the survey data confirmed that there are clear differences between generations in attitudes towards learning; while all cohorts placed a high value on formal education, older adults tended to see it as a guaranteed pathway to social mobility, while younger adults tended to view it as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for employment and a career (Aro et al 2005, 472). Again, then, this suggests that the concept of educational or learning generations has some warrant in the evidence.

A third study, also by researchers from Turku, draws on the work of Antikainen, Aro and J.P. Roos among others (Olkinuora et al 2008). Based on a

large body of empirical data gathered between the mid-1980s and the early years of this century, it examines the meanings of lifelong learning for three generational cohorts:

- Young adults (20-35 years old), facing forced individual choices as a result of insecurity in the labour market combined with the steady extension of initial education;
- Middle-aged workers/citizens (35-50 years old), who experienced welfare and wide educational choice in their youth, and overwhelmingly work in secure employment; and
- Aged adults and pensioners (aged over 50), who share very strong beliefs in the value of education, but are themselves often on the periphery of the learning and information society (Olkinuora et al 2008, 44-53).

These authors conclude that a "participation threshold" has arisen between the oldest generation, who are unlikely neither to have opportunities to learn nor particularly wish to take up those that are available, and the other, younger generations (Olkinuora 2008, 55).

All of these Finnish models seek to connect generational groupings to shared experiences of education, connecting private experiences with changes in public institutions. They may require modification, though, in a number of ways. There is, for example, evidence of a marked gender dimension to educational generations. In her qualitative study of three generations of Norwegian women, for example, Bjerrum Nielsen (1998, 62) notes that for those whose youth occurred in the period 1955-1965, "the main motive for these girls is to get away from their mothers' lives, and education is now available as an *obvious choice*" (emphasis in original). Their own mothers, by contrast, spoke of their parents with deep respect; their daughters, who were 18-19 at time of interview, portrayed their parents in a "warm-ironic" way, which Bjerrum Nielsen interprets as signalling a much more egalitarian

relationship between the generations, which in turn she associates with greater autonomy in relation to education and sexual behaviour (Bjerrum Nielsen 1998, 63-5). For the granddaughters' generation, higher education is no longer an obvious choice, but rather "a necessity for realizing one's skills and abilities", and thus an obligatory component in the "project of individualization" (Bjerrum Nielsen 1998, 69).

Of course, the gap between genders is not necessarily a sharply defined one. Bettina Dausien stresses that biographical differences between men and women fall into patterns that are better described as 'gender-typical' rather than 'gender-specific' (Dausien 1998, 108). These typical patterns themselves may be changing, not least as a result of declining average family sizes (including significant growth in the number of no-child units) and steady rises the proportions of time spent by women in paid employment. Nevertheless, within these 'typical' narrative patterns, women show more of a tendency to present and assess their biographies in terms of relationships, particularly kinship relations and community ties but also increasingly workplace connections, while men are more likely to focus on their self as agent, acting primarily throughout their work trajectory (Dausien 1998,11-13). The marked gender dimension to generation is particularly important in view of the 'opening up' of the educational space to women during the course of the twentieth century. Further, there is a well-known tendency for education to play a greater part in shaping life chances for women than it does for men (see e.g. Blundell, Dearden, Goodman and Reid 2000).

The importance of learning generations

What does generation have to do with learning? Like many later commentators, Mannheim thought that events and experiences in youth were particularly important in generational formation. This was a stage of life when people experienced 'fresh contact' with the 'accumulated heritage' (Mannheim 1952, 293) and responded in the light of their own understandings rooted in their own historical location. As well as freshness, this life stage is widely thought of as crucial in the process of identity formation, and is characterised by high levels of contact with like-aged peers across a variety of contexts (Cavalli 2004, 158; McMullin, Comeau and Jovic 2007, 302-3). Potentially, then, this suggests that education may be a particularly significant feature of generational formation.

There are at least four ways in which age cohorts can become 'educational generations'. First, school structures and cultures primarily affect the young, and therefore form a central part of the generational habitus during youth. Second, since the structures and cultures of school systems are subject to change, they are therefore "something that has an effect on what a generation takes for granted" that then distinguishes it from other cohorts (Aro et al 2005, 461). Third, school systems are connected with other areas of everyday life, and particularly with people's transitions into adulthood. They therefore shape people's experiences of the labour market, and they tend to influence – and feature strongly in – people's accounts of their subsequent adult lives. This aspect is strongly associated with the ways in which people's identities are formed (including self-forming of identity). Fourth, school systems can trigger cohort-based social movements. The clearest example in recent decades is probably the student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which provides a widely recognised generational marker. So education can itself be the basis for highly organised expressions of a common generational

identity. The analytical link between education and generation, then, is potentially a right and fruitful one; this also suggests that there may be more or less important implications for educational policy and practice.

