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Chapter Author(s): Helen Kingstone and Jennie Bristow

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Introduction

Helen Kingstone and Jennie Bristow

What's in the concept of generation, and how should it be used? In exploring these two questions, this book seeks to introduce readers to the interdisciplinary potential of, and the intellectual tensions within, the field of generational studies.

The concept of generation has focused sociological interest and debate since the 1920s when sociologist of knowledge Karl Mannheim tried to define the 'problem of generations' (Mannheim, 1952 [1928]). It has developed in a number of directions in the subsequent century, often in conversation with related disciplines. It is a concept that is both instantly recognizable and open to numerous interpretations. For social scientists, explains Burnett (2010, p 1), 'generation is a dual concept, referring both to family and kinship structures on the one hand, and cohorts (or age sets) on the other'. However, 'like all language', it is mutable and 'has been subject to change in the flow of history and circumstance in which it has been put to work'. Burnett thus notes the paradox that:

The concept of generation has been charged with being too empty and slippery to be of much use; yet these characteristics are a function of its survival over thousands of years and the diversity of human formation and experience which it has named. (Burnett, 2010, p 1)

The 'polysemous usage' of generation, and the resulting 'confusion in generational studies' (Kertzer, 1983, pp 127–8), has proved a frustration for social scientists for many decades. When we consider the concept's use in other academic disciplines, and its common usage outside academia, we see that the concept describes a range of human, natural, cultural and technological phenomena. The aim of this book is not to provide a comprehensive etymology of the word 'generation' in all its uses, nor to

provide a definitive ‘answer’ to the question of what a generation actually *is*. Rather, it is to develop the ongoing conversation about how the concept has been deployed, in different ways, within the humanities and social sciences; and the ways it is currently used, in political debates and policy frameworks.

This conversation was the starting point of the Generations network, an interdisciplinary group of academics and policy-facing organizations working with the concept of generation, established by Helen and Jennie in 2019; and the book is one outcome of discussions within this network over the subsequent years. Below, we briefly recount the discussions explored by the Generations network project, and the key questions we identified for consideration when talking about generations. We then outline the structure of this book. First, however, it is worth reviewing the many meanings attached to the concept, and asking why, today, generations have become such a talking point.

The ‘generational turn’ in culture and society

The study of generation has emerged from a heightened cultural interest in the concept’s potential to capture something about people’s relationships with each other and their historical time, which can elude many of the established frameworks and categories through which scholars have tended to understand social developments, divisions, and experiences.

As noted previously, modern scholarship on generations was instigated by sociologist of knowledge Karl Mannheim, whose ideas receive extended attention in [Chapter 2](#). He developed his influential theory of social generations in the aftermath of the First World War, and he argued that generations emerge based on the socially transformative events that take place during people’s adolescence and early adulthood, what he called the ‘formative period’ ([Mannheim, 1952 \[1928\]](#)). Upheavals are therefore particularly conducive to development of strong social generations, and Mannheim suggested that these first came into being in the turmoil of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars (1789–1815), a periodization that we will come back to in [Chapter 3](#).

Generational studies in its own right emerged over the 20th century, developing as academics attempted to make sense of the cultural upheavals of the 1960s ([Bristow, 2015](#)). It gained wider academic and media attention around the dawn of the 21st century, as powerful cultural, political and economic trends were unsettling the terrain on which social conflicts and interpersonal connections had been theorized. From sexual relations to the institution of the family, from class solidarities to gender norms, the conventional borders and binaries of social and political life were superseded by concepts that sought to capture the combination of fragmentation and inter-connectedness that seemed to characterize the Millennial moment.

In different but related ways, concepts such as risk, globalization, fluidity, decoloniality and individualization spoke to decentring of the norms and structures that had previously been the focus of Western intellectual thought.

This unsettling of established boundaries and conventions was not a purely theoretical project, nor one that confined itself to a particular discipline. Across the social and political sciences, the humanities and the arts, there was a shared recognition of the need for new tools and concepts to make sense, in real time, of this new epoch. Beyond the academy, political and cultural institutions were already moving outside the boxes in which they had operated and finding distinctive ways to establish themselves in these novel times. For example, in the UK, Tony Blair's New Labour government took up the mantle of US President Bill Clinton's 'Third Way', to describe a centrist approach that self-consciously took politics 'beyond left and right' (Giddens, 1994, 1998). Government departments worked together on policy making, and the focus was on youth and novelty, encapsulated in the promotion of 'Cool Britannia'.

