

Transmissions between Generations and the Life Course

Abstract

This paper presents a theoretical approach focused on the interactions between life course and intergenerational relationships in the framework of the multigenerational family. The analysis of intergenerational relationships emphasizes the social mobility factor and the economic exchanges which structure the social trajectories of each generation. The assumption is that social transfers and solidarity between generations modify class destiny. Transfers should be considered not only in the "downward" direction from parent to child, but also in the "upward" direction from child to parent, which may be characterized by what could be called the "backward milieu dominance effect" from offspring to parents. This hypothesis is based on the results of longitudinal research which has shown the restructuring of social disparities during the transition to retirement. Moreover, considerations of private transfers within family solidarity bring a larger and more realistic vision of the solidarities and the balances between generations in society.

Auguste Comte stated that the pressure of one generation upon another is one of the most important phenomena in society. This statement is even more relevant in an ageing society in which that pressure increases drastically. In view of recent demographic change, it is vital to deepen our

understanding of new forms of intergenerational relationships and their coexistence, interaction and exchanges. Population ageing is expressed not only through a transformation of generational structure, but also through changes in the nature of generations themselves. Given the increased number of generations alive at the same time, the term "ageing society" appears to be synonymous with "multigenerational society". In effect, with life expectancy near 80 in modern societies, and considering 20 years to be the span of a generation, such societies count no less than 5 co-existing generations. The number of generations seldom reaches that level in the family but three-generation families are becoming the norm, and four-generation families are becoming more prevalent. A French survey on the transition to retirement has shown that one out of three 60-year-olds belongs to a four-generation family (Paillat et al. 1989).

It is well known that in earlier centuries in many European countries, the demographic composition of the family was more horizontal (i.e. with a large number of siblings) than vertical (i.e. extended in the genealogical dimension). This made the practice of family solidarity towards the elderly harder. The modern vertical family may thus encourage such solidarity (Blum & Le Bras 1985).

As generations multiply, their respective demographic distribution changes. In a modern rectangular age structure, the sizes of the different generations are more or less equivalent except for the oldest cohorts, in which high mortality rates are concentrated. The coexistence of adult generations of approximately the same size, an historically new phenomenon, changes the way in which they are replaced and has important consequences for their relationships. For example, a pyramidal age structure, more than a rectangular one, facilitates authoritarian relations because death regulates generation relief at every age and gerontocracy is exerted by a minority.

In the new demographic structure, the

second part of life is lengthening. Middle age is becoming a key period in the redefinition of intergenerational relationships, in much the same way that adolescence is. This process is particularly noticeable when adolescents and adults confront one another. The adolescents seek independence from the adults and force them to enter middle life and become conscious of their own ageing. In order to point out the analogy of processes occurring at the same time in these two generations, I have proposed to call middle life "maturescence" (Attias-Donfut 1988a), a word which parallels "adolescence". The term has the advantage of underlining the changes occurring during that stage of life, while maturity is a static word. During maturescence, the redefining of intergenerational relationships also occurs with the grandparent generation which is growing old and changing expectations, e.g. by asking for help. Being caught between two generations makes this middle stage of life such a critical one. During this stage new types of generations emerge, the result of permanent renegotiations.

An ageing society is not only a multigenerational society but is also characterised by the transforming of generations themselves and their redefinition through relations with others. Such transformations can be seen from a demographic and sociological point of view as well as from a psychological and symbolic one.

Having indicated these new conditions, we can examine the influence of intergenerational relationships upon the life course of generational members, i.e. how the generations shape one another. The present analysis concerns the family context, but the phenomena observed have implications for other social institutions as well as for society as a whole.

During recent years, much attention has been focused on changes in marital relationships, especially regarding the transformation of gender roles. In the various typologies set up to describe emerging family

patterns, the way the spouses relate is often the major criterion (Kellerhals 1987). The family unit is defined by reference to residential nuclear units, i.e. restricted to the couple and their young children.

