Coming Up for Air: Exploring an Intergenerational Perspective on Social Work

Steven Brandt^{1*}, Rudi Roose², and Griet Verschelden¹

¹ University College Ghent, Valentin Vaerwijckweg 1, Faculty of Education, Health and Social Work, B-9000 Ghent, Belgium

² Ghent University, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent, Belgium

*Correspondence to Steven Brandt, Faculty of Education, Health and Social Work, University College Ghent, Valentin Vaerwijckweg 1, B-9000 Ghent, Belgium. E-mail: steven.brandt@hogent.be

Abstract

From the late 1980s until now, scholars, educators and social workers have criticised the diminution of interest in the structural level of social problems. In this lament, former social work is beguiled, while critiques are targeted at the new generation of social workers. These critiques forewarn of important issues and problems, but at the same time they portray social work in a devolutionary way. It is argued that this one-sided debate conceals frictions between different generations of social workers. In reference to the work of Karl Mannheim, an intergenerational perspective is proposed that goes beyond nostalgic relishing of the past and calls on social work to actively engage with past remembrance and present evolutions.

Keywords: Generations, karl mannheim, social work profession, social work theory

Accepted: May 2015

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes ‘What the hell is water?’ (Wallace, 2009, p. 3).

Introduction

A critical note in discussions about social work is the political nature of the profession (Craig, 2002; Gray and Webb, 2009; Reisch and Jani, 2012; Roose *et al.*, 2012; Ioakimidis *et al.*, 2014). McLaughlin (2008, p. 141) argues that ‘social workers are engaged in political activity as they go about their daily work’ by acting as gate-keepers to social services and by defining social problems from a structural or individual viewpoint. In the core concepts of the renewed global definition of social work, it is stated that ‘structural barriers contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities, discrimination, exploitation and oppression’. Therefore, social workers ‘need to challenge and change those structural conditions’ (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). While the structural dimension of social work is stressed, there is an ongoing debate indicating the decrement of it. For instance, Marston and McDonald (2012) have argued that social workers currently tend to minimise the relationship between structural and individual problems. As a result, social workers are becoming technicians, focusing mainly on techniques at the individual level (Dominelli, 1996; Karger and Hernandez, 2004; Kam, 2014).

It is our contention that this debate is one-sided. It is focused on the new generation of social workers, yet they do not take part in this debate. Moreover, it breathes a nostalgic tone in which the glory days of social work have passed, the present is inferior and the future turns even darker. The sentimental remembrance of the good old days brings a negative perspective on to current social workers, urging them to reclaim what once was (Ferguson, 2008).

Without refuting the important critiques on the technocratisation of social work, we plead for a nuanced and constructive approach. By examining Karl Mannheim’s essay ‘Das Problem der Generationen’ (1928), an intergenerational perspective is proposed that goes beyond the nostalgic relishing of the past. The notion ‘intergenerational’ often refers to the persistence or transmission of social problems across generations (Savage *et al.*, 2014; Hartas, 2015). Or—in the context of ageing studies—it is used to denote encounters between older and younger people (Prior and Sargent-Cox, 2014; Strom and Strom, 2015). In this article, an intergenerational perspective embodies a constructive approach between generations. Based on a dialogue between the cultural and political, knowledge and experiences of different generations, an intergenerational perspective does not signal a conflict or a threat to social work; rather, it functions as a learning opportunity between different viewpoints. It calls to social work to engage actively with past remembrance and present evolutions in a dynamic sense. This engagement challenges social workers to come up for air, and learn about the water they are swimming in.

In this article, we first argue that the decline of the structural dimension is an old and ongoing debate in social work which cannot be portrayed regressively. Second, we present the life and work of Karl Mannheim, elaborate his position in generational theories and present contemporary readings of his theory. Third, we argue that an intergenerational perspective is valuable for social work because it encloses multiple learning possibilities in practice and pertains to a dynamic understanding of debates in social work. We end this article by concluding with reflections and a discussion on changing perspectives in social work.

The decline of the structural dimension of social work

The debate on the decline of the structural dimension of social work is not new. For instance, [Walz et al. \(1991\)](#) examined retired social work educators, exploring their perspectives on changes in social work education and practice. The participants of this study expressed much concern with the lack of political activism, the lessening interest in poor and oppressed people, the growth of private practice and the decline of interest in education for practice. Also in the USA, [Specht and Courtney \(1995\)](#) referred to social workers as unfaithful angels who abandoned their mission. [Kreuger \(1997\)](#) even looked into a crystal ball to predict the 'The End of Social Work', in times where cyber technology will make social work and its values completely redundant. Is social work falling down from grace? There are indications that the debate is not univocally negative. For instance, the research by [Reeser and Epstein \(1987\)](#) found that social work evolves in many directions at the same time. First conducted in 1968, and repeated for comparison in 1984, their study examined attitudes towards poverty, working with low-income clients towards activist goals and strategies for the profession. This research revealed 'a seeming paradox that the 1968 respondents were less likely than those in 1984 to attribute poverty to structural causes and were more likely to support social change and commitment to the poor as priorities for social work' ([Reeser and Epstein, 1987](#), p. 618). It points to an evolution where activist measures decline, but at the same time structural attribution of poverty increases. Hence, it is unwarranted to believe that evolutions in social work can be plotted as simply regressive.

