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### **'Generationing' development: a commentary**

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The articles in this special issue present a persuasive case for accounts of development to recognise the integral and fundamental roles played by age and generation. While the past two decades have witnessed a burgeoning of literature demonstrating that children and youth are impacted by development, and that they can and do participate in development, the literature has tended to portray young people as a special group whose perspectives should not be forgotten. By contrast, the articles collected here make the case that age and generation, as relational constructs, cannot be ignored. Appropriating the term 'generationing', the editors argue that a variety of types of age relations profoundly structure the ways in which societies are transformed through development – both immanent processes of neoliberal modernisation and the interventions of development agencies that both respond and contribute to these. Drawing on the seven empirical articles, I attempt to draw some of the ideas together into a narrative that further argues the case for 'generationing' but also identifies gaps, questions and implications for further research.

### **Context: the youth bulge and the new social studies of childhood**

The expansion of interest in the lives of young people in Southern countries reflects both empirical and theoretical developments. Demographically, 43% of the world's population and 60% in the 'least developed countries' are under 25 (United Nations, 2013). This 'youth bulge' (Shapiro and Wynne, 1982) preoccupies policy makers, concerned about its implications for future society. Young people's incorporation into development studies research often reflects this agenda. Scholarship from the perspective of childhood studies, and increasingly youth studies, by contrast, reflects the growth of the 'new social studies of childhood' (James et al, 1998). Rejecting the idea that young people's importance lies only in relation to futurity, advocates of this paradigm view children as worthy of study in their own right. The approach is characterised by two key theoretical tenets: that childhood is a social construct and that children are active social agents. In Southern contexts, research has examined diverse and changing constructions of childhood and youth, and the lives of young people whose social agency is particularly apparent such as child workers and those heading households.

The only author in this collection to address the new social studies of childhood directly is Gigengack, who argues that street children studies have given undue prominence to deconstructing institutional street children discourse and to celebrating street children's competence. Arguing that this approach denies both the materiality of street children's lives and the frequent self-destructiveness of their agency, Gigengack calls for more ethnographically grounded research that recognises the complexities and politics in which street children's lives are embroiled, a message equally relevant to research with other children living complex lives in difficult situations.

The articles collectively demonstrate that while young people do indeed matter, this is not just because they are numerous. Moreover, it is not only the discourses through which societies or

development agencies understand and respond to childhood that should concern us, nor the purposeful actions of young people themselves. Age and generation have broader salience and are basic to the constitution of societies and economies and to how change happens.

### **'Generational': from actors to relationships**

Research with children and youth in the South has been criticised for taking too little account of their relationships with other age groups or their embeddedness in wider processes (Ansell, 2009). The articles in this special issue, by contrast, focus on relations of age and generation and the ways these function to sustain or challenge the social order or to shape individual and collective experiences. This relational approach to age is not entirely new. The idea that age is simply an individual attribute or means of classification has been contested (Hopkins and Pain, 2007). Age is increasingly recognised to be dynamic, processual and produced contextually, as well as through relationships with other generations.

The theme of this special issue is 'generational', which is understood by the editors to entail a refocusing on the fundamental role generation plays in development processes, broadly conceived. This goes beyond recognising that age is constituted relationally; it potentially shifts the focus of attention away from the actor toward the relationship, from agency to structure and from understanding young people to understanding development. Doubtless there are different perspectives on the extent to which this is desirable: it sits rather uncomfortably against the new social studies of childhood, and may attract similar criticism to the focus on futurity. It is certainly possible to see agency and structure as co-constituting and to recognise that relationships are produced through agency, intentional or otherwise. Relationships also channel power, reinforcing or shifting patterns of dominance, an aspect that arguably demands more attention.

Generation is not a univalent concept; it is deployed by the authors in several distinct ways. Hart offers the most comprehensive schema, drawing on Kertzer's (1983) four sociological uses of the term. Generation may refer to a cohort growing up together; an historical period; a life stage; or kinship descent. While not clearly specified, it is helpful to understand each of these as representing a different form of relationality: relationships across a cohort; relationships to key features of the external context; the relationship of one life phase to others within an individual life course; and relationships between generations of kin. Of these, in keeping with the distinction drawn in the editorial introduction, the first two might be deemed 'horizontal' (located in time) and the latter two 'vertical' (extended over time). All four relationalities shape processes of development and mediate development's impacts on individuals and societies.