The technology sector in the US, headed by bright young things, was rewriting the rules of social interaction to an extent that would not become apparent for a decade. The old jobs of the rapidly deindustrializing West would not be passed from father to son but outsourced to countries where different economic rules and cultural norms applied. Education expanded and became focused on keeping up with these new trends. Meanwhile, the trends shaping Western societies in the 'second demographic transition' first theorized in the 1980s, and characterized by falling birthrates, relatively high levels of migration and increasing life expectancy (Lesthaeghe, 2014), brought pressures for social policy in managing 'ageing societies'.

In this context, generation came to the fore as an alternative way of exploring social and interpersonal connections and conflicts, situating experience within historical time. As all the chapters in this book indicate, when handled with care, the concept of generation can expand our understanding. Between academic disciplines, differing interpretations currently exist of the concept of generations. This provides the basis for a more rounded and expansive understanding but also the potential for confusion, as researchers engaged in the study of the same topic can end up talking past each other.

This is a particular problem since generation has become routinely used as a frame in politics and policy. The UK now has All-Party Parliamentary Groups focused on 'future generations', 'inheritance and intergenerational fairness' and 'communities of inquiry across the generations'. Wales has a Future Generations Commissioner, and the label of 'the Covid generation' has been widely applied to children and young people who lived through the recent pandemic. A range of organizations and projects work to celebrate

intergenerational relationships to respond to social ills, often framing the concept of ‘generation’ in quite different ways.

Recent events, such as the 2007–8 Global Financial Crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020–21, have revealed our dependence on intergenerational relationships, both within and beyond the family, but have also exacerbated intergenerational inequalities. Deeper trends related to globalization have brought to the fore some important cultural, demographic, and societal differences surrounding the meaning and experience of ‘generation’, which need to be sensitively and reflexively understood rather than subsumed into generalized frameworks. Since the ‘generations’ rhetoric is likely to ramp up even further, we need to make sure that it is nuanced, informed and used productively.

It was in this climate of intensive but contradictory use of the generations concept that we set up the interdisciplinary Generations network in 2019. With funding from Wellcome, we built a network that brought together scholars from across the humanities and social sciences, along with representatives from third sector organizations including two partners: BPAS (the British Pregnancy Advisory Service), for their expertise on familial generations, and ILC-UK (the International Longevity Centre UK), for their expertise on the impacts of an ageing society. During 2020 and early 2021, we held a series of workshops on different aspects of the generations concept: ‘Generations in the family and the problem of “parenting”’, ‘Generational identities and the problem of “presentism”’, ‘Intergenerational Relationships’ and ‘Generational identities and historical events’.¹ The Covid-19 pandemic forced all but the first workshop online but also meant that we had contributions from a valuably international and geographically dispersed group. Finally, we held a consultation workshop specifically with a wider group of third-sector organizations, at which we co-wrote our toolkit for ‘Talking about Generations: 5 questions to ask yourself’: questions that we elaborate later.

This book is one outcome of that work. It introduces and explores the growing field of ‘generational studies’, by outlining ways that a generational lens is and can be used in a range of disciplines: Sociology and Social Policy, Literary Studies, History of Science, Media Studies, Politics, Psychology and Psychotherapy, and Social Enterprise. The contributors have all been working closely together through the Generations network, building a mutually synthesized, interdisciplinary working understanding that we hope will be useful for scholars across multiple disciplines. This book makes a commitment to addressing the topical issues of generational debates head-on but doing so without blame: other recent popular books about generations have assumed that ‘Baby Boomers’ and ‘Millennials’ or ‘old’ and ‘young’ are in conflict and in competition for future resources, a view that is also influential and problematic in media and policy debates. Here we invite

you to come with us beyond any such reductive and unhelpful paradigms, to offer new avenues for generational thinking.

Five questions for generational studies

We suggest, as a starting point, that those working with the concept of generation ask themselves five questions:

1. *What* are you talking about?
2. *Who* are you talking about?
3. *Where* are you talking about?
4. *Why* are you talking about generations?
5. Who are you talking *to*?