These findings plead for a more refined and dynamic view on the evolution of social work. The debate needs to be deepened in a way that cultural and political factors are taken into account. We suggest that this requires investigation of social work from an intergenerational perspective. Therefore, an important piece of Karl Mannheim's intellectual legacy 'Das Problem der Generationen' is applied. Although written almost 90 years ago, it offers a meaningful framework for contemporary issues in social work.

A history of generations

Different approaches of generations

In ‘Das Problem der Generationen’, [Mannheim \(1928\)](#) reflects on the relationship between societal evolution and generations. His essay includes the newest scientific insights, research and knowledge at that time in Germany. ‘Das Problem der Generationen’ contributes to the intelligence of key sociological issues: the nature of time, the relationship between the biological and the social, and the socio-psychological connections of language and knowledge ([Pilcher, 1994](#)). The importance of this work is indicated by the numerous references made in almost every paper about generational theory ([Becker, 1992](#)). In essence, Mannheim’s theory conceptualises generations at three layers. The first layer, *Generationslagerung* (generational location), is the temporal positioning of groups in history. At the second layer, *Generationenzusammenhang* (generation as an actuality), generations are distinct from birth cohorts, as the cultural and political are taken into account. Finally, the third layer, *Generationseinheiten* (generation-units), consists of groups that develop their own — sometimes antagonistic — views of the world.

Mannheim was not the first scientist to have taken an interest in generations, nor was he the only one. Although the term ‘generations’ goes back to Homer’s *Ilias* and the Bible ([Adriaansen, 2006](#)), the beginning of the twentieth century proved to be a fruitful period for generational theories. Many scientists wrote about generations at that time: François Mentre (1920) in France; Jose Ortega y Gasset (1923) in Spain; and Wilhelm Pinder (1927), Edward Wechsler (1928) and Julius Peterson (1930) in Germany ([Jaeger, 1985](#), p. 277; [Hazlett, 1992](#), p. 83). From an epistemological viewpoint, these generational theories are divided into two separate schools. The first, prevailing upon positivism, assigns generations to a natural biological rhythmic law. These theories originate from the ‘Enlightenment’ by adopting Comte’s assumption of social change ([Mannheim, 1952](#); [Becker, 1992](#)). According to Comte, new ideas arise and old ideas become extinct at the rhythm of subsequent generations. Elements of this positivistic stance are found in the work of Mentre, Ortega, Pinder, Lorenz and Müller ([Jaeger, 1985](#)). This assumption is rejected by the second school of scientists: Mannheim, Wechsler and Peterson ([Jaeger, 1985](#)). Although they also relate the generational phenomenon to the continual biological process of birth and death, [Mannheim \(1952, p. 290\)](#) reprimands that ‘to be based on a factor does not necessarily mean to be deducible from it’. Hence, Mannheim denounces a strictly positivistic explanation between societal change and generations. Continual biological renewal relates generations with societal change, albeit indirect, more complex, and more dynamic: by means of social and political events. Trying to deduce generational characteristics from birth years is dismissed by [Mannheim \(1952, p. 312\)](#) as an ‘attempt to explain dynamic phenomena directly by something constant, thus ignoring and distorting precisely that intermediate sphere in which dynamism really originates’. As

will be shown below, coevals and generations are not interchangeable terms. Coevals have no more than birth years in common, whereas generations are formed by sharing qualitative experiences at the cultural and political levels.

