

# Ambivalence: A key concept for the study of intergenerational relations<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

With this audience, I can certainly take for granted an awareness of the multi-faceted relevance of the topic of intergenerational relations in contemporary societies, both in the conduct of everyday life and in politics. We are all aware of an almost overwhelming number of empirical studies, and I think that many of us will agree with the statement formulated by Diane Lye (1996: 76) in her review of recent research: “The most pressing need for future research is the development of new theoretical formulations.” I shall attempt to make a contribution to this effort.

As a starting point, I shall briefly describe the mental image that I summon up when working on the topic. I see before me a graph displaying the population by age and gender, for instance, the population of the European Union or of any of the Member States.

The age-composition of the population is the background of all ways to analyse intergenerational relations, both conceptually and empirically. Generations are conceived of as one or more cohorts which are united by certain experiences, by a specific approach to tasks and by a more or less strict sense of common identity. How many cohorts a generation may include can vary. In any case, the notion of a generation implies a difference to at least one other generation. The most general expression of this is the juxtaposition between the old and the young. At the same time, generations belong to the same overall community, society, or, technically speaking social system, thus they are bound to each other by more or less formalised and institutionalised social relations.

I suggest that it is useful to take the institutionalisation of the *relations* between generations as the point of departure for conceptual and empirical, and also policy-oriented, work on the topic, and I conceive of them as clusters. I have borrowed this term from musicology, where a cluster means the simultaneous sound of a row of tones which contains both harmonies and dissonances.

## Intergenerational relations

The most widespread clusters of intergenerational relations in a society are to be found, obviously, in families and other kinship associations. Structurally speaking, this explains their key relevance for the cohesion of a society. There are more reasons that give them special relevance. The number and the composition of familial generational clusters depend on demographic developments in generations involved, such as the increase in life expectancy. In turn, reproductive decisions taken in the privacy of familial intimacy — in their aggregation over the whole population — affect the demographic composition of a society. Concurrently, the organisation of public welfare is linked to the conduct of family tasks and vice versa. These are good reasons to pay special attention to intergenerational relations in *families*, even more so in the light of recent developments (Kohli 1997, 1999).

Of relevance are not only the decline in birth rates and the reduction of family size, but also the fact that because people get older, the common life time of familial generations expands, both for parents

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<sup>1</sup> I appreciate the cooperation of James Brice in editorial matters.

and adult children and across three or even four generations. Let me illustrate this with some findings from research conducted at the Konstanz *Society and Family Centre*.

Common lifetime children–parents		
Cohort of parents 1900	with fathers	19 years
	with mothers	45 years
Cohort of parents 1940	with fathers	45 years
	with mothers	52 years

Source: Lauterbach (1995)

What percentage of children has at least one grandfather/grandmother?			
Age group		...at birth	...at the age of 20
Grandfather	before 1890	67	18
	1911–1920	74	46
Grandmother	before 1890	80	33
	1911–1920	93	77

Source: Lange/Lauterbach (1998)

Before the background that a large majority of the population still engages in parenthood (although a growing fraction remains childless in many countries), the expanded 'common life time' of familial generations creates a new potential for close intergenerational relations across the life span. Is there also a potential for solidarity between the generations, a potential which can be relied on within and beyond kinship ties, and which can be incorporated in the design of social welfare, especially the care of the elderly? To which extent can we take for granted the transfers across three generations?

Asking the question proclaims a differentiated answer. It is true that the most popular organising framework for understanding family relationships in later life is that which highlights intergenerational *solidarity*. It is rooted in functionalistic theories. A number of prominent researchers responded to Talcott Parsons's (1942, 1949) concern about the isolation of the nuclear family by proposing that extensive family solidarity actually existed (Shanas et al. 1968; Litwak 1965; Sussman 1959). Since the early 1970s, Bengtson and colleagues have continued and expanded this tradition in an influential series of articles and books (Roberts/Richards/Bengtson 1991; Bengtson/Harootyan 1994; Treas/Bengtson 1988). The solidarity perspective has been taken up by other researchers in the United States (Rein 1994; Rossi/Rossi, 1990), and is also a reference point for European authors, although not without critical overtones (Attias-Donfut 1995; Bawin-Legros/Gauthier/Strassen 1995; Coenen-Huther/Kellerhals/von Allmen 1994; Donati 1995; Finch/Mason 1993).