A small number of studies already exist on generations and learning in adult life. Generational analysis played a central role in the well-known life history study of Finnish adult learners by Ari Antikainen and his colleages (1996), which now has the status of a seminal work. The authors stated baldly that "The two most central factors in biographies are life phase and generation" (Atikainen et al 1996, 34). Peter Alheit has explored generational relations within workers' social milieus in eastern Germany, concluding that parts of the population in the former DDR display an "intergenerational resistance to modernisation" that has profound consequences for lifelong learning (Alheit 2003). Other relevant work – while sometimes suggestive – has added relatively little. Other Finnish researchers have drawn on Antikainen's model (Aro et al 2005), with some modification, and without citing the Antikainen study. In her doctorate, Tilda Gaskell noted clear generational differences in learning orientation, with those born in the earlier part of the twentieth century tending to take a more collective view of the learning self, while those born later tended to emphasise the autonomous, individualised learning self (Gaskell 2005, 358); but this was an under-developed empirical element of a rather specialised theoretical study. More generally, lifelong learning researchers tend simply to refer to chronological age, or at most age group, with little further discrimination.

There are good reasons for supposing that the relative neglect of generation in adult learning research will, or at least should, change. First, demographic developments across many western societies have brought about growing levels of interest in those groups who are often described as 'older adults'; older adults as actors are also of growing importance, particularly perhaps as

citizens (one feature of a generational analysis is that older adults usually seem more likely to vote than younger adults), lobbyists who can band together to promote their own interests, and consumers who have considerable collective purchasing power at all levels of the market. Those who have an interest in reaching 'grey votes' or the 'grey pound' are already identifying and targeting sub-groups based on a variety of distinguishing features, including generation. The influence of market research methods is very visible in this development, and has been since the 1980s (Bocock 1993, 29).

Second, and related to this, learning providers are increasingly acknowledging and responding to the 'grey learner'. As policy and practice continue to develop, and as researchers increasingly engage with what has previously been a rather specialised sub-field (sometimes technically defined as 'educational gerontology'), so they are likely to abandon the tendency to lump together all people who are over fifty or sixty as 'older', and increasingly to recognise the existence of different groups, including age cohorts with particularly important shared experiences. Closer to the other end of the life span, younger adults may well be culturally and politically rather distant from the aging professional workforce in adult learning, and generational differences between providers and part of their clientele are becoming quite marked.

Third, there is a wider public and popular use of the term 'generation'. Impressionistically, this wider usage seems both to have expanded, particularly in western societies since the later 1950s, and to have become more precise, in that people are increasingly able to define themselves and others by quite short term generational features (for example, the 'X-Box generation'). It may be speculative to suggest that this apparent acceleration in the usage of generation has much to do with the importance of fashion in

driving markets – and, of course, of the importance of demonstrating *un*fashionableness in driving consumer decisions to ditch one product or lifestyle and replace it with another. Nonetheless, the relationship does have a certain plausibility, particularly for produces of goods and services who target those whose identities and desires are least fixed (Bocock 1993, 28). This more general cultural trend provides a background in which adult learning researchers are likely to show increasing interest in generation in the future.

So what can we learn from the existing body of knowledge? In particular, the Finnish studies indicate that there are some important differences between generations in their attitudes towards both initial education and adult learning. Some of this is common sense: for instance, being a university student is likely to have carried a very distinctive set of meanings for young people at a time when the higher education participation rate was three per cent; the same status carries quite different meanings when the participation rate is over forty percent, and higher education entry is part of the normal biography – at least for the middle classes, for girls and for some ethnic groups. But some of these studies have found much more deeply-rooted differences in orientations towards learning, resulting for example in varying generational views of on-the-job-training (Aro et al 2005, 466).

These studies take generations to be groupings based on age cohort and shared experience. Another body of work looks at intergenerational learning within families (eg Boström 2003; Gorard, Rees and Fevre 1999) or the reproduction of educational – and other – inequalities across generations (eg Istance 2003). Alison Fuller and colleagues have considered generational differences in higher education access, but with particular respect to inter-generational transmission of inequality, in their study of barriers to participation in higher education in England (Heath, S., Fuller, A. and Paton, K.

2007). Gender again plays a central role. Partly this is because primary care responsibilities, whether for children or for the infirm elderly, is far more likely to lie with women than with men.

Ethnicity may similarly play a distinctive role in intergenerational learning. Particularly among migrant groups, intergenerational exchanges appear both to help maintain existing collective identities, while simultaneously enabling adjustment to a new context. A recent qualitative sociocultural study of child/grandparent learning among Sylheti/Bengali-speaking families in east London explored the ways in which grandparents served as 'founts of knowledge' that had been passed on in the past, including key social and communicative competences; equally, though, the children brought new competences that older adults had not previously accessed, such as familiarity with new technologies (Kenner et al 2007). This study also noted the important caring role carried out by many grandparents, in a context where mothers are increasingly engaged directly in the labour market.

Bjerrum Nielsen's work also raises further questions. In her study, the teenage girls' prospects of social mobility were limited in comparison to those of their mothers and grandmothers, largely because the transition to the middle class had already taken place in the earlier generations (Bjerrum Nielsen 1998, 70). She suggests that the project of social mobility may therefore be losing symbolic power; but we can also speculate that this younger generation faces greater risks of downward mobility than of upward movement. If so, then social mobility acquires a new symbolic power, signposting the risk of unwanted destinations as much as wanted ones. So as well as introducing a gender dimension into the analysis, we need to consider the role of risk (Beck 1992). Indeed, rather than describing those born after 1966, and schooled during the 1970s, as the 'young' generation, we could rather think of them as the risk society generation, for whom the entry into the labour market was

highly uncertain and often disrupted. This leaves open the question of how to characterise subsequent generations; Antikainen's study was based on work conducted twenty years ago, and we need to update it in the light of subsequent changes.