Reflections on these questions form the starting point of this book.

Question 1: *what* is being talked about? The ‘generations’ concept is complex partly because it has two different meanings fruitfully in use at the same time. It refers to different generations in a family (grandparents, parents, children and so on) but also across society to contemporaries in the same age group (Burnett, 2010, pp 1–2). The first has long been recorded and celebrated in genealogical terms, and Buklijas expands on the evolution of generation’s genetic sensibility in Chapter 4. Over the past two centuries (as Kingstone shows in Chapter 3), a second meaning has developed, which instead looks beyond the family, and refers to contemporaries in the same cohort strata. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2023) lists the term as being used in several other senses too, including to refer to the relativity of generational relations between people and to the stages in development of a product or technology, both of which use the same terminology of ordinal numbers: first-generation, second-generation and so on. This epitomizes the way that generation has escaped its original bounds and become both literal and metaphorical in usage.

The concept of generations therefore has significance both within the family and across society. We can think of these dimensions as ‘vertical’ and ‘lateral’: the familial meaning indicates the passing of time, whereas the social meaning focuses on contemporaries. Complicating matters further, ‘vertical’ relationships between generations do not exist only in families but permeate work and community life, bringing members of different generations in constant contact with each other.

Developing a sense of clarity about what we mean when we talk about generations is particularly important as the concept is not disembodied but used to describe groups of people. In respect of cohorts, demographers and sociologists are widely agreed on a generational schema we can use to refer to the social generations that have been born since the Second World

War: the ‘Baby Boomers’ (born 1945 to 1964), ‘Generation X’ (born 1965–80), ‘Generation Y’, (born 1981–96), known as ‘Millennials’ since the eldest of them came of age around the Millennium, and ‘Generation Z’ (born 1997–2012); the current crop of young children are as yet unlabelled in this way. The categories, their birth-year spans and their associated stereotypes have their own problems, which we will return to later, but these are what we mean when we talk about social generations in contemporary society.

All too often, however, commentators erroneously use the term ‘generation’ to refer to groups such as ‘60–65-year olds’, which are specifically age groups. These are much smaller and more specific strata of people, which potentially cut across social generation categories since the personnel within the age group changes over time. When people refer to even narrower time periods such as ‘the Class of 1966’, the same issues apply, and in this case the more precise term would be cohort: a group defined by its institutional function. Similarly, simplistic phrases like ‘older and younger generations’ are really referring to life stages. And the phrase ‘once in a generation vote’, used in the UK to mobilize for both the 2014 Referendum on Scottish Independence and the 2016 Brexit Referendum, is deliberately using the emotive word ‘generation’ to evoke a broad, but crucially indefinite, period of time, that can be redefined dependent on the political advantage.

Question 2: *who* is being referred to? Do intra-generational differences (that is, variation across a cohort) fundamentally undermine the generational concept, or simply nuance it? A key limitation of the concept of social generations, when mis-used, is that it artificially homogenizes a diverse population. Current discourse surrounding terms like ‘Boomer’, ‘Karen’ or ‘Millennial’ are often based on stereotypes of a white, middle-class, educated minority and treated as if representative of the whole. That can exclude or simply obscure a range of quite different experiences. Generational categories also, of course, intersect with other categories of identity. Minority groups, including migrants and LGBTQI+, often have different generational markers, as is discussed further in [Chapters 4, 8 and 9](#).

Specificity is also crucial when situating discussion of generation within time and place, bringing us to question 3, *where*. Historical and demographic differences mean that no single schema can be applied globally. Generations form through historical events and upheavals (for example, the Spanish Civil War in 1930s Spain; the Windrush migration in late-1940s Britain), that are often distinct to particular national contexts. Claims about the size, or the experience, of birth cohorts in one society should not be mapped on to another society without attention to the differences. Decolonial and postcolonial challenges to homogenizing concepts and discourses should be taken seriously here: norms and values related to family, youth and social time differ across societies, and concepts of generation developed within European and Anglo-American cultures are not directly applicable everywhere.