Some scholars have criticised the overly positive and consensual bias of the solidarity perspective. Research within the solidarity framework typically assumes that individuals' personal feelings — such as affection, attraction, and warmth — serve to maintain cohesion in the family system (Sprey 1991). Marshall, Matthews and Rosenthal (1993) note that even the term 'solidarity' indicates an emphasis on consensus. European writers have echoed this sentiment, noting the value-laden origins

of the term in proletarian movements and in religious social doctrine (Kleine 1992; Lüscher 1997). As Roberts et al. (1991: 12) themselves point out, solidarity “has been treated as the engine driving the pursuit of the common good within families”. Negative aspects of family life are typically interpreted in this view as an absence of solidarity. Research in this tradition has tended to emphasise shared values across generations, normative obligations to provide help, and enduring ties between parents and children. Thus, ‘solidarity’ contains normative implications which easily lend themselves to an idealisation as it can be observed in ‘generational rhetoric’.

However, at the same time that scholars in the solidarity tradition have emphasised mutual support and value consensus, another line of research has focused on isolation, caregiver stress, family problems, conflict, and abuse (Marshall et al. 1993). The perception of weakened family ties and abandonment of the elderly also remains strong in popular opinion, and in portrayals of the family in contemporary fiction and theatre. Thus, some scholars, as well as the general public, appear to be unwilling to accept that intergenerational relationships are solidary and characterised by shared values and reciprocal help. As Marshall and colleagues (1993: 47) have succinctly put it, “the substantive preoccupations in gerontology over the past 30 years point to a love-hate relationship with the family”.

I shall argue that the study of parent-child relations in later life must move beyond this ‘love-hate relationship’. The vacillation between images of mistreatment and abandonment, on the one hand, and comforting images of solidarity, on the other, are not two sides of an academic argument that will ultimately be resolved in favour of one viewpoint. Rather, I hold that societies, and the individuals within them, are *ambivalent* about relationships between parents and children in adulthood.<sup>2</sup> I therefore propose ambivalence as an alternative to both the solidarity and conflict perspectives, as a model for orienting sociological research on intergenerational relations. We can sum up the fundamental point of the present article in the following general heuristic hypothesis:

*Intergenerational relations generate ambivalences. That is, the observable forms of intergenerational relations among adults can be socio-scientifically interpreted as the expression of ambivalences, and as efforts to manage and negotiate these fundamental ambivalences.*

I intend to lay out, with due brevity, the theoretical foundations of this idea, and I shall then speak of our attempts to operationalise it for research purposes. I shall also comment on its relevance for the analysis of societal intergenerational relations in contemporary societies that are often labelled as ‘post-modern’. This is important because one aspect of these theories are the challenges posed by the awareness of fundamental social differences, such as the difference between gender and, obviously, between generations. Their fundamental relevance is due to the anthropological roots of gender and generation. These differences have to be interpreted again and again during history in connection with the changes in economy, politics and culture, and they also reflect the contradictions that characterise the most recent developments in the processes of modernisation.

Intergenerational differences often also go together with another basic social difference, namely *inequality*. Intergenerational differences are bound to the management of authority and power. They are related to the struggle over resources, knowledge and influence. However, as I shall show, I do not think that intergenerational relations can ultimately be reduced to mere differences in inequality. Yet I think it is appropriate to depart from models which do not imply a pre-established harmony as can be found in some of the functionalistic traditions in the social sciences. What we need is a more differentiated picture of the basic structure of intergenerational relations that is sensitive to conflict and divergences of interests.

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<sup>2</sup> I think it is appropriate to acknowledge that Leopold Rosenmayr, in several of his writings, has referred to ambivalence in connection with intergenerational relationships, yet without suggesting a full conceptualisation. Our approach was developed independent of his publications (see for example Rosenmayr 1983, 1998).

The idea to pay attention to inherent contradictions and polarisation in intergenerational relations has one of its roots in empirical observations. Let me complement the references to the literature, as mentioned before, with just two findings from our current research: In a telephone survey we asked a representative sample of adults in the political unity around Konstanz two questions, namely whether they felt torn into two directions in their relations to the mother and whether the relationship was the way they wished it could be.