Table One represents a preliminary attempt to categorise educational generations in contemporary Britain. While it draws on information gathered during the project, it has yet to be fully tested against a range of empirical data. It is, moreover, grounded mainly in experiences of the formal educational system, rather than in the range of learning activities in which people engage, including those powerful learning processes that can shape identity and sense of self-efficacy in the childhood years. And even in respect of the formal educational system, there is a danger of overlooking the consequences of differences in the three national education systems within Britain. In particular, the early introduction of comprehensive secondary education in Scotland, as well as its continuing dominance, mean that educational generations may not be as clearly distinguished as in England and Wales. It is not just that the school systems themselves therefore provide different experiences, but they also have different consequences; in particular, school-leaver attainment in Scotland tends to be higher on average, much less affected by school characteristics, and – perhaps most significantly – shows a relatively small gap between high attainers and low attainers, particularly compared with England (OECD 2007). In many other respects, though, such as the breakdown of existing transition-to-work systems in the 1970s, the rapid expansion of higher education in the 1980s/1990s, and the expansion of early years education, the differences between Britain's three national systems are relatively minor. Given these qualifications, the categorisation should best be viewed as a heuristic device, designed to stimulate analysis, debate and further research, and not as a finished conceptual framework.

Table One: School reforms and generations in Britain

Generation	Education as privileged resource	Growing educational opportunity	Welfare and educational choice	Extended schooling, risky transitions	Permanent lifelong education
Years of birth	1915 - 1940	1941 – 1960	1961 - 1970	1970 - 1985	1986 - ????
Entered school	1920 – 1944	1945 – 1965	1966 - 1975	1975 - 1990	1990 – ????
School reforms	Universal primary education, wartime disruption of schooling and transition to work, elite higher education	Education Acts 1944/1947 Universal secondary education (tripartite in England and Wales but comprehensive in Scotland), elite higher education	Comprehensive secondary education, expanded higher education	Expanding higher education and early years provision, disrupted transition from school to work, youth unemployment	Mass higher education, partial feminisation of higher education, marketisation (strongest in England), continuing structural and curricular revolution
Age in 2005	61-85	40-60	30-39	25-30	??-30

Adapted from the Finnish model presented in Aro, Rinne, Lahti and Olkinuora (2005, 463)

Cases from Learning Lives

In examining generational formation in Learning Lives, we have selected six cases. All come from the Scottish fieldwork, and although there were cases of geographical mobility, they were educated primarily within the Scottish educational system. The intention here is to explore the ways in which this group "did generation", as well as the ways in which generational influences have shaped their own educational attitudes and trajectories.

These individuals represent a balance between the genders and come from a range of different backgrounds. At time of interview all were in the labour market, or had recently left it. The individuals concerned are:

- Andy O'Donnell – former bricklayer and building sub-contractor, in his early seventies when interviewed;
- Archie Bone – former miner and factory worker, in his seventies when interviewed;
- Brother Raphael – higher education lecturer and artist, in her forties when interviewed;
- Andy Lawson – skilled engineer, in his forties when interviewed;
- Carmen - graduate social worker, in her thirties when interviewed;
- Daisy Paterson – unqualified social worker, in her late thirties when interviewed.

The analysis that follows looks at examples of generational 'markers' – experiences and memories that are characteristic of a particular period - that emerged during the interviews. A number of writers, including many psychologists, hold that the years between infancy and youth are particularly significant in forming a person's sense of self (eg Cavalli 2004), but while I have included episodes from this period, it is clear that the interviewees also refer to events and experiences from adulthood as being critical for their

identity – and sometimes their sense of agency. The experiences are structured around five themes: working life, cultural practices, civic engagement, community and education.

i. Working life

Andy O'Donnell was born in the early-30s and entered the labour market shortly after the War at the age of 14. His career trajectory was a typical one for a working class boy of the time: apprenticeship, National Service, skilled work as a bricklayer, sub-contracting and small employer. His Army service took him abroad (Egypt) and taught him new skills (lorry driving, taking command as a non-commissioned officer); it was *a rotten posting*, but at least *I didnae hae the spit and polish lot*. Work for Andy was physical, and skill embodied, as in this account of work on 'the grip' (sub-contracting): *Well, it's kind a hard tae say this, but the ones that went for it were the ones that could work hard and the ones that were fast bricklayers*. There was also a bodily penalty: *I went though a spot with a bad knee I knocked off a wall, and I was off my work for a long while with that, but I've still got arthritis in my knee since I got that knock, and I had tae stop working with spinal arthritis because of my back, but it's a common complaint with bricklayers, bad backs*.

Andy Lawson, born in the early 1960s and leaving school in the late 1970s, is a skilled engineering worker. His labour market trajectory does not conform to the generational norm: leaving school at a time of high youth unemployment, when the 'normal' pathway for working class boys was onto a youth training programme, Andy went directly into a job in a garage. Family social capital provided the initial entry point: his father, who owned two or three garages, took him on; he carried on as a garage mechanic after his father sold the business, then took a maintenance job in a large engineering concern who subsequently trained him up to skilled level.