The shift in research focus towards adult intergenerational relationships requires us to change family definitions. A similar recognition to that new only occurring in gender relationships is needed in intergenerational relationships. Moreover, those two kinds of relations have to be linked in a "gendered generation" (Attias-Donfut 1988b) approach. This subject is dealt with later on in this paper.

Intergenerational relations in the multigenerational family have been the subject of some significant research, although in a more limited sense than in other areas of family micro-sociology (see review of the question by Hagestad 1981). In much of this research, the family is seen as a social network or a type of small group to which the phenomena principles of group dynamics can be applied (Mangen et al. 1988).

Emphasis has been put on affect (Rosenmayr 1977), cohesion and consensus among family members; and on parenting styles (Hagestad 1984). Other research has centred on altered family structure resulting from changes in marriage, divorce, fertility, and life expectancy (Roussel 1989).

In most of this work, the economic dimension remains largely unexplored, which is also the case regarding the influence of social mobility on family relations. Studies of family exchanges deal more with emotional support or practical help than with economic exchange. It is therefore important to pay more attention to economic factors and to examine the array of affective, cultural, financial and material gifts: to consider the economic as well as the symbolic. Exchanges, direct or indirect, restricted or generalised (Levi-Strauss 1947) are intertwined. The subtle mechanisms of immediate and delayed reciprocities which are at work in the relations between generations have to be understood within a larger theoretical context

of gift and exchange. Family solidarity implies a necessary asymmetry given the chains of debt transmitted across generations (Buisson et al. 1989). That dynamic is at work for example in the help given by family members to the dependent elderly, the importance of which can now be evaluated: recent studies in France reveal that this support is about twice the size of institutional support (Gauthier & Colvez 1989; Bouget & Tartarin et al. 1990).

In my opinion, private transfers within family solidarity complete, balance and booster national solidarity. Understanding such transfers would bring about a broader and more realistic view of the generations in society as a whole. Current thinking in this field remains narrowly limited to the question of retirement pensions. It seems important to put that question in perspective, within a framework of a complex web of transfers: public and private, formal and informal, upward and downward.

Discussions of intergenerational transmission and transfers generally concentrate on "downward" transmissions, those from parents to offspring. The emphasis is on the socialisation of the young and parental influence on children's social trajectories. "Upward" transmissions, from offspring to parents, have rarely been considered. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the social position of offspring influences that of the parents too, at least during the second half of the parents' life. Such transmissions would be similar to "reverse socialisation" (Allerbeck et al. 1979) and mutual influences.

Intergenerational transfers have consequences for social structure, influencing the circulation of goods, social transfers and basic social class structure.

These issues are touched on in the following three points: concomitant changes in gender and intergenerational relationship patterns, downward socio-economic transmissions from child to parent and upward socio-economic transmissions characterized by what could be called the "backward milieu dominance effect", from

offspring to parents.

Concomitant changes in gender and intergenerational relationship patterns

In traditional societies, and, until the recent past, in modern societies, generation renewal and the social organisation which guarantees it has been a matter for men, since such renewal manages -and is managed by- the reproduction and distribution of power. The social mobility of a person is measured through the social status of his or her father. The social dependency of women on men - fathers or husbands- maintains them within an intra-family role, the mother's role, in which they embody the social image of a traditional female role.

Female lineage on the one hand and male lineage on the other order the renewal of generations through forms which also reproduce gender distinction and class structures as they are represented by men, the latter keeping social control over these changes.

Today, as the respective status of genders shifts, so too do their social images. This phenomenon is obvious in every field. In the working world, even if gender inequality has not yet been overcome, real progress can be observed. The number of female workers is steadily growing despite an rise in unemployment. This increasing female participation in the workforce is not a temporary phenomenon, but is the sign of a deep and irreversible tendency. One by one, the last bastions forbidden to women have fallen: the military, sports and, possibly soon, the church. Girls' access to various institutions of academic learning is increasing as well as their success in getting degrees. Family roles are also being modified as a result of birth control and the diminishing amount of time devoted to reproductive functions.