<b>Ambivalence and quality of relation to mother (adults age 25–70)</b>						
Relation is ... the way I wish it could be						
Feel torn ... in two directions	Always	Almost always	Seldom	Never	%	(n)
Always	—	—	—	13	1	(2)
Almost always	7	12	47	25	18	(55)
Seldom	61	73	45	31	65	(198)
Never	32	14	8	31	17	(51)
% (n)	14 (44)	64 (195)	17 (51)	5 (16)	100	(306)
Significance = .000						
Source: Project on intergenerational relationships among adults, telephone survey 1998						

Examples of the rising concern for intergenerational differences may also be found in what we have called '*generational rhetoric*', e.g. the style and content of public discourses on generations. We have been looking at this kind of generational rhetoric in non-fiction books. One of its dominant features is the reference to the danger of a 'war between the generations', and recent demographic developments are described as a 'time bomb' (Bräuninger et al. 1998).

The idea of taking inherent contradictions as point of departure has also theoretical roots. One of them can be located in the etymology of the term generation and in its history. As Nash argues, "our most secure standard for defining a generation rests on the Greek root of the word *genos*, whose basic meaning is reflected in the word *genesthai*, to come into existence. ... That moment when a child is born simultaneously produces a new generation separating parent and offspring — *gonos ergo genos* — and the very concept evokes the paradox of an ever shifting threshold in time" (Nash 1978: 1).

Thus generation stands for continuity *and* for beginning. It is used in the context of the family but it also refers to relations of similarity among peers and distinguishes the older from the younger. How this differentiation is socially and culturally achieved and accentuated is one of the themes of Karl Mannheim in his seminal essay *The Problem of Generations* (1952 [1928]). The insight that my identity is similar to that of others because of my age and the attendant personal and social circumstances can be, but need not necessarily be, relevant for my actions. In the potentiality of this awareness we may see a special quality which invites research on intergenerational relations. This also holds for the idea that new life is procreated, and at the same time the individual is assigned a position within an already existing social order, and this order is meant to continue. More evidence from Greek mythology, from Jewish and Christian thoughts as well as from literature up to our present time could easily be mentioned where the idea of inherent tensions, contradictions and difference between the generations is more or less implicit, without explicitly labelling them as ambivalent (see, for example, von Matt 1995).

## Ambivalence

What precisely is meant by ambivalence? Indeed, this term is as new as our century, and this is quite amazing given its broad usage in contemporary everyday language. The creator of the term is the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler who introduced it in the diagnosis of schizophrenia (Bleuler 1911). For him, ambivalence of *feelings* was expressed in the statements of the patient who expressed to hate and to love his wife at the same moment. Ambivalences of the *will* could be observed if a patient tried to eat, but was unable to put the spoon into his mouth. Ambivalence of *thought* was expressed if somebody said "I am A and I am not A".

The reference to the constitution of personal *identity* is of special relevance for our topic. The negative connotation should also be noted. It recedes later in the psychiatric literature, insofar as coping with ambivalence is considered an important achievement of the individual. This is especially the case in psychoanalytically oriented family therapy, and this pragmatic mastering of ambivalences, rather than the diagnosis of pathology, is the meaning that is of interest for generational research.

Freud took the concept from Bleuler and used it with at least *three* different connotations, namely with regard to parent-child-relations, with regard to relations between therapist and patient, and with regard to cultural analysis. Thus the concept is not necessarily limited to merely describing inner psychic attitudes and processes (Otscheret 1988).

In the mid-1960s, a sociological reception was initiated by a group of scholars led by Merton and Barber (1963), L. Coser (1965) and R. L. Coser (1966). They demonstrated the usefulness of the concept for the analysis of social roles and role conflicts, as well as for organisational analysis and the understanding of the dilemmas in the professions, especially those of physicians. In addition, the work of Lewis Coser demonstrates an affinity to conflict theory in sociology. This merits attention, because it indicates that the use of the concept may be bound to paradigmatic choices.