The life and work of Karl Mannheim

In order to understand the origin of Mannheim's theory, we need to zoom in on his life and professional background. Karl Mannheim was born in Budapest as Károly Mannheim on 27 March 1893, as the only child of Gustav Mannheim, a Hungarian-Jewish cloth merchant, and Rosa Eylenburg, who had German-Jewish roots (Congdon, 1977). In 1918, he acquired a PhD *summa cum laude* at the University of Budapest. He became closely associated with a Marxist group around George Lukács (Whitty, 2004). He took part in 'several progressive reform organizations, the most important being the Society for the Social Sciences' (Kettler and Meja, 1988, p. 625). This group introduced the thinking of European social science—including Marxism—into Hungary (Kettler and Meja, 1988). Mannheim preferred an academic career above a career in politics. In 1918, Mannheim became a lecturer at the college of education of the University of Budapest. After a counter-revolutionary government took over in Budapest, he left for Vienna in December 1919 (Whitty, 2004). He moved to Germany in 1920 for nearly thirteen years, where he held academic posts in Freiburg and Berlin, and settled later on in Heidelberg (Whitty, 2004). Mannheim had weekly meetings with Alfred Weber and Heinrich Rickert in Heidelberg. By the end of the 1920s, he became the head of the department of the University of Frankfurt and shared an office with Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (Kaiser, 1998). He fled the Nazi regime in 1933, was invited to Britain and spent the next ten years as a lecturer at the London School of Economics. In the middle of the war, he was appointed Professor in the Sociology of Education at the University of London (Keele University, 2012). Mannheim died in 1947. His early German publications from 1923 until 1929 were translated by Paul Kecskemeti. They were bundled in the book *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* published in 1952, five years after the death of Mannheim. Chapter VII is called 'The problem of generations'. It consists of fifty pages and presents generational change as 'other than "sociological" factors, after all, seem to be responsible for certain characteristic modifications of thought' (Kecskemeti, 1952, p. 22). These factors are presented in the next section.

The problem of generations

'Das Problem der Generationen' saw daylight at the University of Heidelberg. It was at this university that Max Weber served as a professor until

his death in 1920, shortly before Karl Mannheim was appointed to a position. There is an apparent relationship between Mannheim's generational theory and the concept of 'class' as delineated by Max Weber (Becker, 1992). For Weber, the location of individuals in the economic and power structure—by the possession of material resources—enables us to become part of a social class. Similarly, Mannheim introduces *Generationslagerung* or generational location to denote the common placement in history of generations. This location in time capacitates the existence of generations. Nevertheless, being born in the same period is not the same as being part of the same generation. It would reduce generations to coevals having nothing in common except birth years. Like class position, generational location creates no more than a potential for political and social consciousness (Goertzel, 1972). Therefore, Mannheim allocates a social location on a second layer, which he calls 'generation as an actuality' or *Generationszusammenhang*: 'We shall therefore speak of a generation as an actuality only where a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization' (Mannheim, 1952, p. 303). Generation as an actuality is made possible by shared experiences. As a consequence, distant, cultural environments with distinct shared experiences lead to other kinds of *Generationszusammenhang*. Mannheim exemplifies this in 'Das Problem der Generationen' by referring to the differences between young people in Prussia and China in 1800. Although born in the same chronological period, there is no geographical, political or cultural linkage between them. At a third layer, Mannheim introduces 'generation-units', *Generationseinheiten*, here generational groups (re)act, characterised by 'identity of responses, this is a certain affinity in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experiences' (Mannheim, 1952, p. 306). Not always does *Generationszusammenhang* lead to generation-units. This is only the case when an identity of responses is expressed by 'entelechy'. The term 'entelechy' derives from Aristoteles, emerges later on in Goethe's writings and was picked up anew by biologist Hans Driesch and art historian Wilhelm Pinder (Jaeger, 1985). This philosophical notion epitomises common destiny. It plays a steering role in the collective and individual behaviour of a generation-unit (Adriaansen, 2011).

Generation-units remain rarely applied in present-day (science) literature about generations, yet they are of great importance in Mannheim's theory:

If we speak simply of 'generations' without any further differentiation, we risk jumbling together purely biological phenomena and others that are the product of social and cultural forces. Thus we arrive at a sort of sociology of chronological table *Geschichtstabellensoziologie*, which uses its bird's-eye perspective to 'discover' fictitious generation movements that correspond to the crucial turning points in historical chronology (Mannheim, 1952, p. 311).

In the next section, the role and application of generation-units will be elaborated. As will be argued, they serve us with the understanding of the nature of societal change and deliver tools to perform an intergenerational perspective on social work.

Generation-units

Although generation-units can be relatively small pressure groups like Flower Power or Punk, they may have a major influence on the whole of society. Today, the Occupy Movement could be seen as an influential generation-unit. Started by students who occupied campus buildings, targeting austerity at universities, the movement is now adopted by larger political and economic structures as their influence and adherents are broadened to the whole population. Pointing out the significance of generation-units to societal change, Mannheim asks a simple question: What would the world look like, if there were no generations? He concludes that, in this utopian world, people would live forever and changes in society would occur more slowly. In contrast, the existence of generations and the process of generational change can be conceived as a continuous process of renewal of participants in society: ‘... members of any one generation can participate only in a temporally limited section of the historical process, and it is therefore necessary continually to transmit the accumulated cultural heritage’ (Mannheim, 1952, p. 292).