Archie Bone came from an earlier generation, one that could take jobs for granted. Growing up in a small mining village, son of a miner, his working life was mapped out from birth; demand for coal was high when he left school immediately after the War. No worrying about disrupted school-to-work transitions for Archie – family social capital kicked in at once:

> *You left the school on the Friday morning, you went tae the church on the Friday, your last day at school, you left the school straight fae the church, you got finished aboot twelve o'clock in the day, so I came hame, ma mither says to me, "Right up tae the pit, and see aboot a job", right ye are, so away I goes up to the pit, walked into the pit yaird, never knew any better like, just walked into the pit yaird and I was standing looking roond aboot me and this man comes over to me and he says "What are you looking fir?" and I says "I am up tae see the manager aboot getting a job", "What is yer name?", I says "Archie Bone" and he says "Who is yer faither?" and I says "Jimmy Bone", "Skin Bone yer faither?", that was ma faither's nickname like, and I says "Aye", he says "Right, ye start on Monday morning".*

Daisy Paterson was from a later generation, many of whose members faced unemployment or youth training schemes on leaving school. Like the older working class men, though, Daisy also slipped easily into a job. A miner's daughter, she had done reasonably well at school, and stayed on for Highers. On the very day of her final exam in 1980 *I started work in the local factory*, as a machinist making jeans.

For university graduates from the younger group, the transition to work could be highly contingent. Carmen had studies social administration at university and went straight into social work, but

> *… it was a very kind of generalised notion and I had no idea what being a social worker would actually be like. I think by the time I got into my second year at college I had begun to realise that I was probably far too young to be thinking about being a social worker*.

So she decided to treat her first job as an experiment, *go out and work for a while and see if that was still what I wanted to do*. After some years of working successfully as a support worker she returned to take a social work qualification.

For Brother Raphael the whole process was much more protracted. Teenage rebellion had left her unqualified and with a young daughter; while she ended up lecturing in higher education, this followed on from re-entering higher education, which she combined with caring for her elderly parents.

Carmen's view of work corresponded with the exigencies of a flexible labour market. Although she worked in the public sector, she feared the stagnation that might come from staying too long with the same employer. In her present job, she said, *I'm feeling uncomfortable that I've been there for ten years*. She had taken a counselling course partly

> *because I don't want to sort of stagnate, I don't want to be in a job forever where I don't do different things . . . that really did help, it helped me in my job that I was doing, but it also helped me broaden my horizons, meet different people, be doing different things and learning new skills*.

At the same time, she didn't want to move into management, because *it's further away from working with tenants and the kinda direct support to tenants, much more political kind of post*. Moreover, *I'm a bit of a control freak*, and management would mean relying on others.

Daisy did accept promotion to a supervisory role in the jeans factory. Initially she rejected the offer, then decided to give it a *six week trial and if I cannae,*

cannae hack it I'll say so. She remained a supervisor for the next fourteen years, taking an SVQ in supervisory management, with *thirty-nine machinists below me, and that wis just in my section, thirty-nine crabbit machinists (laugh).* Because she had been promoted within the factory,

> *they tried tae kind a get ye tae fall, I would say they tried taeget ye tae fall on yer face. They didnae like tae see folk getting on and the fact that I had took the production supervisor's job, I had left the ranks of the machinist, I had moved out o' them, I had went to the staff side o' stuff, and that bugged a lot of folk*.

Daisy changed job only after her mother entered a protracted serious illness and her father – who had refused help caring for his wife – had a fatal heart attack. Daisy looked for part time work, and ended up working with adults with disabilities, and found *I really, really enjoyed it*, moving subsequently into a support assistant post when she went full-time again.

These specific examples can be related to wider transformations in the British – and more generally the Western – labour market. First, there has been a general shift away from manufacturing and extractive work, and towards service sector employment; second, there has been a shift away from manual and craft occupations towards professional, technical and managerial occupations; third, there has been a decline in routine factory occupations and a rise in the number and range of jobs that require affective work directly with customers (including internal customers); and fourth, there are pronounced trends towards flexibility of employment, much employer (or market) driven but some – and I suspect an increasing amount – initiated by workers who want to change their role. These tendencies have been accompanied by cultural and social changes that have witnessed a widespread feminisation of the labour market, albeit one that has been highly uneven in its impact; and a breakdown of the relationship between regulated retirement age and actual retirement age. There are clear gender dimensions

to these trends, and there is also evidence of a marked generational aspect. Thus the Fordist workers tend to be aged in their mid-forties or over and male; the flexible career changers tend to be slightly younger and female.

ii. Taste and cultural practice

Brother Raphael in her early years at secondary school *got into David Bowie and that was a kick-start of a certain sort of education* By 1973, *I'd spend my days in newsagents reading everything, Melody Maker from cover to cover*. References to Bowie pepper the interviews, including a reference to a fantasy about *dark David Bowie in Berlin.* For a time she became *completely obsessed* with one of the local *hard boys*, making a scrapbook about him and his tastes, trying to *turn myself into what he liked*. This led to conflict with her Catholic parents, particularly her father who packed her off to Wexford for a holiday away from urban Scotland.