A new interest can be observed in the 1990s, the leading author being Zygmunt Bauman in writings related to postmodernism (e.g. Bauman 1995). Of importance, from a societal perspective, is the analysis of the ambivalent structure of the category of gender in contemporary feminist writings. Similar to the differences between the young and the old, ambivalence is used with reference to a basic condition of human sociability. A very recent reference to the concept of ambivalence is found in Smelser's 1997 ASA presidential address (Smelser 1998). He proposed the reintroduction of the concept as an alternative, or rather as a complement, to those propositions and ideas of social contact which dealt with this under the primacy of rationality and using the postulate of rational choice. Thus he is referring to the paradigmatic relevance of the usage of the concept. Further, and in a way very compatible with our proposal to use the concept in connection with intergenerational relations, he stated: "My general proposition is that dependent situations breed ambivalence, and correspondingly, models of behaviour based on the postulate of ambivalence are the most applicable." (p. 8)

For research purposes, different notions or types of ambivalence should be distinguished, as proposed for instance by Hajda (1968: 23):

- "*Biological ambivalence* refers to the simultaneous presence of opposing drives or instincts in the human organism.
- *Psychological ambivalence* can be conceived of as an experience of unstable duality of feelings, simultaneous calling forth of counter-emotions, inability to overcome counter-feelings or contradictory evaluation of the same object of attachment.

- *Social or structural ambivalence* is, first, an expression of man's duality as an individual and a social being. Secondly, it is a manifestation of the simultaneous independence and interdependence of social relations, roles and statuses, and the multiple loyalties, conflicts, and cross-pressures thereby created.
- *Cultural ambivalence* represents an inherent tension between the inner experience of attachment to values and an outward expression of this experience in a socially and normatively patterned way..."

Each of these meanings may have some bearing on the 'problem of generations'. Or, to state it from a different angle: In using the concept of ambivalence for the study of intergenerational relations, we may be encouraged or sensitised to view the topic as radiating into different disciplines and even raising issues of epistemological relevance. However, for practical purposes, a precise *definition* is needed, and I suggest we phrase it in the following way:

*Definition: We speak of ambivalence in a social science perspective when dilemmas and polarisations of feelings, thoughts, actions and, furthermore, contradictions in social relations and social structures, which are relevant for personal and societal development, are interpreted as being basically irreconcilable.*

This definition contains *three key elements*:

- 1) Ambivalences *presuppose contradictions and conflicts*. But this is not sufficient. They must be viewed as polarised and *irresolvable*.
- 2) This irresolvability must be *diagnosed* by agents and their interpretations.
- 3) *Agents* of interpretations can be the acting persons themselves, third parties such as therapists, or the bearers of scientific analysis.

With regard to recent theories of action and structuration and the analysis of *agency*, one should add that ambivalences are inherent in social, cultural, and psychological structures; in this way, they can be diagnosed as pre-conditions *ex ante* for action. However, *actions* can also be interpreted as the consequences of dealing with ambivalences. In terms of research, this means that ambivalence can be both a dependent and an independent variable. More precisely, it should be emphasised: ambivalence, as defined here, is a *second order construct* denoting not behaviour as such, but rather the interpretation of relations in social contexts. It is itself the interpretation of an interpretation.

Let us step back and take an intermediate summary. I think several arguments can be put forward to support the general heuristic hypothesis:

- everyday experience (including our personal insights)
- the overall juxtaposition in research findings on the quality of intergenerational relations
- historical developments
- anthropological and linguistic considerations
- theories of temporality and difference

But where do we go from here? How can we put this general ideas to work in research and policy formulations? From my own work in progress, I can offer an attempt to operationalise ambivalence sociologically with the aim of identifying strategies people use to deal with intergenerational ambivalence. This strategies may then be judged as more or less favourable, and thus could be linked to policy formulations. Yet, this is still part of a programme.

## Proposal for a heuristic model

### Dimensions of intergenerational ambivalence

Before this background, and bearing in mind that the focus is on conceptual work, I would now like to present a model of intergenerational ambivalence which we have developed in connection with an exploratory project on the relationships among adults after divorce.<sup>3</sup> It is an attempt to combine the postulate of ambivalence with considerations concerning the two basic dimensions implied in the concept of generation.

a) *The institutional dimension:* Intergenerational relations are imbedded in a family system which is characterised, sociologically speaking, by the structural, procedural, and normative conditions in a society. These institutional conditions shape familial relationships. They create a 'family world' into which the individual is born. Following the premises of a pragmatic-interactionistic or social-constructivistic notion of social institutions, such as stated by Berger and Luckmann (1967: 47–128), these institutional conditions are, on the one hand, reinforced and reproduced by the way people act out their relations. On the other hand, these conditions can also be modified and can lead to innovations.

One can see *reproduction* and *innovation* as the *two poles* of the social field in which the family is realised as an institution. These two poles may be conceived of as referring to *structural ambivalence*, at least from the point of view of the scientific observer. The institutional preconditions are always references for any 'definition of the situation' (W. I. Thomas) in view of concrete actions. Total changes seem unlikely, at least within the span of two or three generations.