### **'Generational' social reproduction**

Generation is most obviously fundamental to social reproduction, which in turn is crucial to understanding how societies function, how they adjust or are transformed by changing political and economic environments, and the sustainability of social relations and located livelihoods. It figures

prominently in many of the articles. Understood as the "material and social practices through which people reproduce themselves on a daily and generational basis" (Katz, 2001:711), social reproduction incorporates both horizontal (day-to-day) and vertical (through time) elements and involves all four concepts of generation Hart describes. It takes varied forms that reflect (and contribute to) historical circumstances; through it cohorts of young people build both change and continuity over time; it involves individuals differently at different life stages; and it is commonly both achieved through, and shapes, the relationships between parents and their children. These interrelated functions of generation are well illustrated through the empirical material presented in the articles.

### *Common historical circumstances*

Several articles are located in relation to very specific historical events: the aftermath of civil war in Burundi (Berckmoes and White); the Iraq war and growth of Islamism in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan (Hart). Berckmoes and White also cite more generalised processes shaping patterns of social reproduction: land scarcity, climate change, population pressure. A common theme across the articles is the role of neoliberalisation, promoted (albeit not uniformly) by development agencies and governments. Pressures to open economies to global markets, commodification of common property and the formation of individualised aspirational subjectivities result in new patterns of social reproduction.

A key agent of social reproduction that is rapidly becoming a universal experience of childhood and youth is formal schooling. Promoted under the United Nations' Education For All agenda, inscribed in a Millennium Development Goal and funded by the World Bank, universal basic education is arguably geared as much to generating the aspirational subjects as the skills and dispositions required by a globalising economy. Morarji describes the rationale of "education-as-development" that suffuses Indian education policy and practice. Young people here view education as a route to individual improvement and social mobility. Similarly, Berckmoes and White reveal how young people in Burundi talk of development and progress, viewing (secondary) education as the means to achieve this. In Southern Kenya, Archambault found young people's attitudes to land privatisation strongly reflected their exposure to education.<sup>i</sup> Many hoped to raise livestock using modern methods that contrasted with the practices of their parents. Through shaping aspirations, schooling intervenes in social reproduction, potentially shaping an altered (and more neoliberal) society.

Nonetheless, the social reproduction function of formal education is perhaps more contradictory and less transformative than might be anticipated. Both Archambault and Berckmoes and White chart young people's ongoing enthusiasm for pastoral or agricultural livelihoods, repudiating their representation in schools as archaic. Morarji shows how, despite the pervasive ideology of continuous improvement, education is negotiated by young people and is not entirely hegemonic. Schooling may enact both disciplinary and governmental power, but does not always produce the aspirational subjects intended. Rather, Morarji contends, development and education are socially constructed through schooling as sites of power and struggle, contested at times by students and

their parents whose engagement with modernity is ambivalent. Morarji's work thus sheds light on generational processes of social reproduction, and young people's agency within these.

The nature and effects of educational expansion and young people's engagement with schooling reflect the wider economy. As Morarji notes, schooling promotes a discourse of education for development through employment. In Southern Kenya, Archambault suggests increased school participation reflects pressure to diversify livelihoods. The contradictions of neoliberalism are unmistakable. Young people whose aspirations are raised seldom achieve the 'progress' imagined for them: contextual realities confound their expectations. Challenging economic situations offer neither the salaried jobs secondary-educated youth anticipate nor significant openings for entrepreneurship. Berckmoes and White suggest the meagre earnings of young men from Burundi who migrate illegally to Tanzania do not allow them to perform the social reproductive roles expected; rather, they are caught up in a reproduction of precarity.

Archambault explores young people's perspectives on a particular practice of neoliberalisation: the privatisation of rangeland in Southern Kenya. By transforming how access to land is transferred between generations through struggles at the intimate level of the family, privatisation is transforming generational relationships.

Cheney examines a neoliberal practice occurring at a very different spatial scale: inter-country adoption (ICA). She suggests this represents a marketization of social reproduction, addressing reproduction crises both in impoverished exporting countries (where families struggle to raise the next generation and states are retreating from supporting social reproduction) and in wealthier importing countries (characterised by high infertility rates and delayed parenthood among working women). Ostensibly ICA may be seen to serve 'development': exporting needy children reduces welfare costs; orphanages receive financial support; and children are offered a 'better life'. However, ICA arguably prioritises providing children for wealthy parents rather than parents for needy children, and the demand for children promotes the 'manufacturing' of orphans as income-seeking orphanages, brokers and often governments collude to recruit children from poor households, irrespective of whether their parents are alive.