According to research findings, daughters of working mothers have stronger and more positive "woman images" than the daughters

of inactive mothers. Moreover, the former are more likely to pursue careers not specifically female in character (Hoffman 1986). The employment of the mother also results in a better sharing of domestic tasks with the father. In this way, the father's role in child socialisation is developing, symbolised by the term "new fathers". Increasing father participation in children's socialisation encourages independence and social achievement among girls as well as among boys, further contributing to the reduction of gender differences. Children's sexual development is no longer linked to social identifications which create drastic differences between genders and there is disconnexion of early sexual identifications and social gender identifications.

Adopting a "gendered generation" approach, we emphasise an interdependence between gender relationships and generational relationships and assume that the transformation in the respective status of male and female results in a transformation of intergenerational ties.

Women's increased access to every skill, every labour sector, every status may affect future intergenerational relationships as well as the future social class structure. Examples of such interconnections might be:

- Greater gender cooperation induces a greater intergenerational cooperation while competition between genders and competition between generations increases. Power relationships give rise to revolt or submission; at the same time, egalitarian relationships allow time more solidarity and more competition.
- Gender competition increases in every field: the academic, the professional and the private. That competition intensifies the pressure exerted by the new generation on the previous one still at work, leading to a rise in intergenerational competition.
- Patterns of social reproduction and social mobility are changing. Infant sexual

identifications are no longer necessarily coupled with social and status identifications linked to gender images whose social relevance has decreased. Thus, a girl or a boy can refer to the social location of either the mother or the father, which, in turn, could be a factor in multiplying social mobility chances.

According to these assumptions, gender transmissions disrupt the social reproduction pattern as it has been established in the traditional gender division. It already seems useful to explore in depth the findings in family microsociology with regard to male and female roles and relationships and to look for their effects on intergenerational relationships.

Downward socio-economic transmissions

The family cannot be seen conceived as a small group restricted to affective exchanges and disengaged from economic functions. And we are once again now beginning to understand the importance of intergenerational transfers. In France, three out of four households leave an inheritance after death. These transfers have been continually increasing during past decades (Gotman 1988). This trend is, to a great extent, due to the fact that salaried workers have had access to house-ownership. A longer life expectancy and above all a predictable one, encourages savings, and the age of access to ownership is now concentrated between the ages of 25 and 40. The means of transmission is changing too: the proportion of donations to inheritance is increasing, the former being often made between the ages of 45 and 55 (Masson 1985).

Savings are accumulated during the first half of life, then they are spent during the second half, revealing a tendency towards economic transfers during the second part of life. This tendency is encouraged by improvements in retirement pensions and has

been made even more necessary by youth unemployment. Forms of transfers vary from gifts of money to help in purchasing a house (Bonvalet 1988). On a more modest scale, other kinds of transmissions ought to be mentioned and considered, such as daily help, gifts, assistance with house furnishings, even cars.

These facts lead us to restate the respective contributions of successive generations to the national wealth. It is usual to emphasise increasing costs caused by the aged as a consequence of an ageing society. Such an analysis remains dominated and limited by the question of retirement schemes, i.e. by the only mechanisms of intergenerational transfers governed by national solidarity. Moreover, the latter is wrongly supposed to cancel and replace traditional solidarity within the family.

By disregarding interfamilial transfers, one neglects more informal and diffuse mechanisms which are of considerable importance. Cultural and financial accumulation as life expectancy increases result in more transfers to younger generations. These transfers continue after retirement and even after life itself, and represent important social and economic support from the old to the young. They represent a transfer in the opposite direction to that of national solidarity, but may indeed contribute to national and family solidarity. Thus a kind of accumulation cycle operates: the resources of the old are transferred to the young, who in turn contribute to societal transfers which benefit the old. This cycle should give us a new perspective on the "burden" that the elderly are supposed to be. Although the cycle of transfers reflects and possibly reinforces social inequalities, it nevertheless represents an important part of the intergenerational picture and should temper alarmist views of population ageing.