As generation engages explicitly with temporality, historical context also matters in how we use and employ the concept, as we see in [Chapters 3](#) and [6](#). This, in turn, raises a fourth question: *why* generations are being discussed, and how claims about generations are used. We can acknowledge that generation is an important consideration for some policy discussions and decisions, but it should not operate as an overarching frame in this domain. As explored in [Chapters 2](#) and [4](#), ‘generational divisions’ should not be emphasized to evade discussions of other social divisions. Sometimes what appear to be generational differences are in fact a result of something else such as material deprivation, cultural differences, or inequalities related to class, gender, and/or ethnicity. Politicized uses of ‘generation’ tend to co-opt young people into particular stances, by blaming ‘older voters’ for democratic choices or assuming a single ‘voice of youth’. Generational language such as ‘Millennial vs Boomer’ is often applied as a proxy for the binary categories of ‘young vs old’. Precise generational language and analysis will allow us to go beyond simplistic and potentially divisive dichotomies.

Finally, when drawing on generational categories we need to ask ourselves who we are talking *to*. Generational analysis is important because it helps us identify differences between groups. However, differences should not be emphasized at the expense of what people have in common. Where there are differences, this does not automatically need to produce antagonism: differences in experience, skills, outlook and resources can be complementary and produce solidarity. Generations do not exist in isolation but are constantly interacting and interdependent via reciprocal relationships of support. Too much policy discussion currently focuses exclusively on intergenerational asset transfer or ‘justice’ – using a deficit model – rather than what generations can gain from each other. Supporting intergenerational cooperation and solidarity requires bringing different generational groupings into a conversation about social problems and solutions, both with policy makers, and with each other.

Studying generations is exciting and challenging partly because, as we have seen, its referents are perpetually under debate. French historian of identity and memory Pierre Nora asks some important questions about how social generations form and function:

Exactly what role do events play in the determination of a generation, where the term *events*, broadly construed, encompasses both ordinary experience and *the* traumatic event? Is generation a conscious or unconscious phenomenon? Is it something imposed from without or freely chosen? Is it a statistical or a psychological phenomenon? Or, to put it another way, who does and who does not belong to a given generation, and how does that belonging manifest itself, given that one

or more different age cohorts may identify with a generation without taking part in the vicissitudes of its existence? (Nora, 1996, p 505)

These are questions that we take forward through the rest of this volume.

Structure of this book

Part I, ‘The Generations Concept in Historical and Contemporary Perspective’, comprises four substantial chapters reviewing how the concept has developed and is used in four fields: sociology and social policy, literary and historical studies, media and politics, and history of science. The aim of these chapters is to introduce students, scholars, and others interested in generations to how the concept is used across a range of disciplines, until now in limitingly separate ways. As such, **Part I** takes the form of a ‘reader’ on generational studies, mapping out this sub-field and identifying its limitations and potential. It begins with chapters from each co-editor, outlining the current position of the generations concept in social sciences and humanities scholarship respectively, and showing how each of those fields next needs to adapt and grow.

In **Chapter 2**, Jennie Bristow reviews the problem of ‘social generations’ as it has been developed and debated within the discipline of sociology, with particular regard to its relationship to contemporary social, historical and political developments. By theorizing the significance of generations within the transmission and development of knowledge, **Mannheim’s (1952 [1928])** essay on ‘The problem of generations’ provided a framework for understanding the emergence and significance of generational consciousness in relation to wider social and cultural events. However, despite its influence, Mannheim’s theory of ‘social generations’ is not the only way in which sociologists understand the concept. In evaluating the power and limitations of the ‘social generations’ concept, through engaging with subsequent social and theoretical developments and critiques, **Chapter 2** reviews different approaches to the study of generations. It suggests that the emergence of the life course approach reflects the increasing fluidity of kinship relations and personal ‘life stages’ from the latter part of the 20th century, providing a more nuanced and reflexive approach to understanding the experience of growing up and ageing (**Pilcher, 1995**). The chapter further suggests that the increasing appeal of ideas about ‘social generations’ partly reflects the increasing salience of generational analysis to a ‘post-political’ age increasingly concerned with identity, and partly reflects the misunderstanding and extension of this analysis into crude generational labels and stereotypes (**Bristow, 2019**).