The process of renewal, as a consequence of the emergence of new individuals in society, brings us to a problem: how do we demarcate the rise and ending of a generation? This position is arbitrary because, every day, new people, and thus possible generations, are born (Spitzer, 1973). Here, Mannheim comes to a critical point where he argues anew against positivism. Chronological time is not at stake; what counts to Mannheim is the qualitative dimension of time. Coevals experience the same chronological time (as contemporaries) in different forms, which results in a distinct qualitative time. Representations of an experienced time can only be fully understood by people who share common experiences, in the same cultural, political environment, namely by being adherents of the same generation. ‘Since experienced time is the only real time, they must all in fact be living in qualitatively quite different subjective eras’ (Mannheim, 1952, p. 283). To explain this, Mannheim cites Pinder: ‘Periods have their characteristic colour—such colours do in fact exist, but somewhat as the colour-tone of a varnish through which one can look at the many colours of the different generations and age-groups’ (Pinder, 1926, in Mannheim, 1952, p. 284). Experienced time possesses a ‘biographical significance’; therefore, Mannheim discriminates decisive childhood experiences from later experiences. According to Mannheim (1952, p. 298): ‘Early impressions tend to coalesce into a natural view of the world. All other experiences tend to receive their meaning from this original

set, whether they appear as that set's verification and fulfilment or as its negation and antitheses.' Taking the aesthetic path that Pinder already outlined, one could portray the first impressions of the world during childhood as a primer on a new surface. All later experiences will be painted above, yet leaving the existing structure of the primer intact. For Mannheim, experiences in childhood are comparable to a blueprint of a generation—which is of course an anachronism, while, at adolescence, identification with the surrounding generation takes place. New generations are less confined to tradition than elder generations; as a consequence, they become sceptical of traditions (Goertzel, 1972) in such a way that young adults become aware that their world is different from the world in which their parents or earlier generations lived.

Here, Mannheim provides two critical insights. The first is that no generation escapes from their natural view of the world. Even when fully accepting and acknowledging certain evolutions in society, earlier generations are condemned to—or benefit from—their specific historical viewpoint. The same counts for new generations, where past experiences can only be understood when they still attribute meaning to the present context. Second, it helps us to understand dynamic characteristics of societal change. It entails biological factors of people—being a child, young, adult or old—that lead to distinctive qualitative experiences. As explained later in this paper, these insights will be elaborated to an intergenerational perspective on social work, which brings us to a dynamic understanding of debates on the social justice orientation of social work.

Contemporary readings of Mannheim's theory

Mannheim's three-layered concept is still applicable to today's research. Essentially, recent theories use contemporary frameworks to express the complex relationship between biological life stages and historical conditions, but the basic theory which Mannheim offered us still holds. A critical review on the generational theory of Mannheim from the Dutch historian Adriaansen (2011) is inspired by post-structural thinking. To Adriaansen, generations are essentially ex-post constructed units of remembrance that mediate between age-specific experiences and social experiences. Every generation is no more than a narrative identity—a shared story told about a shared past. Adriaansen concludes that it is not possible to delineate a generation on a biological or historical base; instead, he frames generations as the merge between a person's autobiographical memory and collective remembrance: 'It is not being young in itself, but it is the whole of generational experiences and likewise historical events from adolescence that function as the basis for later generational memories and generational identification' (Adriaansen, 2011, p. 235). Although Adriaansen's adoption of narrative identity is useful to understand how people are engaged in generation-units,

it is not feasible to reduce generations to a construction of memory; moreover, it would constrain generation-units to play any role in society or even to exist, until they become apparent as a memory.

At the time of 'Das Problem der Generationen', the social and geographical mobility was smaller and less complicated than it is today. This should be reconsidered when analysing the decisive role Mannheim attributes to childhood experiences. Recent generational theories give considerably more attention to later socialisation processes in all life phases. The Dutch sociologist Henk Becker refers to radical occurrences, of which parts have a major influence on future events for generations (Becker, 1992). This is also the case according to Kriegel and Hirsch, as they argue that 'the date of entry into any sort of institution, particularly if the latter is meant to give a meaning to life, or even to transform it, represents the choice of one's destiny' (Kriegel and Hirsch, 1978, p. 28). Elaborating on these positions, later socialisations are also formative for generations, such as in inherited resources (Becker, 1992; van den Broeck *et al.*, 2010; Dollinger *et al.*, 2013), in higher education (Marston and McDonald, 2012; Moore, 2012) and within working conditions (Bontekoning, 2007).

Eyerman and Turner adopt Bourdieu's sociology of culture to define 'generations' as:

... a cohort of persons passing through time who come to share a common habitus, hexis and culture, a function of which is to provide them with a collective memory that serves to integrate the cohort over a finite period of time (Eyerman and Turner, 1998, p. 93).