Upward transmissions

Transmissions and transfers are generally

considered from parents to offspring, i.e. in a downward direction. Less attention has been given to the reverse. However, such exchanges take on a new importance in an aging society where family support to the elderly becomes increasingly necessary.

Studies of poverty have shown that underqualified young people stay longer in their parental home. The struggle against poverty leads to a strong economic solidarity in the family. Historically, in agrarian societies and nowadays in developing countries, children are seen as resources, because of their contributions to the household as manpower or sources of income. They also represent insurance for their parents' old age. The idea of offspring being sources of income has been replaced by the idea of children being sources of expenditure, characteristic for a consumer society. Descendants nevertheless represent resources for their parents, although this is not always obvious.

Various statements lead to the assumption that there are also relevant upward transmissions. These transmissions are a logical consequence of upward social mobility. It is well known that social mobility has noticeably increased during the course of the last decades (Bertaux 1977; Thelot 1982 1983). This evolution is, indeed, related to the profound structural changes occurring in developed societies, which have been particularly brutal in France (Erikson et al. 1979).

Each generation faces a social structure different from the previous one, including an altered professional sector. Employment in industry, for instance, has decreased, while service employment has increased. The result is a drop in social immobility. This does not mean that family origins are no longer important, but family influence exerts itself through patterns other than simple reproduction.

As a consequence, cases of status disparities between family generations become frequent. In some milieus, such as in the independent professions, they represent the majority. This is even clearer if one

considers three generations. Higher executives are more often grandchildren of workers or peasants than of higher executives; less than 10% are of the latter origin (Pohl & Soleilhavoup 1982). What has been the role of family exchanges in this mobility and what is, in turn, the influence of this mobility on intergenerational interactions?

Marriage also represents a factor in social mobility (de Singly 1987). When spouses are from different backgrounds, this affects parental relationships on both sides. Relationships with the parents of the spouse from a higher level are closer, whether it be the husband or the wife (Menahem 1988).

It is interesting to note that when elderly individuals live with adult offspring, the former have an income which is lower than the national average, while the latter have above average incomes (Canceill 1989). In such situations, it appears that a rise in offspring status benefits parents and brings improved living conditions.

These few examples point out the often neglected importance of social mobility in intergenerational relationships. The hypothesis that mobility benefits are often shared with other generations in the family seems quite plausible. Such a sharing could illustrate a phenomenon discussed by economists, the tendency towards a certain equalisation of consumption among family members. The second half of life is becoming longer and affords the opportunity of a second career. This also means that changes in career trajectories could take place. Consequently, another kind of mobility, one which occurs during the individual life course, becomes possible in society in general and entails movement through shifting patterns of income, possession of goods, social interactions and life styles.

Changes in social status can be tied to relations between generations by means of national solidarity, which is a form of institutionalised intergenerational solidarity. Such a hypothesis is supported by the fact that the transition to retirement restructures

social disparities as expressed in ways of life. This is a key finding from a longitudinal study conducted in France on two cohorts of retiring people (Attias-Donfut, Renaut, Rozenkier 1989; Attias-Donfut 1989). The cultural behaviour of different social categories tends to homogenise after retirement. It is as if the suspension of job-related constraints suppresses some of the concrete daily forces which shape a way of life, and which characterise different social categories. Do upward transfers between generations affect status changes? Is there a driving effect of the promotion of some members upon the whole family group? Studies of social mobility have shown that the background of social influence operates not only during the first stage of socialisation. For example, family background not only influences academic achievement, but professional career as well. Among those who succeeded in the French baccalaureate, the children of higher executives more often become higher executives themselves (46%) than, at the same level of education, the sons of lower executives (39%), the sons of craftsmen or tradespeople (30%) or the sons of employees or manual workers (25%), (Thelot 1985). Academic achievement is then a function of what has been called the "dominance effect" of the social origin (Boudon 1973).