By way of illustration, **Chapter 2** concludes with a discussion of generational consciousness and labelling in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This historical moment has brought to the fore many existing features of

the problem of generations, including the emergence of generational consciousness; the potential for tensions and collaboration between the generations; the difficulties expressed by modern societies in educating and socializing young people; and the problems of adult identity and authority. At the same time, political and media attempts to summarize and predict the life chances of the ‘Covid generation’ risk disregarding the nuances of generational analysis to present an overstated polarization of ‘young vs old’, and flattening out the diversity of experiences between young people globally.

In [Chapter 3](#), Helen Kingstone argues that discussions of generations need to take into account the concept’s long and non-linear history. Social generations and their associated identities began to emerge about 200 years ago, in the upheavals of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars ([Mannheim, 1952](#)). Scholars’ understanding of social generations, which has previously focused on the post-1945 period, therefore needs to address at least the past two centuries. This chapter surveys the current state of engagement with ‘generations’ in the humanities, particularly in literary and historical studies. The chapter then examines the nature of generational affiliations and identities across the period 1800–1945. Kingstone shows that generational identities were deep-rooted, though socially narrow, in 19th-century Britain: bourgeois intellectual movements were notably generation-conscious, but the working-class majority had quite different markers of age and maturation. In the early 20th century, the First World War produced more-widespread division between the generation who commanded the army and the ‘Lost Generation’ whose lives were shattered by it, followed by a post-war generation who turned away from it completely ([Erl, 2014](#)). Subsequently, the Holocaust and post-Second World War migration have raised the question of how social and genealogical generation interrelate ([Weigel, 2002](#)). Both have been mass events impacting society, but the ‘first-/second-/third-generation’ taxonomy in which we discuss these impacts is rooted in family relationships and ‘postmemory’ ([Hirsch, 2012](#)).

[Chapter 3](#)’s final section shows that these tensions between generation’s social and familial dimensions were well-recognized even back in the 19th century. A case study is offered of Margaret Oliphant’s novel *Hester* (1883), which depicts two successive generational moments when young women have to rise to the challenge to rescue their community. In the novel, age-definition is used to patronize and homogenize, showing that our ageing society’s failure to distinguish effectively between different generations within the ‘older’ population is nothing new. Equally significantly, the novel also showcases intergenerational friendships that break out of genealogical conventions, demonstrating that these relationships are powerful when reciprocal.

In [Chapter 4](#), Tatjana Buklijas showcases the generations concept’s dynamic career in science and medicine. She charts the emergence of

epigenetics from the study of cell cultures through animal studies, leading to its application to understanding transmission between generations of humans. The development of epigenetics, Buklijas explains, was preceded by the growing availability and authority of psychoanalytic psychiatry. This emerged in North America following the Second World War and was bound up with attempts to understand the impact of the Holocaust on the offspring of its victims. The concept of inherited trauma came to constitute a medical phenomenon, and the idea of ‘intergenerational cycles’ offered explanations based on biological and environmental factors that were distanced from earlier eugenic approaches. Epigenetics complicates the idea that inheritance is determined by genetics alone, and it speaks to the double meaning of ‘generation’ as a biological and environmental concept.

In [Chapter 5](#), Ben Little and Alison Winch argue that generation is a key but underused term for cultural studies, since it helps to map the type of large-scale cultural change that Stuart Hall terms the conjuncture. In the process, they examine the abuse of the generations concept: what happens when generations are over-generalized and weaponized to become ‘generationalism’. They examine think tank literature, and the discursive figure of the Millennial, as particularly utilized by Facebook and Meta founder Mark Zuckerberg. The problem comes when by moving into popular political discourse, generation becomes obfuscatory and deflective, serving as a means to shore up a conservative agenda, or to restore a radical movement to ‘traditional’ foundations.

[Part II](#), ‘Studies of the Generations Concept in Contemporary Life’, introduces new empirical studies from a range of disciplines, illustrating the breadth of generational studies as a sub-field and diverse ways in which a generational lens can be applied. The four shorter chapters in [Part II](#) provide a topical and applied dimension, bringing to life the debates about generation within and between disciplines.