I shall *illustrate* this with an example on the societal level. Here, the very term family, regardless of many debates, is not being replaced (although there are some proposals to do so). Rather, new forms of living together are being defined against the background of traditional forms as demonstrated, for instance, by the term 'reconstituted' families. The same is the case on the individual level, where the memory of experiencing a certain type of family and a certain institutionalised notion of family persists over several generations. Take, for example, the case of research on family memory. In this connection, Segalen (1993: 160) speaks of a transmission that refers both to what may be called a pattern of receiving (from one generation) and a pattern of giving (to the other generation).

However, it is neither useful nor appropriate to think that structures and forms can be *completely* reproduced. Such a position is at least not compatible with a sociology that uses actors as subjects (as for instance in Mead's model of personality). Incomplete reproduction is also due to the dependence of the family as an institutional subsystem of society and its connection to its environment.

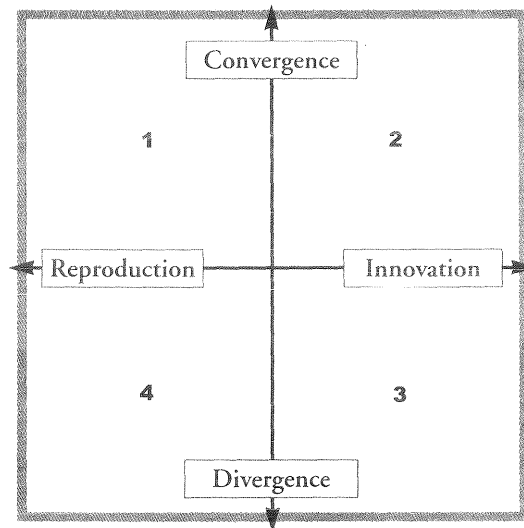
From an institutional point of view, intergenerational relations are thus lived out or shaped in a field between what may be called reproduction and innovation. At least implicitly or latently, this polarity contains ambivalences. It is an empirical question to what extent these ambivalences become explicit because the members of a family are aware of them, or to what extent they are brought to their attention, for instance, in family therapy or in comparison with other families.

b) *The interpersonal, subjective dimensions:* Parents and children and the members of other involved generations share a certain degree of similarity. This can be attributed to biological inheritance. However, any inheritance is incomplete, because individual parents and individual children do not share all genes. The similarity is also reinforced by the intimacy of mutual learning processes. They contain a potential for closeness and subjective identification. At the same time, and especially in growing older, the similarity is also a cause of and reason for distancing. Ultimately, children come

<sup>3</sup> The findings of this project and a detailed presentation of the model are provided in Lüscher/Pajung-Bilger (1998).

to have a different personal identity than their parents. This may be attributed to the constitutive difference I have referred to in my exposition of the concept of generations. Consequently, we may postulate an ambivalent polarity also on this intersubjective dimension. It may be characterised by the two terms *convergence* and *divergence*. These terms are general labels which may be specified in connection with specific contexts.

Most studies, e.g. Cohler and Grunebaum (1981), Cohler (1983), juxtapose dependence and independence, however, without separating the institutional and intersubjective dimensions. This implies that these authors assess ambivalence in a way that mingles the personal and institutional components. If one separates these dimensions, a more differentiated picture emerges, as is shown in the following scheme:



This scheme reveals a *heuristic potential*, insofar as it encourages us to look at different *strategies* in dealing with ambivalences, depending on whether the behaviours and actions are closer to one or the other pole on both dimensions. Or to start from the other side: reports on how people shape their intergenerational relations and act as a consequence of their relations can be interpreted as the outcome of leaning more towards one or the other side. Yet the assumption remains that the opposite pole cannot be completely suppressed.

Such a model, and consequently such a research strategy, of qualitative differentiation draws on well-known sociological traditions with theoretically deduced *typologies*. One is reminded of Parsons's pattern variables. There is, however, one important difference. Parsons tried to interpret the decisions of actors in an unequivocal way. He was interested in definitive solutions for dilemmas. My proposition, on the contrary, keeps in mind that the different strategies employed are of a tentative nature. They are rooted in what are ultimately conceived as irresolvable dilemmas. The processual nature of intergenerational relations is kept in mind, because of the temporal connotation implied in the concept of ambivalence.