While ICA might represent a marketization of the most basic form of social reproduction, it is far from the only such global process. Mattingly's (2001) research, for instance, highlights how economic globalisation produces transnational networks delivering commodified domestic work.

### *Shared identity among a cohort*

While the articles refer very explicitly to the historical contexts producing new generations, they have less to say about the production of shared generational identities among cohorts of young people. This theme infused studies of the Arab uprisings of spring 2011 (see, for instance, Passini, 2012). Hart explores the specific circumstances of the cohort of youth reaching their teenage years as Palestinian refugees in Jordan in the early 2000s. The young men shared stories of migration experiences which shaped common aspirations and views on good destinations. Growing up

together, they attended the same youth club and afterschool Quranic classes, and through this developed a bond and a religious-political discourse that differed from that espoused by older generations. Hart draws connections between the young people's shared experiences, their relations with other generations and engagement in processes of social reproduction such as education and livelihoods.

While this mode of thinking about generation was not pursued in depth among the other authors of this collection, it is clear that generational identity production shapes not only young people's political identity but their engagement in wider processes of development. There is perhaps scope to connect with work on the role of peer relationships and social networks in shaping livelihoods (see for instance Chant and Jones, 2005).

### *Life phase<sup>ii</sup>*

An individual's involvement in and perspectives on social reproduction strongly reflect their (gendered) life phase. Inter-country adoption, as discussed by Cheney, largely involves young children; those who are older are made available at a lower cost. Life phase is central to the article by Archambault, who examines how it shapes young people's attitudes to land privatisation. Her research found young people in Southern Kenya generally more favourable to privatisation than adults. They raised similar concerns when asked, but also some distinctive ones.

While much previous research has examined the impacts of life phase on experiences of development, a noteworthy feature of many articles in this collection is their focus on young people's concerns about anticipated future life phases rather than their immediate requirements.<sup>iii</sup> In terms of social reproduction, those in Archambault's study were expecting to support a family. Land would be necessary for pastoralism but also for home-building and other forms of income generation such as renting out land for grazing, selling water and timber, renting accommodation, or growing cash crops. Imagined future roles and responsibilities were strongly gendered: while young men spoke of raising livestock, young women wanted access to land to build a home and engage in other livelihood pursuits.

Future costs of marriage were a consideration for many youth. For young Palestinian men, marriage is a significant rite of passage but requires payment of brideprice, provision of accommodation and clothing, and a wedding celebration. Envisaging their inability to accomplish this life course transition (and important step in social reproduction), many young men felt disillusioned. In Burundi, young men often marry late as they lack resources, though unauthorised unions avoid the involvement of parents who would normally be called on for consent, bridewealth payments, and the financing of ceremonies.

By contrast, Srinivasan's longitudinal study with ten girls in a south Indian community, where 'daughter aversion' and discrimination against girls and women is pervasive, reveals the girls' anxieties about puberty and 'becoming a woman'. Where sexuality is heavily regulated through

generational relations, the onset of puberty is accompanied by loss of freedom and more specifically pressure to leave school and marry.

While many of the articles suggest young people are preoccupied with the future, it should not be inferred that adulthood is of greater significance. Rather, it is young people's "age position" (Hart, this volume) in relation to their future adult lives that shapes their perspectives. The articles demonstrate that each life phase is constructed relationally to others, as well as to external context and to other generations. This connects with emerging work that explores the temporalities of young lives in connection with their roles in social reproduction (see Ansell et al, 2013).

### *Relations between parents and children*

Many of the articles explore relationships between parents and children and how these are impacted by and impact on processes of development and modernisation. Berckmoes and White explain how generational relations limit Burundian young people's capacities to pursue their aspirations by shaping the political economy in which they operate, specifically the control of resources, divisions of labour and relations of surplus transfer. Disadvantaged by law in accessing land, for instance, young people work as hired labourers, restricting their capacity for self-advancement.

Generational relations within the household are not fixed. Archambault describes how privatisation of rangeland is transforming household level social relations in Southern Kenya. Young people, increasingly depend on parents who may now sell their land, express fears concerning inheritance and anticipate infighting between generations and among siblings.