Would not such a dominance effect work in reverse from successful offspring to parents whose social status would increase, through level of income, way of life, social relationships and symbolic references? Could some changes in social status come about during late maturity? Could parental investment in offspring bear social fruit in a kind of social and economic profit directly resulting from intergenerational relationships?

The analysis of the intertwining of life course and intergenerational transmissions may shed light on some aspects of the social determination game, by introducing a dynamic perspective and emphasising mutual influences between individual lives.

Social class sociology and, more generally, social inequality analyses are used to focus on patterns of reproduction. Emphasis is then put on social conditioning effects and the resulting habitus (Bourdieu 1979). The latter is defined as a system of durable predispositions, a product of the internalisation of objective conditions, which structure social practices. The habitus ensures the "social heredity of acquired characters", "the predecessors reproducing themselves in the successors" (Bourdieu 1974). It has become obvious that age and social class are not sufficient to predict life-styles throughout life. For example, retirement affords lower social classes new opportunities for leisure activities generally reserved for the middle and upper classes. Moreover, social transfers may restructure the life-standard disparities between different social categories, for example, bringing the independent professions nearer to the lower-paid workers in retirement.

Thus, it is interesting to introduce within social class theories reflections on the life course (Kohli 1986) and the changing intergenerational exchange-balances across phases of life. These factors are able to moderate the effects of the position in the production process upon class disparities and to help account for shifts in class destiny.

Upward and downward transfers are part of a complex family exchange network. Thus it is necessary to consider it in its entirety, i.e. not limited to one direction and not limited to two generations, but including the whole multigenerational family. In this way, we can evaluate social costs and costs shared by families. We must not only calculate the cost of a child or the cost of a dependant older person, but we must also consider possible benefits within a broad time perspective.

Directeur des Recherches sur le
Vieillessement Caisse Nationale d'Assurance
Vieillesse

References

- Allerbeck, K.R.; M.K. Jennings, L. Rosenmayr 1979, "Generations and families". In: S.H. Barnes, M. Kaase, *Political Action*, Sage Publications.
- Attias-Donfut, C. 1988a, *Sociologie des générations, l'empreinte du temps*. Collection le Sociologue, Puf, Paris.
- Attias-Donfut, C. 1988b, "Des générations sexuées". In: C. Attias-Donfut *Sociologie des Générations*, Op. Cit., (114-125).
- Attias-Donfut, C. 1989, "L'évolution des inégalités sociales lors du passage à la retraite". In: *Cahiers statistiques solidarité/santé*, N° 16, (61-68), La Documentation Française, Paris.
- Attias-Donfut, C.; S. Renaut; A. Rozenkier 1989. "L'irruption du temps libre". In: P. Paillat ed. *Passages de la vie active à la retraite* (127-145). Collection Politique D'aujourd'hui, Puf, Paris.
- Bertaux, D. 1977. *Destins personnels et structures de classe*. Puf, Paris.
- Blum, A.; H. Le Bras 1985. "Solidarité familiale, solidarité sociale". In: D. Kessler; A. Masson, eds. *Cycle de vie et générations* (157-176). Economica, Paris.
- Bonvallet, C. 1988. *Cycles de vie et changements urbains en région Parisienne*. Rapport ronéoté, Ined, Paris.
- Bouget, D.; R. Tartarin, (eds); M. Frossard, P. Tripiet 1990 - *Le Prix de la Dépendance*, La Documentation Française, Paris.
- Boudon, R. 1973. *L'inégalité des chances*. Armand Colin, Paris.
- Bourdieu, P. 1974. "Avenir de classe et causalité du probable". In: *Revue française de sociologie*, XV, (43-73), Paris.
- Bourdieu, P. 1979. *La distinction*. Editions de Minuit, Paris.
- Buisson, F.; J.C. Mermet; M. Bloch 1989. *Dette et filiations*. Rapport ronéoté, C.N.A.F., Paris.
- Canceill, G. 1989. "Ressources et niveau de vie des personnes âgées". In: *Economie et statistique*, n° 222, (3-14), Insee, Paris.
- Erikson, R.; J. Goldthorpe; L. Portocarero