There is also a certain similarity with the Circumplex Model developed by Olson and his collaborators for purposes of family therapy (Olson et al. 1979). However, two reservations apply. Although reference to ambivalence is often made in family therapy, the Olson model does not use this concept. Moreover, the institutional dimension of the family is not taken into account. Time permitting, further typologies could be mentioned, mostly developed through inductive generalisation of empirical data. An example is the already mentioned Geneva study on kin relations, another is a study done in Australia by de Vaus (1994).

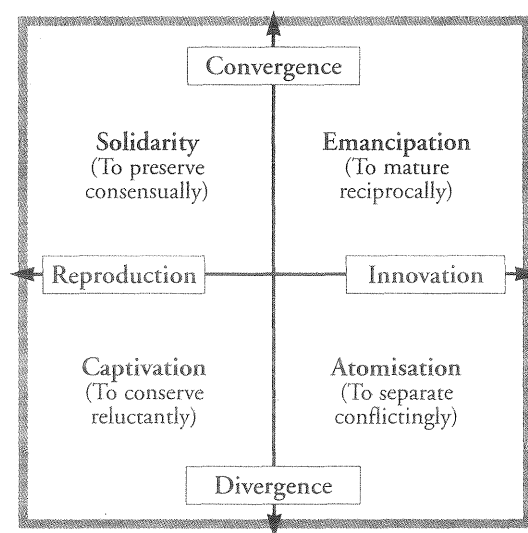


In our own work, we have used this schematic typology to interpret data from semi-structured interviews on the reorganisation of parent-adult child-relationships after a divorce either of the parents or the children. Our *procedure* can be summarised as follows: In a first step, we extracted from the responses typical, concrete *definitions of the situation* (or 'patterns of meaning') with reference to *specific tasks* such as, for instance, financial transfers, the consequences of a new partnership of a divorced parent or the support given by parents to young divorced fathers. We were able to assign the answers by means of content analysis to the four cells of the model. We then condensed their common content into *maxims*, i.e. general statements concerning typical patterns of actions dealing with ambivalences. Ultimately, we attempted a characterisation on the level we call '*the logic of social relations*'. This concept refers to basic modes of sociability defined on the socio-cultural level. On this level, we also took into account the dimensions of influence and power, because they are an integral part of acting out intergenerational relations.

### Strategies for coping with intergenerational ambivalence

Still within this exploratory work, we ultimately suggested a general label for the four basic types of strategies for dealing with ambivalences between generations in general. Methodologically, of course, this work relies heavily on linguistic interpretations, and it is open to criticism with regard to its validity. Yet, as said before, to bring ambivalences to light and to describe them appropriately, a certain sensitivity to the ambiguities of everyday language is desirable, or may even be necessary.

As a summary, the scheme can be presented in the following way (the corresponding maxims are given in brackets):



a) I suggest the label *solidarity* for the strategies of dealing with ambivalences when reproduction on the institutional level and convergence on the personal level are in the forefront. By solidarity we mean reliable support and the readiness to make payments or to provide services which are not reciprocated. These relations are shaped by a kind of *authority* that goes beyond the simple exercise of power. It implies (and this is the older meaning of the term authority) that those in power use it in a responsible way, oriented to the best interest of the others. In this sense, authority includes vicarious behaviour under conditions of empathy. If solidarity can be realised in this way, it is a relatively sovereign or confident management of inherently ambivalent tensions. Yet tensions are latently in the background, because the solution of tensions is only pragmatic and not ultimate; it is not an ideal final solution. The corresponding maxim implies to preserve consensually.

I would like to emphasise this point, because it implies that the very notion of solidarity, at least as I understand it here, contains latent or implicit ambivalence. In another discussion of the term, Pillemer and I have shown that enforced or idealised solidarity provokes explicitly ambivalent reactions. We base our statement on a review of the already mentioned work by Cohler and Grunebaum, as well as on work by George (1986) on family care giving, and by Braiker and Kelley (1979) on romantic relationships. Our understanding of solidarity differs from the common use of the term, insofar as we account for fragility, for tentativeness. In other words, in emphasising temporal dimensions, we point to the pragmatic character of solidarity and avoid *normative* idealisation.