Sometimes economic processes do not merely intervene in shaping relationships between generations, and the performance of social reproduction, but actively take advantage of those relationships. Srinivasan describes the 'sumangali' scheme which recruits young women in Tamil Nadu for factory work on three year contracts or until they turn 18. The young women stay in hostels, have minimal opportunities for communication or travel outside the factory, work long hours for low pay but at the end of their contracts receive a lump sum that enables them to pay dowry. This offers many young women their only alternative to early marriage. Because girls can earn their own dowry, many parents support the scheme. Moreover, the young women are less likely to be viewed as an economic burden on their parents, which is a contributory factor in daughter aversion. While recognising that this scheme may offer hope to some young women, Srinivasan is unconvinced that it will weaken the cultural reproduction of daughter aversion in a context of extreme poverty. She cites one young woman who, having participated in the scheme, married and gave birth to a daughter, but stated she would have preferred a son.

A last example of the role of parent-child relationships in shaping economic structures is inter-country adoption, which exploits some parents' inability to care for their own offspring. Cheney suggests ICA is founded on and reinforces a notion of 'deserving parenthood', wherein relative affluent couples in prosperous countries are deemed worthy parents for children who are not their

progeny. Ideologically, ICA prioritises a 'better life' for the individual child over family preservation. In line with neoliberalism, the individual takes precedence over the collective. Relinquishing families may think differently. Cheney presents evidence that some families, inadequately aware of the permanency of adoption, anticipate that sending their children overseas will bring future benefits to their families. Cheney draws attention to the way children serve their adoptive families, as "labourers in the affective economy of modern family making", but the relinquishing family may also expect them to perform reproductive work, gaining education, lucrative employment and offering social mobility.

### **The social reproduction of inequalities**

A theme pervading most of the articles is the intersection of generation with other social relations, often reinforcing existing inequalities. Morarji explores how education generates differentiated subject positions. By framing teachers as the embodiment of economic and cultural success, schools reinscribe rural youth, their families and communities as 'backward' and destined for failure. In Archambault's study, wealthier youth were more positive about privatisation as they saw greater prospects for inheriting land. Many of the articles explore the intersection between generation and gender. Inter-country adoption involves predominantly girls; a situation that reinforces, albeit in a very small way, the heavily skewed sex ratios in China and India which represent another social reproduction challenge. Berckmoes and White chart how generational relationships within rural Burundian families sustain unequal gender relations. Families are generally more committed to educating sons than daughters and where girls seek to 'escape' the hardship of their families through unofficial marriages, their parents tacitly agree as they are relieved of paying bridewealth. Such unions, however, leave young women and their children without legal protection and therefore vulnerable. In parallel, expectations concerning marriage place pressures on young men. While Hart does not directly address gender relations among his Palestinian participants, their experiences as young men clearly reflect the reproduction of gender and not only generation. Most alarmingly, Srinivasan relates in detail how discrimination against daughters – and even 'daughter elimination' – is reproduced from generation to generation. As young women move between life phases, their altered experiences transform their perspectives, enabling daughter aversion to be perpetuated.

### **Conclusions**

The articles in this collection emphasise that young people are worthy of research not simply because they are numerous, have different perspectives and are affected by change differently from adults, but because they play a role, intentionally or otherwise, in economic and social processes of transformation that affect everyone. They may be a force for continuity and not just change, but their role is crucial. Moreover, their significance attaches not so much to their age, but to the multiplicity of generational relationships they are embedded in. These relationships affect young people themselves: Gigengack highlights how street children's lives are shaped by relationships with their families but also the adult street populations whose lives they share. But generational

relationships are also fundamental to understanding processes of change, both those such as educational expansion or inter-country adoption that directly incorporate children, but also processes such as tenure change where the connection is less obvious.

The articles here are not the first to explore the roles of young people in social reproduction (see for example Katz, 2001; Ruddick, 2003) or of generational relationships in shaping young people's lives (see Punch, 2002). The collection's distinctive contribution is to demonstrate how an explicit theorisation of generation can open new areas for research. If generation is understood to encompass 'relational age' (the idea that life phases are constructed relationally – see Ansell et al, 2011), one might question the added value of this particular lens. That value arguably lies in opening up relational age to explore its diverse relationalities and how these are implicated in development processes.