Aboim and Vasconcelos (2014) argue that individual persons in the same generation location must position themselves in the face of the narratives and labels that are dominant to describe a given generational location. Clearly inspired by Foucault, they propose to replace the notion generation-units by dominant ideas. This interesting viewpoint merits further consideration: not by replacing generation-units, but by integration of dominant discourses as a contemporary concept of entelechy. As such, entelechy under the form of dominant discourses functions as the driving force for collective and individual behaviour.

An intergenerational perspective on social work

As mentioned above, the research of Walz *et al.* (1991) presented the concern of retired social work educators about the future of social work: the lack of political activism, the lessening interest in poor and oppressed people, the growth of private practice and the diminution of interest in education for practice. Two possible explanations are suggested by the authors. First, the older-generation educators have difficulty in relinquishing responsibilities to the next generation. Second, an explanation is found in the transformation

of social work itself, as it drifts away from its earlier mission (Walz and Groze, 1991). Although both explanations could be warranted, an intergenerational analysis will add a historical, cultural and political perspective to these statements. The generation of the retired educators were professionally active in a period where social work represented 'a special helping mechanism devised to aid those who suffer from the variety of ills found in modern industrial society' (Gilbert, 1977, p. 402). Furthermore, at that time, the dominant methodical discourse—as part of an influential generation-unit—consisted of building a counterculture. It is why these educators found ways in activism, joining clients and students, to change social institutions (Erlich, 1971). In the late 1980s, at the end of the careers of the retired educators, there was a shift towards post-industrial (e.g. family and educational) problems. These led to other clients in the social work field, as not only poor people appealed to social services for assistance (Walz and Groze, 1991). Taking into account the shift in the mission of social work and its clients and the dominance of activism, an intergenerational analysis enables us to re-read this discussion as a knowledge claim. Earlier generations of social workers are endowed with the ability to criticise the lessening interest in poverty, not because they are more intelligent, but because they are gifted with past remembrance. Unfortunately, their critiques can only be (fully) understood by those who share the same experienced time, the same historical location and cultural environment, and hence are part of the same generation. For the new generation who never experienced a shift in the mission of social work, social work of today is just a part of their natural world. Knowing this, the experiences of an earlier generation can be fruitful lessons for the next generations but, even so, can be unfavourable because they are outdated. If experience can be expired, then the same counts for established-generation social workers who ask too few questions about formalised goals and methods. A dialogue between the social work educators and adherents of the new-generation social workers could be a next step to attain an intergenerational perspective. In this case, this is impossible. To lift a corner of the veil, we refer to a recent observation by the University College Ghent where an intergenerational perspective opened up learning opportunities between generations. While conducting a workshop as a part of a European project called 'WISE' (WISE is an acronym in Dutch: 'Werken aan Intergenerationele Samenwerking en Expertise', meaning sharing expertise and co-operation in an intergenerational approach (Brandt, 2014)) in a Flemish centre for child and family social work services, it became apparent that generations adhere to communication styles towards parents that were serviceable in their youth. In a discussion concerning different meanings of 'communication', former generations gained views about how today's parents perceive home visits and prefer shorter ways in communicating, while the youngest generation learned about prior views on parenting and child–parent relationships by discussing the underlying changing context of parenting.

In a critical book on the evolution of social work, Van der Lans (2008, p. 101) proposes a beneficial co-operation between generations where ‘the unspoiled pragmatic view of the new generation and the reserved indignation of the old generation could find each other in a renewal movement’. This points out that learning processes between generations are practicable in all directions. As Margaret Mead noted in *Culture and Commitment*:

... three different kinds of culture—*postfigurative*, in which children learn primarily from their forebears, *cofigurative*, in which both children and adults learn from their peers, and *prefigurative*, in which adults learn also from their children—are a reflection of the period in which we live (Mead, 1970, p. 21).

According to Mead, since 1940, we have lived in a prefigurative culture, which is mainly future-oriented. This has led to an irreversible change in the relationship between generations (du Bois, 1971). In the same sense, Bontekoning (2010) perceives new generations as innovative waves. To him, innovation is necessary because ‘a group that carries on with the same habits for too long, loses its energy’ (Bontekoning and Grondstra, 2012, p. 21). As Mannheim pointed out forty years earlier:

... the older generation becomes increasingly receptive to influences from the younger... with an elasticity of mind won in the course of experience, the older generation may even achieve greater adaptability in certain spheres than the intermediary generations, who may not yet be in a position to relinquish their original approach (Mannheim, 1952, p. 302).