The body was an issue for Brother Raphael. She did not only try to dress and behave in ways that would impress her 'hard boy' boyfriend. In her mid-teens, Brother Raphael became keen on aerobic exercises (*away before* they were popularised by Jane Fonda's videos); she also remembered reading D.H. Lawrence and Henry Miller in those years, and feeling herself somewhat apart from *all these divvy girls* at school.

Archie Bone, trade union activist and local community organiser, is also a keen football fan, and has run his local Rangers supporters' club for three decades. Football rivalries also regulated his exchanges with a Catholic friend and workmate:

> *before we left each other at the top of the road it wis "I hope yer fuckin team gets beat the day", "I hope yer fuckin team gets beat the day, I will see you on Monday at the back shift, cheerio", and that wis it.*

Carmen thought that her faith background had influenced her decision to become a social worker, *in that I suppose all my messages that I've had throughout my childhood was about thinking about other people and about, that not everybody is as fortunate as yourself*.

Culturally, Andy Lawson had followed what might have been a 'normal' boys' pathway at any time between the 1950s and the 1980s, and was involved in consuming and playing popular music. Although from a working class background, Andy's father was a small businessman who engaged in conspicuous consumption, and Andy was set to learn the piano. He dropped that and taught himself to play guitar: *One o' the boys had a garage and we used tae play in there*. This came to an end when he got a new job, but in his early forties Andy had started to build a CD collection and teamed up with a friend to attend concerts by *a lot o' the auld groups, you know like all the kind o' in the eighties*; he was looking at buying a new guitar and amplifier, joking about having *missed oot* on being a *rock star*.

Culturally, Andy O'Donnell seems to have followed what at first sight looks an atypical pathway for working class people born well before the War. He and his wife spent much of their free time travelling abroad, not just to the conventional working class holiday destinations like Florida but to Italy, California and the Middle East. Their first holiday – to a Butlin's camp on the North Yorkshire coast – had earned him a reputation for snobbishness in his wife's family.

As well as dreams of guitar-playing and rock stardom, Andy Lawson shows traces of belonging to 'Thatcher's Children' when it comes to conspicuous consumption. As a child in the late 60s and early 70s, he was embarrassed when his father used the family car (a Mercedes) to drop him at school; at time

of interview, he had bought Gucci watches for all his children and a Rolex for himself (and fourteen more watches in a drawer); and, he admitted, *I like ma designer clothes*.

Daisy Paterson can also be seen as one of Thatcher's Children. Born in 1964, she left school in 1980 because *aw my mates were oot working and at the weekends they were aw gone clubbing it and were at the local working men's clubs, and I couldnae go because I had nae money and I decided "Hmm, I've had enough o' school, I'm off".* Unlike Andy, conspicuous consumption for Daisy involved not the purchase of cars, chunky gold jewellery and designer clothing, but rather the music and dancing of the working men's clubs; and these were now part of her past, albeit one remembered with regret for its passing.

Again, cultural practices appear consistent with wider social and cultural trends. There is a concern among younger adults, particularly women, with control over bodily appearance which is consistent with Giddensian ideas about the scope of individual reflexivity; and there is the broken body of the older male manual workers. There are patterns of conspicuous consumption among Thatcher's Children, and rock music seems to have been a key cultural marker for three of the four adults in this group.

iii. Active and inactive citizens

Andy O'Donnell was a stalwart of his local Labour Party and an active trade unionist. In his seventies at the time of interview, he took a dim view of Tony Blair and the New Labour government. Born in the early-30s, he became involved in politics in the 1960s and became a Burgh Councillor, rising to the point where he led the Labour Group on the Council and was scheduled to be the next Provost when he resigned from the Council to attend to work, and

became a Justice of the Peace. Andy's father had been an active socialist who had sat and discussed politics with him; one of his early memories was of his father heckling a Communist street speaker; another was of his father – who had served in the Second World War - talking about his experiences of helping released inmates at Buchenwald. The immediate trigger for Andy joining the Labour Party was more prosaic: he wanted to get into the local Labour Club, and party membership would help his candidature. His wife also joined, serving a long period as local branch treasurer.

Archie Bone was also an active citizen. He had been a militant activist in the miners' union, served on the village community council, and helped run a football supporters club (he had been the club secretary for thirtyone years when interviewed in late 2004). He gave local history talks at the primary school He had issues with the Labour Party, believing that it had lost touch with its own roots: *Even oor ain local councillor, I had a go at him just nae later than last night, and said to him "You are no listening to the people in this village that you represent, you are listening to the Labour Party and you shouldnae be daein that".*

Most of the other – younger – manual workers in our sample did not mention any political involvement at all. Again, this is typical of working class people from the generations born after the Second World War: political activism, and even union activism, is very much the exception. Rather, it was usually part of the family background, associated with parents and grandparents rather than oneself. In some cases, this might open up the possibility of regret at one's own civic disengagement, even a sense of guilt, but none of our younger contributors had a continuing career of political or social involvement outside their own immediate and known circles.

Carmen, who became a social worker after university, described her parents as *quite politically aware, that not everybody had access to the same things and that it was important to be aware of that and to contribute*. Brother Raphael's family environment included strong memories of Irish nationalist rebellion: *the big turning point in their life, in my family's psyche was 1916 and it was what the grandparents were all doing at those times*. Another one of our interviewees, Sue Martin, felt slightly guilty about her own inactivity; daughter of staunch Labour-supporting teachers, she had demonstrated and sung during her student days, but could not see how civic engagement related to her adult life. And again, these generational effects largely correspond to wider trends.