The four-fold conceptualisation of generation focuses attention on some distinct (if interrelated) relationships underpinning society's functioning. These relationships generate continuity and change, exploit differences and similarities and are imbued with power: an aspect of generation that merits further attention. It is important to explore further the distinctions between the four relationalities, and how they interact. Do they have equal conceptual purchase? Is power exercised differently through each? Do they direct attention to different sets of processes and potentially invite intervention in different areas of life? In general the vertical (life phase and kinship) perspectives remain rather focused on individuals and their families, whereas exploring the horizontal generational power structures linking individuals with their contexts and their peers may have greater radical potential. Significantly, the seven articles, while all exploring social reproduction, adopt highly disparate approaches. They focus on very different kinds of relation – some material, some ideological, some political – operating at (mutually constituted) scales ranging from the intimate to the global.

Absent from the four-fold schema are relationships between younger and older generations in society at large, beyond kinship relations. Cheney's discussion of inter-country adoption indicates its use by governments in securing social reproduction at national level. Return tourism by adoptees is used to generate income and also a sense of loyalty to the country of origin. Chinese tours take adoptees and their families to visit the orphanages they were adopted from, encouraging them to offer financial support; South Korea stages ceremonies for adult adoptees, hoping they will invest in the national economy. In many poorer countries, the introduction of old age pensions and child grants is shifting the locus of enactment intergenerational contracts from the family to the state. These practices are beyond the purview of the concepts of generation elaborated here.

I will end this commentary by looking briefly at some questions raised by 'generational' for research in development studies, in childhood and youth studies and for research methodology. In relation to development studies, 'generational' calls for a mainstreaming of child and youth research. Such research should focus not only on understanding young people but on understanding development: how it happens and how it affects all generations. The articles here discuss social reproduction which is clearly fundamental to development: to the functioning of society and the production of continuity and change through both immanent and intentional processes. I have also



refracted my discussion through this theme. This does, however, invite the question of which other development processes function through generation. Previous studies, for instance, have explored changing generational relations as outcomes of migration (Lawson, 1998; Silvey, 2001) and factory employment (Mills, 1999).

While important and arguably fundamental, generation is not the only relationality relevant to development. It is also worth asking how this set of relationalities relates to others. Perhaps one lesson of this issue is that development studies should recognise more fully the relationships that constitute subjects and produce change.

In terms of children and youth studies (notwithstanding the diversity these encompass), a key question is whether young people themselves should be decentred in favour of an analysis of generational relations. Most articles in this issue explore young people's own perspectives, but 'generationing' demands consideration of the conceptual value of shifting attention from actors to relationships, from agency to structure. As I indicated earlier, this might not be essential, provided it is recognised that young people only exercise agency relationally – in response to their contexts, to other generations, to their own future expectations and aspirations. However, there might be situations where generational relations are best illuminated without a central focus on young people themselves. This poses a clear challenge to the orthodoxy of the new social studies of childhood. Relatedly, it is noteworthy that all but one article in this issue focuses principally on teenagers and older youth. This reflects childhood studies' tendency to focus on older children, as more obvious exemplars of agency (see Thorne, 2008). Refocusing on generation requires attention to individuals of all ages and all levels of capacity to act, purposefully or otherwise, within society. 'Generationing' encompasses all: infants, adults and the very elderly, are all embedded in generational relations.<sup>iv</sup>

Finally, 'generationing development' raises questions concerning methodology. Most of the articles take young people's voices seriously but do not venerate them or their ideas. They do not romanticise young voices, but recognise their diversity and dissonance and that they are products of contextually constituted located subjects, engaged in "subverting, challenging, consenting or colluding" (Srinivasan, this volume). However, while Berckmoes and White (this volume) report that the young participants in their study were highly aware of being embedded in larger structures, young people are not necessarily best placed to provide insights into the processes through which they contribute to social and economic change. As Harriss (2007) points out, studying poverty need not imply 'studying the poor'. A switch of attention from actor to relationship might require not only a decentring of young people in childhood studies research, but less reliance on child- and youth-centred methods.

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<sup>i</sup> The fact that Archambault's research was undertaken in a school setting might have exaggerated the apparent extent of its influence on their thinking.

<sup>ii</sup> The term 'life phase' is used in preference to Kertzer's 'life stage' to acknowledge that life courses are not composed of static, linearly arranged 'stages' but are fluid and relationally constructed.

<sup>iii</sup> As Gigengack's article indicates, questions of immediate survival are more pressing for street children. For a discussion of the balancing of present and future needs, see Ansell et al (2013).

<sup>iv</sup> For an example, see Huijsmans' (2013) exploration of how older mothers and adult daughters are incorporated into particular inter-generational relations in response to structural conditions.

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