Coming up for air

The introductory quote of David Wallace (2009) fits as an allegory in which challenges and actions between generations in social work are advertised. Imagine a first-generation fish in a new fish tank with few plants to deliver oxygen. One can only become aware of one’s surroundings by escaping from it. To escape from asphyxia, it is necessary to swim to the surface and take a breath of air. This provides the fish with new knowledge: the difference between water and air. Eventually, after a longer period, oxygen-producing plants grow and as a consequence new-born fish don’t need to swim to the surface and breathe air. For this new-generation fish, oxygenated water is part of their natural surroundings. It serves as a metaphor for the changing society in which the current generation social workers are socialised. It is a world that can be perceived by former generations as individualistic, competence-based, globalised, rationalised and measurable. Yet, these aspects of the world might be taken for granted and remain unseen by the current generation. Hence, one can only become aware of one’s surroundings by escaping from it, by coming up for air. It serves as a metaphor for the changing society in which the current is former:

While the older people may still be combating something in themselves or in the external world in such fashion that all their feelings and efforts and even their concepts and categories of thought are determined by that adversary, for the younger people this adversary may be simply non-existent (Mannheim, 1952, p. 299).

Here, two perspectives manifest simultaneously: a prospective and a retrospective. Earlier generations are endowed to *retrospect* the present from past experiences, while newer generations are able to *prospect* the past in its present significance. As Mannheim explains:

... youth has a natural way of up-to-datedness, this consists in their being closer to the 'present' problems ... and in the fact that they are dramatically aware of a process of destabilisation and take sides in it. All this while, the older generation clings to the reorientation that had been the drama of their youth (Mannheim, 1952, p. 301).

Combined, prospect and retrospect form an intergenerational perspective.

We return to the fish tank where the first-generation fish does not notice the covert but continuous increase in oxygen. These fish keep coming up for air because there is no tangible or observable difference for them to make this evolution apparent. This is also the case between subsequent generations: '... it is not the oldest who meet the youngest at once; the first contacts are made by other "intermediary" generations, less removed from each other' (Mannheim, 1952, p. 301). It is fully comprehensible that the new generation does not realise what water is: they never got out of the tank. And, likewise, the first-generation fish does not understand the condition of changing water. So the question 'What the hell is water?' points to continuous significant changes in society that affect all generations at the same time, but have distinctive outcomes. When the question 'What the hell is water?' is popped, the continuous change crystallises at a point where generations are unable to understand each other's perspective. So the question does not only need to be answered; it also points to the necessity to examine the distinct generational frames in which they find meaning: our own references and those of other generations.

To improve the intelligence between generations, creative ways to dialogue are required: a sort of out-of-the-box thinking or, in the case of the fish, out-of-the-fish-tank thinking.

Concluding reflections and discussion

The political orientation of the social work profession is subject to an ongoing discussion. From the late 1980s until now, scholars, educators and social workers have criticised the diminution of interest in the structural level of problems. In this lament, former social work is beguiled, while critique is targeted to the new generation of social workers. Deceitful and tempting, it must be confirmed that these critiques forewarn of important issues and problems

facing social work. But, at the same time, it portrays social work in a devolutionary, declining way. The starting point of these critiques is often a nostalgic static and one-directional view on 'good' social work. In this view, the changing societal manners in which the political could or can be conceived are omitted. Perhaps more harmful, it leads to a negative conception of social workers of today, because they are held accountable for taking part in a changing society.

Despite the absence of any discussion about social work in Mannheim's generational theory, it provides us with insights that give air to the current debate on the increasing technicality of social work. Mannheim's theory conceives generations as agents in a continually evolving society. Their formative characteristics consist of qualitative experiences deriving from the complex interplay between locations of time, biological, social, cultural and political factors. Generation-units arise and (re)act from a common identity by serving society with updated and contemporary answers to contemporary questions. Mannheim's three-layered conceptualisation of generations remains a firm basis that has stood the test of time. We suggest that the philosophical, perhaps esoteric, concept of *entelechy* can be grasped at best as dominant discourses, which are the driving forces within every generation-unit that creates an identity vis-à-vis established thoughts.

We suggest that discussions about technicality and lack of commitment to social justice conceal frictions between generations as 'the opponents of a new generation-entelechy consist mainly of people, who because their "location" in an older generation are unable or unwilling to assimilate themselves into the new entelechy growing up in their midst' (Mannheim, 1952, p. 318). This does not dismiss former generations to point critically to evolutions in social work. But the grounds on which they criticise these evolutions are nebulous because, for every generation, it is difficult, if not impossible, to uncover the premises and assumptions of their time. Being confronted with societal change and newer generations, however, it becomes clear that every generation's natural view of the world is static and one-sided. 'We always see things already formed in a specific way; we think of concepts defined in terms of a specific context. Form and context depend, in any case, on the group to which we belong' (Mannheim, 1952, p. 306). This implies that every view on social work is only one possible—static—view. To obtain a dynamic view, it is necessary to persist in discussing goals and methodology, not as a means to solve the problem, neither to smooth the wrinkles between different professional views, nor as a cure for the technicality of new generations of social workers. Our aim is to give air to this discussion, to make it possible for new generations to ask the question 'What the hell is water?' as well as to reconsider the meaning of the laments of experienced generations. To enable the latter is to reflect on societal change, which is essential for the understanding of the dynamics in social work.