b) Opposed to the logic of relations as demonstrated by solidarity are strategies in which the poles of innovation and divergence dominate. One is tempted to speak of individualisation, because the integration of the family does not seem to be guaranteed by institutionalised commitments. The experiences of the history of the relations between individuals loosen the interrelationships even more. Taking into account this twofold decoupling, but bearing in mind that ultimately the relations between parents and children can not be completely dissolved, as these relations remain somehow embedded in institutional settings, I would like to suggest '*atomisation*' as a term. By this we refer to the fragmentation of the unit into its smallest parts, where coherence becomes very loose. In terms of social status, formal equity between the generations dominates. Unforeseen events may provoke tensions, and in this way the latent ambivalences between the generations may actually become virulent. The maxim is to separate conflictually.

c) A third pattern can be identified when a strong orientation towards reproduction remains under the condition of living apart or drifting apart, whereby simultaneously 'divergence' dominates on the subjective dimensions, but emphasis is nevertheless placed on family togetherness. We may observe that one side makes claims on and requests to the others and legitimises them by references to their institutionalised ties. These lead to unstable conditions of subordination and super-ordination, in which moral pressure regulates the exercise of power. In order to characterise this type, one is tempted to refer to a term much used in clinical family therapy, namely enmeshment. However, since this term bears clinical connotations, I prefer to speak of '*captivation*'. This is meant to underline the fact that, as a rule, one generation — very often the parents — refer to the institutionalised order in their attempt to maintain their hold on the other or to bind children morally, although individually they feel quite different, distanced, and even estranged (maxim: to conserve reluctantly).

d) A fourth pattern may be observed when individuals feel close to each other yet do not insist on a reproduction of the institutional arrangements. In contrast, there is a certain openness towards institutional innovations, to the creation of new forms of family life and partnership. To characterise this type of orientation, I suggest the term '*emancipation*', being aware that it includes a broad spectrum of meanings. Basically, the idea is to live out intergenerational relations in such a way that the personal growth and development of all individuals involved are guaranteed without completely giving up the customary bonds. This basic agreement or commitment to personal growth regardless of age and lifestyle creates an integrative, though abstract communality among all the members of the family. The mode of emancipation is a rather sophisticated way of dealing with the ambivalences of intergenerational relations, and most likely requires a permanent negotiation among equals (maxim: to mature reciprocally).

As I stated before, this typology is of an exploratory character, and it serves here to demonstrate the *heuristic* character of the general postulate: Intergenerational relations both imply and generate ambivalences. It is obvious that future work must include the development of research instruments which are more precise and intersubjectively more reliable. Taking into account what has been said with regard to the *methodology* of dealing with ambivalences, multiple procedures seem to be the

most appropriate. Thus, we have developed the following instruments for a new project. They will be used in interviews on intergenerational relations among adults:

- ‘*Ambivalence assessment*’ attempts to define the poles that characterise the dimensions of ambivalences.
- ‘*Ambivalence awareness*’ attempts to capture the awareness of the ambivalence between children and parents.
- ‘*Ambivalence management*’ draws on typical stories and searches for strategies for dealing with ambivalences in everyday life. In our project, we also use an instrument on *societal generational relations*, and one to describe the *socio-ecological contexts*.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, a differentiation of the perspectives of the generations is needed, and ultimately the instruments must be designed to allow for a triangulation of the different approaches. We shall also keep in mind the two-sidedness of agencies in dealing with and living out social relations. I am aware that this task requires developing more differentiated hypotheses, but I hope that I have been able to demonstrate the fruitfulness of the heuristics of the general hypothesis. In this way, it can be seen as a partial answer to Lye’s call for a new theoretical orientation.<sup>5</sup>

## Outlook

In my presentation, and especially in its second part, I have paid special attention to the operationalisation of the ambivalence model. This may have created the impression that we are taking a micro-sociological approach. But this is not our orientation. Let me recall what I introduced at the beginning as a major theoretical interest: To formulate a general heuristic hypothesis for the study of intergenerational relations which is rooted in anthropological considerations (or should I say: which explores the anthropological implications contained in many theories in the social sciences, or which are maybe even unavoidable in the social sciences — at least if possible conclusions for the formulation of social policy are kept in mind).

I believe that the concept of ambivalence is a good point of reference, because it avoids normative assumptions and moral idealisations. It points to the pragmatic necessity of searching for strategies shaping intergenerational relations. On a societal level, this implies strategies for their institutionalisation, especially by law and social policies.