In [Chapter 6](#), literary scholar David Amigoni examines the current rise of literature about intergenerational relationships, and asks what its implications are for those working to regenerate places and communities, and for organizations seeking effective intergenerational practice in an ageing society. Where [Chapter 3](#) traced 19th-century literary depictions of these issues, this chapter shows how they are being dealt with in contemporary literature. Amigoni examines a recent popular novel, Libby Page’s *The Lido* (2018), which focuses on an intergenerational friendship and its benefits for both parties. He compares it with John Crace’s *Arcadia* (1992), a novel about ageing and place-making that is emphatically not ‘feel good’ on intergenerational relationships. As he argues, this comparison highlights the very particular policy moment in which *The Lido* gained its popularity. He also reflects on the power of recent intergenerational place-based regeneration projects that have foregrounded older age as the ‘Age of Creativity’.

In [Chapter 7](#), intergenerational practitioner and consultant Ali Somers guides us through the expanding wealth of intergenerational projects taking place worldwide, viewing them in three categories: (1) intergenerational learning between children and older people living in care settings; (2) intergenerational housing; and (3) intergenerational training/mentoring initiatives. She explores how notions of generational identity are sometimes affirmed by intergenerational engagement and are also often contested. Importantly, she suggests that we gain a different understanding of generational identity and its functions when we view it through the lens of intergenerational programming.

In [Chapter 8](#), psychotherapist Nigel Williams puts forward the concept of the multigenerational self, adapted from First Nations people. This concept indicates the extent to which our identity, selfhood and even memories are conditioned by those of our parents and forebears, and the extent to which we shape those of future generations. In the First Nations cultures that Williams draws upon, the multigenerational self extends ‘for seven generations, comprising three generations in the past and three unborn in the future, with the everyday self or ego occupying the middle zone of this deep self in time’. Williams argues that by adopting a ‘seven-generation approach’ to social responsibility, transgenerational transmission of trauma can be addressed in order to help future and as yet unborn generations.

In [Chapter 9](#), sociologists Andrew King and Matthew Hall rethink the concept of social generations from a queer perspective. One of the limitations of current generations discourse lies in how it homogenizes peer-groups, and unintentionally silences marginalized voices and experiences. Their chapter interrupts this silence by thinking about lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ+) lives generationally – to consider what it means for both how we understand generations and how LGBTQ+ people’s lives are framed by the cisheteronormativity of ‘generations’ as a concept. King and Hall apply a generational lens to the lives of LGBTQ+ people living in England who were interviewed as part of a big research project, ‘Comparing Intersectional Life Course Inequalities among LGBTQI+ Citizens in Four European Countries’ (2018–2021). In making sense of these narratives, King and Hall discuss how normative models of generation don’t ‘fit’ LGBTQ+ lives and argue that taking LGBTQ+ lives seriously means re-assessing what a generation is, how it forms in relation to historical events, and how in/equalities persist and are resisted.

The concluding chapter reflects on all these contributions, and points to new developments in generational studies.

Note

¹ We benefited from presentations on familial generations from Nigel Williams (forming the core of this book’s [Chapter 8](#)) and also from Arun Himawan (ILC), Katherine

O'Brien and Rebecca Blaylock (BPAS), care studies ethicist Ann Gallagher (Exeter), psychologist Erica Hepper (Surrey), historian Ellie Murray (Leeds) and parenting culture studies scholar Ellie Lee (Kent). On generational identities, we heard from Jennie Bristow (see [Chapter 2](#)), and also from sociologist Judith Burnett (consultant), psychologist Peter Hegarty (Open University), sociologist Jan Macvarish, gerontologist Karen Glaser (King's College London), literary scholar Trev Broughton (York), and historian Martin Hewitt (Anglia Ruskin). On intergenerational relationships, we heard from Ali Somers (see [Chapter 7](#)) and from sociologist Cissie Buxton (Canterbury Christ Church), public health scholar Michael Toze (Lincoln), anthropologist Carys Banks (Surrey) and psychologist Kate Howson (Swansea). Presentations on how generational identities relate to historical events came from Helen Kingstone (see [Chapter 3](#)), Tatjana Buklijas (see [Chapter 4](#)) and Matthew Hall and Andrew King (see [Chapter 9](#)), and also from memory studies scholar Astrid Erll (Goethe University, Frankfurt), social and cultural historian Lucy Bland (Anglia Ruskin) and oral historian Ruth Blue (Thalidomide Society). These presentations were always met with further dynamic and fruitful responses from other network members at the workshops, and we thank them all. For further information about the workshops and their presentations, see <https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/parentingculturestudies/research-themes/generations/generations-the-network>

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