By combining retrospective and prospective capabilities of generations, an encounter between present-day and historical insights throughout generations

is made possible. This intergenerational perspective pertains to a certain 'historical consciousness' (Lorenz *et al.*, 2010) which goes beyond reading and learning history in social work. Additionally, an intergenerational perspective attributes to a constructive dialogue between generational insights and generational blindness. Adherents of a certain generation-unit can only prospect and retrospect from their own assumptions about the social and society. Instead of criticising other generations for their temporary assumptions, social workers should engage in constructively discussing the political and cultural background of concepts, actual practice and goals in social work. But also within generations—amidst oppositional generation-units—a constructive dialogue is meaningful. Discussions between generation-units can contribute to escaping from mere depoliticised technical questions by asking questions about the relation between different points of views on social work and the contemporary political and social context. With regard to the debate on the political nature of social work, this should not lead to negative labelling of young professionals. Rather, it is crucial to find ways to discuss this on a creative methodological level as well as learning to share dissensus on an epistemological level. In social work, where there is no simple right or wrong, it is particularly important to be able to investigate debates from a dynamic viewpoint. Therefore, we need to engage with generational differences in future research and educational agendas.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to University College Ghent for funding this research.

References

- Aboim, S. and Vasconcelos, P. (2014) 'From political to social generations: A critical re-appraisal of Mannheim's classical approach', *European Journal of Social Theory*, **17**(2), pp. 165–83.
- Adriaansen, R.-J. (2006) *Between experience and remembrance: Generations and history writing*, Faculteit Historische en Kunstwetenschappen, Rotterdam, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam.
- Adriaansen, R.-J. (2011) 'Generations, remembrance and historicity', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, **124**(2), pp. 220–37.
- Becker, H. A. (1992) *Generations and their opportunities*, Amsterdam, Meulenhoff.
- Bontekoning, A. (2007) *Generations in organisations: a study of generational differences and its effects on organizational development*, Ridderkerk, Universiteit Utrecht.
- Bontekoning, A. (2010) *The enigma of generations: Discover the power of generations*, Amsterdam, Mediawerf Uitgevers.
- Bontekoning, A. and Grondstra, M. (2012) *Generation Y meets generation X, Pragmatic generation and Babyboomers*, Amsterdam, Business Contact.

- Brandt, S. (2014) 'Organisational level practices to facilitate sustainable careers', in A. De Vos and T. Gielens (eds), *Second Learning Seminar—Career & Age*, Belfast, Antwerp Management School.
- Congdon, L. (1977) 'Karl Mannheim as philosopher', *Journal of European Studies*, **7**(25), pp. 1–18.
- Craig, G. (2002) 'Poverty, social work and social justice', *British Journal of Social Work*, **32**(6), pp. 669–82.
- Dollinger, B., Oelkers, N. and Ziegler, H. (2013) 'Students of social work in the slipstream of the politics of activation: Results of explorative studies', *Social Work & Society*, **11**(1), pp. 1–15.
- Dominelli, L. (1996) 'Deprofessionalizing social work: Anti-oppressive practice, competencies and postmodernism', *British Journal of Social Work*, **26**(2), pp. 153–75.
- du Bois, C. (1971) 'Culture and commitment: A study of the generation gap by Margaret Mead', *American Anthropologist*, **73**(6), pp. 1291–3.
- Erlich, J. L. (1971) 'Turned-on generations—new antiestablishment action roles', *Social Work*, **16**(14), pp. 22–7.
- Eyerman, R. and Turner, B. S. (1998) 'Outline of a theory of generations', *European Journal of Social Theory*, **1**(1), pp. 91–106.
- Ferguson, I. (2008) *Reclaiming Social Work: Challenging Neo-Liberalism and Promoting Social Justice*, London, SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Gilbert, N. (1977) 'The search for professional identity', *Social Work*, **22**(5), pp. 401–6.
- Goertzel, T. (1972) 'Generational conflict and social change', *Youth and Society*, **3**(3), pp. 327–52.
- Gray, M. and Webb, S. A. (2009) 'The return of the political in social work', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, **18**(1), pp. 111–15.
- Hartas, D. (2015) 'Parenting for social mobility? Home learning, parental warmth, class and educational outcomes', *Journal of Education Policy*, **30**(1), pp. 21–38.
- Hazlett, J. D. (1992) 'Generational theory and collective autobiography', *American Literary History*, **4**(1), pp. 11–96.
- International Federation of Social Workers (2014) *Global Definition of Social Work*.
- Ioakimidis, V., Santos, C. C. and Herrero, I. M. (2014) 'Reconceptualizing social work in times of crisis: An examination of the cases of Greece, Spain and Portugal', *International Social Work*, **57**(4), pp. 285–300.
- Jaeger, H. (1985) 'Generations in history, reflections on a controversial concept', *History and Theory*, **24**(3), pp. 273–92.
- Kaiser, D. (1998) 'A Mannheim for all seasons: Bloor, Merton, and the roots of the sociology of scientific knowledge', *Science in Context*, **11**(1), pp. 51–87.
- Kam, P. K. (2014) 'Back to the "social" of social work: Reviving the social work profession's contribution to the promotion of social justice', *International Social Work*, **57**(6), pp. 723–40.
- Karger, H. and Hernandez, M. T. (2004) 'The decline of the public intellectual in social work', *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, **31**(3), pp. 51–68.
- Keele University. (2012) *Karl Mannheim Papers*, Keele, Keele University.
- Kecskemeti, P. (1952) 'Editorial note', in P. Kecskemeti (ed.), *Essays on Sociology*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- Kettler, D. and Meja, V. (1988) 'The reconstitution of political life: The contemporary relevance of Karl Mannheim's political project', *Polity*, **20**(4), pp. 623–47.
- Kreuger, L. W. (1997) 'The end of social work', *Journal of Social Work Education*, **33**(1), pp. 19–28.