Depending on the level of generalisation, our model can be applied on different societal levels for the identification (by means of research) and analysis of (institutionalised strategies) in order to deal with intergenerational ambivalence on the micro, the meso and the macro levels. Of course, given its nature as a heuristic hypothesis (and *not* as an *ontological* statement), the model is open to modification. It may also be adapted for other topics. For instance, I am considering its usefulness for a typology of children’s politics and policies (as part of generational politics and policies).

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<sup>4</sup> The research instruments exist in a German and an English version and are available from the author upon request.

<sup>5</sup> For an innovative transfer of the concept of ambivalence to the study of grand-parenthood see the contribution by Liselotte Wilk in this volume.

In addition, the focus on ambivalence suggests a certain affinity to *societal analysis* using the attribute 'post-modern' in a sophisticated sense of the word. I would like to emphasise just two interrelated aspects:

- On a universal level, there is a degree of *interdependence and interpenetration* of all domains of societal development previously unknown in human history. This idea is captured in the concept of globalisation and in the idea of a global market place which presupposes an international flow of communication. However, these processes of globalisation also intensify the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in and between different social domains.
- On the level of personal action, more and more people are becoming aware of and experiencing *contradictions and discrepancies* in their daily lives, and all segments or groups of the population are affected: upper, middle and lower classes, the young, the middle-aged and the old, women and men. There is a widespread feeling of insecurity, which expresses itself in anxiety. Hazards and risks seem to be omnipresent. We seem to live in aleatory social structures.

Thus one may state (as an additional general hypothesis): Major cultural and social indicators and their interpretations speak for the hypothesis that societal development in the sense of a continuing differentiation of its traditional institutions can no longer be taken for granted. This is precisely the idea contained in the concept of ambivalence. In that it has been defined as a second-order construct which implies that the awareness of ambivalences is bound to forms of communication and processes of interpretation, we may add:

- 'Post-modern' refers to the obvious changes in the media of *human communication*, and consequently in the role of language as the most general social institution.
- 'Post-modern' stands for the assumption that these changes are fundamental and display new qualities, foremost among them the universal experience and awareness of the unlimited *plurality of ambiguities and polarisations* which at some point become ambivalent. Aleatory conditions become basic to the organisation of social life and of the individual self.
- 'Post-modern' (by its very logic) implies the possibility of a radical denial or refusal of its basic assumptions, e.g. it provokes radical *fundamentalism* and a search for *simplicity* and *unambiguity*, or it lends itself to an attitude of 'anything goes'. Yet it also provokes a new attention to the anthropological roots of social institutions.

What does this mean for our understanding of intergenerational relations and the proposition concerning the genuine ambivalence of intergenerational relations? Here is a summary of my interpretation:

- Under societal conditions that could be called 'post-modern', a *genuine ambivalence* of intergenerational relations becomes *manifest* in wide segments of the population because traditional ways to deal with this ambivalence no longer work.
- The experience of manifest ambivalence in intergenerational relations goes together with the *problematization* of the *taken for grantedness* of ideas concerning normality, the everyday division of roles, gender relations and notions of personal identity.
- At the same time, the *empirical strategies* used in dealing with intergenerational ambivalences merit *attention*.

To conclude: As I said in my introduction, intergenerational relations refer to basic problems of human sociality. This is why they have always been of great concern to mankind. This implies a special challenge to the social sciences. It is based on the necessity to take into account the relevance of these relations without idealising them. This danger is obvious if one looks at them under the primacy of solidarity. Such a view is blind to the typological plurality of experiences and the possibility of different forms. It also underestimates the tentative character of all practical solutions.

Both in their theoretical arguments and in their empirical findings, societal diagnoses of our time refer to the fragility of interpersonal relations. One encounters a rather contradictory argumentation which I would like to call the '*generational paradox*'. On the one hand, it means that intergenerational relations are endangered on all social levels, the society, organisations, firms and the family. On the other hand, these relations are seen as ties that guarantee social integration.

I would claim that on the level of arguments and language, paradoxes are the equivalent of those contradictions which we refer to as ambivalences in terms of emotions, experiences and social relations. In taking ambivalence as a point of reference for our analysis, we may be able to contribute to a better understanding of the 'problem of generations' in our present times (to paraphrase Karl Mannheim), i.e. in contemporary (post-modern) societies. Such a realistic view and the exploration of possible strategies may also be a more reliable basis for social policies than the idealisation of family ties.

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