For several of those born during the sixties, Margaret Thatcher was a significant figure. Daisy Paterson, recalling the bitter legacy of the 1980s mining strike, described the Conservative prime minister as *the woman that broke the miners' strike, she really did destroy them and destroyed a lot ae communities*. She herself as a young factory worker had worn a red shirt – along with protesting fellow workers – when Thatcher visited the jeans factory where she was working. But Daisy does not mention any form of political or voluntary activity outside her own family (where she took responsibility for her parents when they became inform).

Again, then, we can see significant traces of generational or cohort effects in respect of civic engagement. The older adults grew up in a world of trade unions, political parties and social clubs; both of the men in this group had taken on wider responsibilities for community leadership – primarily political in Andy O'Donnell's case, predominantly sporting in Archie Bone's case. For Thatcher's children, civic engagement was part of the world of childhood or adolescence, something that one's parents did and that formed part of the immediate environment, but not an everyday feature of one's own adult life.

iv. Community

Many of the older adults told a story of community lost. Archie Bone, who grew up in a Stirlingshire mining village, spoke of the contrast with the local town:

> *Stirling was a place that we never ever actually went to as kids . . . When I eventually got married, I went to live in Stirling, and I stuck it for eleven months and I just couldnae stick it any longer, I just, it wisnae my lifestyle, I wisnae used to that, I wis used to going oot the front door and within two minutes I wis oot in the open countryside . . . there was nae fun in toons.*

Work and fellow workers played a central role in Archie's sense of community. In Fallin pit, he recalled

> *…that is the tradition, you don't sack anybody in the pit, the miners will sack them, but the management will not sack them. And it was one of they type of pits, because it was a very close knit community that was in the place, it was mair or less the men that run the pit, the manager would take a back seat*.

The phrase 'close knit' was a common one for interviewees from neighbourhoods that had previously been dominated by coal. Daisy Paterson described her mining village as 'close knit', for example, when recalling her father being on strike in the early 1970s.

When Archie took another job in a concrete factory, he missed *the camaraderie* of the pit. His new workmates *were just individuals and they werenae a collective workforce, people came fae Stirling, they came fae Alloa, they came fae all over the place*. Archie followed this immediately with a common tale about community past as community lost:

> *…if a family were having a bad time in the village, everybody rallied round fir tae try and help the family as much as they could . . . yer could leave yer back doors open at night, yer could leave anything lying oot the*

front or the back of yer hoose, yer could be guaranteed it would be there the next day or somebody would come and say, yer left that lying outside yer hoose last night, it could be anything of any value, naebody would take anything off of yer, as I say, nooadays yer are feart tae pit a milk bottle oot in case somebody steals it.

The cause, Archie believed, was the closure of coal mines: *they have taken that part of yer life away, that culture away from yer, the traditions away from yer and everything, and kids nooadays are growing up with entirely different values fae what we were actually taught*. That said, this sentence was followed immediately by tales of fights, poaching and theft.

Daisy Paterson's story of community lost was more specific, and focussed around the closure of social clubs. She had left school partly because her working friends had money to spend in clubs and she did not. Looking back,

That was their whole social life, that's where the working men's clubs were, they'd domino tournaments and cards and sometimes I remember in one ae the clubs on a Sunday morning they had a sing song on Sunday fae twelve o'clock tae three, and that was aye quite good, but as I used to say there used tae be live bands on Friday, Saturday, Sunday for the dancing and folk used to gae there, even in the eighties after the pits had shut, the clubs were still no too bad, but it's just kind ae fell away, now there's nothing, there's nothing in this area at all.

Community for Archie was exclusive as well as inclusive. In one story of a conflict with another man, he remarked as an aside that the man *was a Fifer, and Fifers and people from this area don't really mix, he was a Fife miner, who thought they were superior miners to every other buddy*. Toward the end of his interview he spoke of sectarian tensions in the village:

> *I always remember, when I was young, I was bad fir it, I was really bad fir it, I wis [pause] Catholics [pause], I don't like them, I hate them, they shouldnae actually be here, they are the scum of the earth and everything*.

This story was provoked by reminiscences of a friend and workmate known as Baby Kelly, *a big bruiser of a guy like, but a big gentleman though*. By that stage, Archie's lingering sectarianism had become ritualised into football banter. Again, though, we hear of community as exclusion: when a workmate told him about his experiences in the Second World War, Archie was forced to admit that compared with the Wehrmacht, local Catholics were best reserved for *friendly rivalry*.

Sectarianism was also part of the background for Brother Raphael. Now a lecturer in an art school, Brother Raphael had been brought up in a middle class Catholic family, with English and Irish parents, but rejected *the West of Scotland Catholic grumpiness*, and was uncomfortable when her brothers responded *in certain ways which could be quite bullying*.