1979. "Intergenerational Class Mobility in Three Western European Societies: England, France and Sweden". In: *The British Journal of Sociology*, Volume XXX, n° 4, (415-441).
- Gauthier, A.; A. Colvez 1989. "L'incapacité des personnes âgées en France et l'aide reçue. Synthèse d'enquêtes régionales conduites en France entre 1978-1986. In: *Les indicateurs d'incapacité fonctionnelle en gérontologie*, ctnerhi/insem, Paris.
- Gotman, A. 1988. *Héritier*, Puf, Coll. Economie en liberté, Paris.
- Hagestad, G. 1981. "Problems and Promises in the Social Psychology and Intergenerational Relations". In: R. Fogel; E. Hatfield; S. Kiesler and J. Mark; et al., eds. *Aging: Stability and Change in the Family*. Academic Press, New York.
- Hagestad, G. 1984. "The Continuous Bond: A Dynamic, Multigenerational Perspective on Parent-Child-Relations Between Adults". In: M. Perlmutter, ed. *Lea*, Hillsdale/New Jersey/London.
- Hoffman, W. 1986. "Les changements dans les rôles familiaux et les différences entre les sexes". In: M.C. Hurtig; M.F. Pichevin *La différence des sexes*, (179-214), ed. Tierce, Paris.
- Kellerhals, J. 1987. *Microsociologie de la famille. Que sais-je?*, Puf, Paris.
- Kohli, M. 1988. "Ageing as a challenge for sociological theory", *Ageing and society* 8 (367-394).
- Levi-strauss, C. 1949. *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, Puf, Paris.
- Mangen, D.J.; V.L. Bengtson; P.H. Landry Jr. 1988. *Measurement of intergenerational relations*. Sage, Newburg Park Beverly Hills, London, New Dehli.
- Masson, A. 1985. "Cycle de vie et accumulation patrimoniale". In: D. Kessler; A. Masson, eds. *Cycles de vie et générations* (53-68), Economica, Paris.
- Menahem, G. 1988. "Trois normes d'organisation domestique selon deux normes familiales font 6 types de famille". In: *Population*, n° 6, (1005-1034), Novembre-Décembre, Ined, Paris.
- Pohl, R.; P. Soleilhouvoup 1982. "La transmission du statut social sur deux ou trois générations" In: *Economie et statistique*, n° 144, (25-42), Insee, Paris.
- Paillat, P. ed.; C. Attias-Donfut; F. Clement; C. Delbes; P. Paillat; S. Renaut; A. Rozenkier 1989. *Passages de la vie active à la retraite*, Collection politique d'aujourd'hui, Puf, Paris.
- Rosenmayr, L. 1985. *Intergenerational Relations Within the Family. Notes on the Post-Family Family*. Paper presented at the ESK workshop on the elderly and their families - patterns of mutual caring, 13-17 november, Jerusalem.
- Rosenmayr, L. 1977. *La famille multigénérationnelle*. Communication au congrès mondial sur le vieillissement, 24-30 avril, Vichy.
- Roussel, L. 1989. *La famille incertaine*, Odile Jacob, Paris.
- Singly, F. de 1987. *Fortune et infortune de la femme mariée*, Puf, Paris.
- Thelot, C. 1982. *Tel père, tel fils?*, Dunod, Paris.
- Thelot, C. 1983. "L'évolution de la mobilité sociale dans chaque génération". In: *Economie et Statistique*, n° 161, (3-22), Insee, Paris.
- Thelot, C. 1985. "La transmission du statut social entre générations". In: D. Kessler; A. Masson; eds. *Cycles de vie et générations*, (35-146), op. cit.