- Kriegel, A. and Hirsch, E. (1978) 'Generational difference: The history of an idea', *Daedalus*, **107**(4), pp. 23–38.
- Lorenz, W., Coussée, F. and Verschelden, G. (2010) 'Historical consciousness in youth work and adult education', *Social Work & Society*, **8**(1), pp. 32–45.
- Mannheim, K. (1928) 'Das Problem der Generationen', *Kölner Vierteljahrshefte für Soziologie*, **7**, pp. 157–85.
- Mannheim, K. (1952) 'The sociological problem of generations', in P. Kecskemeti (ed.), *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, London, Routledge.
- Marston, G. and McDonald, C. (2012) 'Getting beyond "heroic agency" in conceptualising social workers as policy actors in the twenty-first century', *British Journal of Social Work*, **42**(6), pp. 1022–38.
- McLaughlin, K. (2008) *Social Work, Politics and Society: From Radicalism to Orthodoxy*, Bristol, Policy Press.
- Mead, M. (1970) *Culture and Commitment*, New York, Natural History Press.
- Moore, L. L. (2012) *Millennials in Social Work Field Education*, Boston, The Field Educator, Simmons School of Social Work.
- Pilcher, J. (1994) 'Mannheim sociology of generations—an undervalued legacy', *British Journal of Sociology*, **45**(3), pp. 481–95.
- Prior, K. and Sargent-Cox, K. A. (2014) 'Students' expectations of ageing: An evaluation of the impact of imagined intergenerational contact and the mediating role of ageing anxiety', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **55**, pp. 99–104.
- Reeser, L. C. and Epstein, I. (1987) 'Social workers' attitude toward poverty and social action', *Social Service Review*, **61**(4), p. 610.
- Reisch, M. and Jani, J. S. (2012) 'The new politics of social work practice: Understanding context to promote change', *British Journal of Social Work*, **42**(6), pp. 1132–50.
- Roose, R., Roets, G. and Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2012) 'Irony and social work: In search of the happy Sisyphus', *British Journal of Social Work*, **42**(8), pp. 1592–607.
- Savage, J., Palmer, J. E. and Martin, A. B. (2014) 'Intergenerational transmission: Physical abuse and violent vs. nonviolent criminal outcomes', *Journal of Family Violence*, **29**(7), pp. 739–48.
- Specht, H. and Courtney, M. E. (1995) *Unfaithful Angels: How Social Work Has Abandoned Its Mission*, New York, The Free Press.
- Spitzer, A. B. (1973) 'The historical problem of generations', *American Historical Review*, **78**(5), pp. 1353–85.
- Strom, R. D. and Strom, P. S. (2015) 'Assessment of intergenerational communication and relationships', *Educational Gerontology*, **41**(1), pp. 41–52.
- van den Broeck, A., Bronneman-Helmers, R. and Veldheer, V. (2010) 'Changing of the guard: generations in the Netherlands', in S.e.C. Planbureau (ed.), *Sociaal en Cultureel Rapport*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.
- Van der Lans, J. (2008) *Derule: reconquer the workplace*, Amsterdam, Augustus.
- Wallace, D. F. (2009) *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*, New York, Little, Brown and Company.
- Walz, T. and Groze, V. (1991) 'The mission of social work revisited—an agenda for the 1990's', *Social Work*, **36**(6), pp. 500–4.
- Walz, T., Craft, J. and Blum, N. (1991) 'Social work faculty in retirement: A national study', *Journal of Social Work Education*, **27**(1), pp. 60–72.
- Whitty, G. (2004) 'Mannheim, Karl (1893–1947)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.