For Daisy Paterson, the boundaries of felt community had been set during the miners' strike of 1984-5. Those who worked during the strike were ostracised, and the bitterness remained undimmed twenty years later:

> *Luckily I've never been faced wi' anything like that, but that did go on, it broke up families, it destroyed family relationships, guys that had been pals for years doon the pits never spoke and wid usually end up fighting at the weekend and stuff, because certain folk went back tae work.*

So the generational aspect to community was extremely strong. Daisy Paterson was alone among the four younger interviewees in talking much about community, and she really saw it as something from the past, its ghost killed off by Mrs Thatcher. Daisy regretted the demise of community lost, as did Archie and Andy. By contrast, Brother Raphael saw habitual faith-based

solidarity as something she had decided to leave behind; she grounded her own identity on her separation from inherited beliefs.

v. Education

Almost all of the older adults told stories involving strict teachers. Archie Bone, a coalminer who had gone to school in the 1930s and early 40s, wove a wider pattern into his account when he recalled the military background of his headteacher:

> *…the local school that we went tae isnae there any longer, it was knocked doon a long number of years ago, and we had a headmaster that was called Captain Gracy, he had been a captain in the army, and he turned to education when he was invalided out the army and he was a very, very hard taskmaster*.

The head inspected every child's for cleanliness and neatness, and sent errant children to wash or brush their shoes before entering the classroom.

For Archie Bone, the transition to secondary school brought another unsettling experience: he had to travel into Stirling and home again by bus, which

> *was like going into London, you were just lost, there was masses and masses of hooses and people busy running aboot all over the place, and we werenae used to that.*

So school was a doubly disorienting experience, which Archie saw as tending to disembed him from his own *tight-knit* community.

For Brother Raphael, a favourable disposition towards learning was part of family cultural capital:

> *of my parents had been to university but they were smart and they had a very open disposition to knowledge and reading in quite an old-fashioned cultural way because both were quite religious and they'd both had a*

classical education and which they'd both won by being super smart and they were also the first generation to be able to do that.

Similarly at school, where her own reading and cultural taste had made her aware of *all these divvy girls, I suddenly realised the social politics of that, about nice girls going on to uni*. She became *this arty girl* as a reaction *against the kind of quite repressive regime at home*, with a strong imaginary vision of arts school:

I'm talking about the cultural narratives, I'm talking about how like being into a certain sort of music, be into David Bowie and being into culture and narrative of what an art school was, cause I thought oh, that, you know, I kind of saw it from the distance like somewhere glowing, but it wasn't that there was a canon, it was that that was a place, it was like it was a world, it was like a utopia, it was like in music.

She did poorly at secondary school in a middle class rebel kind of way, passing three Higher grades instead of the six that her family had expected; so instead of going to one of the Scottish art schools, she went to Chelsea for a year, became pregnant and went back to Scotland with her baby daughter. Once her daughter was in school, Brother Raphael went to arts school, working mainly with textiles, taking an M.A. while also caring for her now elderly parents.

Discipline, which we have seen in the stories of the older adults, also featured in the memories of some interviewees who had been born in the sixties. Carmen, born in 1963 to a lower middle class family, went to Catholic schools, and strict discipline was again part of her account. Even at primary school

I can remember, there were a couple of teachers who were very strict, very old school, and, you know, the chalk flying, rulers flying, the belt. . .

She lived two hundred metres away from a non-denominational school, but *the diocese for the church dictated where you went*, and she bussed to a Catholic secondary school, where some of the classes were taken by nuns.

Some of the teachers also taught in a neighbouring boys' school, *so I then had teachers who were used to teaching boys and belting them left, right and centre, and shouting and screaming a lot*. Daisy Paterson, born in 1964 into a mining family, *wis always getting my knuckles slapped wi' the ruler, "Oh, you write properly".*

While her family encouraged Carmen to pursue higher education, neither of her parents had been to university, and her mother – a secretary – in particular *was quite bitter about her lack of opportunity, so probably quite aware that I had better opportunities*.

Daisy Paterson had just completed an Open University foundation course at the time of her second interview and already held two SVQs that she had taken since leaving school. However, she needed a higher education qualification to become a qualified social worker, and during the first interview she was finding the OU course heavy going. Even after finishing it, she said *I'm no a fabulous studier and I'm no clever at revising*.

So here again we can see elements of generational specificity in adults' educational experiences. For older adults school was a place of discipline and harshness, a shocking breach with the rules that governed the previously known world of home and community. Higher education was simply not an option. For the younger group, higher education was the normal pathway for middle class adults, an abnormal pathway for Daisy, and a no entry road for Andy Lawson. This is not to adopt generational determinism: Brother Raphael was a refusenik in this respect as in so many others, and viewed the expectations of her social milieu with great suspicion. But people from different generations were confronted with different expectations and possibilities in education as in other aspects of their lives.

Conclusions

The generational dimension is a significant element of people's experiences, and it is widely suggested that people use generational markers and shared experiences to underpin and articulate their sense of who they are. It therefore seems reasonably clear that generation is vital to identity in direct ways; and shared generational experiences can be seen as an important ingredient in the place of work, community and civic engagement in people's identity. So we need in our analyses of adults' lives to distinguish the effects of generation/cohort from those of age.

This is not to overplay the concept: generation does not dictate the script to passive actors, nor does it perform alone. Generational effects will also be interwoven with other influences on peoples' lives such as gender, social class or ethnicity, and the question of which is most important to their sense of self is likely to be a contingent one, which can be subjected to empirical investigation in individual cases.

Generation may be important in people's identity, but does it also come into play in their sense of agency? This is certainly the view held by Mannheim, who as noted above was careful to distinguish between generation as objective reality and generation as a deeply felt subjective phenomenon. Edmunds and Turner (2005) similarly distinguish between the strong sense of agency felt by Baby Boomers, and the much more muted sense of what can be achieved that they found among the Generation X-ers; the degree of agency in their account is related directly to the strength of the shared identity that can be found among members of a particular generation, as well as to the extent to which its members care able to access different sets of resources (including their shared stocks of social capital). Phillips and Western (2005,

171) similarly suggest that the aging Boomer generation has marginalised contemporary youth cultures and monopolised the dominant cultural icons.

So how is generation part of people's learning lives? Antikainen and colleagues treat learning cohorts as defined primarily by their access to and experiences of education at the time of youth (Antikainen et al 1996). Thus the group educated before or during the crises of the late 1930s and early 1940s viewed higher education as something taken by a tiny minority of the highly privileged; they saw education as highly structured and based on a relatively simple process of knowledge transmission. This, the authors suggest, has shaped this group's orientation towards learning in adult life, and influenced its behaviour when in learning situations, as well as its self-understandings of learning and of being a learner.

These are valuable insights, and they have in turn influenced later research in Finland and elsewhere. It suggests that we need ourselves to take account of the early educational experiences of participants in the Learning Lives study – including, for example, the experiences and choices faced by the different age cohorts that another part of our research team has been following in the BHPS (Macleod and Lambe 2007). Certainly our older interviewees conformed both to the findings of Antikainen and his colleagues, as well as to earlier British studies that have shown a strong correlation between age and reluctance to participate in formal learning. People like Andy tended to see themselves as old dogs, not young enough to learn any more new tricks. But we need to look beyond the formal education system, and beyond the age-bound episodes of school and university. Generational dimensions can also be found in people's learning experiences outside the formal educational system, and across different phases of the life course. While both genders have experienced dramatic shifts in role in late modernity, there are suggestions in our data that generational differences in recent years have

become particularly marked for women. Antonella Spano has put this more starkly, and positively, in arguing that a "series of interconnected changes have made possible a new way of being a woman", presenting quite different dilemmas to women from different generations (Spano 2002, 151).

Most debates over policy and practice in education pay little if any attention to generation. There are exceptions in the policy field, but many of these tend to come from outside the field of education, and their impact on the spending education ministries is therefore limited. Thus the government's Policy and Innovation Unit (precursor of the current Strategy Unit, which advises the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer) has noted the importance of age – if not generation - in lifelong learning, in the context of work around employability and volunteering, concluding that government should be doing much more to "engage the over-50s in lifelong learning" (PIU 2000, 65). This seems an entirely reasonable recommendation, though government focussed much more since 2000 on dismantling the public adult education system, giving virtually no thought to the challenging and complex – and no doubt costly – task of engaging older generations in learning. A sharper generational analysis might well improve our understanding both of the reluctance of older adults to engage in learning, and of the stark inequalities in levels of public support enjoyed by different generational groupings.

Nor has generation featured markedly in debates over professional practice in adult learning. There is strong recognition of the importance of age, not least because of publicity surrounding the repeated findings of national survey data which demonstrate declining participation with age (including McLeod and Lambe 2007). One recent, highly regarded handbook on adult education and training makes no reference to generation (Tight 2002). Peter Jarvis' *International Dictionary of Adult and Continuing Education* provides a very brief, one sentence definition of "generation gap" (Jarvis 2002, 78), but

otherwise does not consider the concept, despite comprehensive and rather helpful discussions of age, gerontocracy and Third Age. Nor does the concept feature in standard texts used for teacher training in post-compulsory education in the UK.

This paper has presented evidence which suggests that this gap is significant, and that generation should be considered in preparing teachers to work with adults. Good teachers already take time to get to know adult students' biographies, and will identify and be sensitive to any difficult earlier experiences of education (Barton et al 2007, 136-7). These should be understood, though, not simply as private troubles, but also as shared, public issues. Further, the potential for intergenerational learning has been under-developed. Yet there is some evidence from other fields that inter-generational practice can be beneficial for learning, as well as producing positive effects on well-being and cohesion. While much of this literature focuses on the learning and well-being of children (see the systematic review summarised in Springate, Atkinson and Martin 2008), there is also some evidence that intergenerational practices may reduce isolation and raise self-esteem among older people, as well as enabling them to acquire and develop new skills and knowledge (Boström 2003; Kenner et al 2007)..

Learning takes place in many settings and at varied times; its outcomes – including its implications for future learning – are highly contingent upon contexts and timing. This paper has shown that generation is one important factor in people's experiences of work, community, culture and civic engagement – all arenas where we have abundant evidence of a rich variety of what has come to be known as informal learning, as well as often providing a critical context for episodes of formal education and training. Generational factors may help, as Gaskell noted (Gaskell 2005), in shaping learning preferences and behaviours. It follows that generational analyses may be

helpful in achieving a more nuanced understanding of the place of learning in people's lives; and that intergenerational practices are well worth exploring as a way of promoting new social approaches to learning.

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