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Generational Consciousness of and for Women

Susan A. McDaniel

Introduction

Relying and building on an analytical framework of gendered generation, the question is posed of whether there is a greater or lesser interconnected consciousness among generations of women. Generational consciousness for women may be both thicker and more brittle than it is for men. Both patriarchy and feminism are examined as the schism and the cement of women's generational consciousness. As ideals and opportunities for women transform, often as a consequence of women's political movements as well as transforming global situations, women create future generations of women by self-sacrifice, and yet, share less life experience. Patriarchy and social change act as both wedge and driver among generations of women.

Women as kin-keepers and as collectors of meanings about generation, even the shared bodily experience of birthing new generations, are situated and situate themselves in the generational differently than men. This is most vividly apparent in times of dramatic social change. Traditions harken to give meaning narratives to lives isolated without generational connections, such as in the early and continuing settlement of Canada by immigrants or refugees, in the reconstruction of the ideals

of womanhood at the moments of modernity and of post-modernity, and at junctures where social "reforms" are focused on women and families. And at the same time, reinvention of generation, and emergent generational consciousness is occurring in response to the new social challenges.[1]

Integrative frameworks exist, or are being developed, for race, class, and gender (see, for example, Glenn, 1999; Acker, 1999; or Moghadam, 1999). The multiple ways in which citizenship is raced, as well as classed and gendered (see the previous three citations as well as Brodie, 1997; McDaniel, 1999b; 2001, for example) have begun to be explored, as have the levels at which economic restructuring and globalization are gendered in relation to geographic region, ethnicity, race, and class (Bakker, 1996; Moghadam, 1999; Walby, 1997). Age has begun to be built into theorizing gender and social relations/social change (see Arber and Ginn, 1995; Goldscheider, 1990; McMullin, 1998; Sorenson, 1991). Life course research has begun to integrate gender as a theoretical construct (Heinz and Kruger, 2001), to differentiate women's and men's life courses (Moen and Han, 1998), and to show how women's life courses are often contingent on men's (Baldus and Kruger, 1999).

What is still missing from these important theoretical contributions, is the voice and reflexive narratives of women in generations. The degree to which, and the multilayered means by which, women's generational consciousness develops, exists, changes, and transforms social relations, is largely unknown and unexplored in research. With women's life courses and everyday lives undergoing (and having undergone) *massive* changes, more so than men's by the admission of most observers, it might be anticipated that generational consciousness among women would be acute. But is it? How might this be captured? How is it shaped? What are its dimensions? Is generational consciousness greater or lesser among generations of women than among generations of men? Is generational consciousness thicker or more brittle among women, and among which women? Are patriarchy and feminism schism or cement in women's generational consciousness? Is rapid social change among/for women a wedge or a driver for generational consciousness? These are the questions that form the basis for theorizing generational consciousness of and for women in this paper.

Generation: In Search of Theorization

Generation per se has been sociologically undertheorized as both a structural dimension of social stratification and as a lens through which to observe and analyze the social and social change (Becker, 1990, 1999; Elder, 1994; Turner, 1998). Generation has long been acknowledged as a sociologically enticing as well as perplexing concept. The conundrum of generation to sociologists has resulted in distorted understandings of women, ethnic minorities/majorities, people of color, sexual minorities, postcoloniality, and aboriginal peoples becoming part and parcel

of the sociological enterprise (Alanen, 1994). Mannheim (1952/1968: 311) recognized that:

> If we speak simply of "generations" without any further differentiation, we risk jumbling together purely biological phenomena and others which are the product of social and cultural forces: thus we arrive at a sort of sociology of chronological tables which uses its "bird's-eye perspective" to "discover" fictitious generation movements to correspond to the crucial turning-points in historical chronology.[2]

When set in the economistic paradigms of contemporary Western societies, the muddled but crucial concept of generation transpires into the iconography of actuarial justice (McDaniel, 1999c), where birth cohorts are boxed and labelled (baby boomers, gen xers, greedy grannies, and geezers), then defined as competing interest groups. Turner (1998: 303) argues "the importance of generation as a feature of social stratification" and sees generation, in the public arena, as a neglected sociological dimension. McMullin (1998) agrees, specifically focusing on the absence of theorizing of age and generational relations in feminist sociology.

Alanen (1994: 37) argues compellingly in favor of the development of a "generational system of relations" analogous to a gender system, premised on relations of ruling. Seen with this lens, those generational issues that become defined as interesting or as problematic (i.e., of interest to sociological knowledge production) are those "that concern the organizing, managing, regulating, and occasional 'modernizing' of the generational system, from the standpoint of those belonging to the hegemonic generation . . . whose business it is to do the ruling" (Alanen, 1994: 37).

Generational concerns then become those of parents with respect to children, and those of adult children with respect to aging parents. Generation in its sociological potentiality becomes eclipsed by the familial preoccupations of the hegemonic mid-life generation. And paradoxically, this has led to the invisiblization of children in sociology, and to some extent of the aged, except as aged, that is, as problematic or to be managed by the hegemonic generation (Alanen, 1994). Relying on the terminology of Becker (1999: 3), "family generations" become distinct from "societal generations."

When not seen a social relational concept, generation tends to be equated with birth cohort, a profoundly different social construct, as Mannheim (1952/1968) clearly instructed, but the lesson is often forgotten. To equate generation with birth cohort, while popularly engaging, is analytically imprecise, as well as misleading and socially divisive (Becker, 1992). We can be daughters at eighty, grandmothers at thirty five, and mothers throughout our adult lives, or never, no matter how long or short our lives. These generational roles are entered and exited, or not, almost (but not completely) regardless of when we were born. The time of our birth in social history matters greatly to the timing and the choices we make

about entering generational relations. We may have fewer or more choices to make, and the ways in which we negotiate the existing structures of social constraint may be affected. It also matters to the likelihood of having multiple generational relations enabled only by longevity.

The collapsing of generation and birth cohort, in the popular mind and media, tends to lead to a social paralytic paradigm whereby generational identities, unlike other social identities, appear to be "cast in stone," categorical and unchanging. This is the risky biological deterministic jumbling of which Mannheim warned. Birth date or cohort are, in fact, unchanging although their social interpretation and the relational meaning they have, vary as does distance from birth date in terms of relative youth or age. Generation, on the other hand, is a relative, relational, and highly change-susceptible construct, with profound period (cross sectional) variability. In these senses, generation is not only not equivalent to birth cohort, it is orthogonal to it. Within this orthogonality may be hidden creative tensions useful to theorizing generation sociologically.

Generational relations, between younger and older age-groups, no matter what their birth cohorts or the historical period of observation, are at the heart of societal continuity and cohesion: "intergenerational transfers are the essence of societal reproduction, continuity, interaction, and exchange. Without intergenerational transfers, societies would cease to exist." (McDaniel, 1997a: 2)

Generation, in this sense, organizes our social worlds in ways as profoundly as gender, class, or ethnicity. Generation, as a social construct may be even more socially timeless than gender, class, or ethnicity. Yet it embodies the paradox of being, of necessity, constantly in flux. As McMullin (1998: 2) points out, "The separation of gender and age relations leads either to the conclusion that age is of considerably less significance than other dimensions of inequality such as gender, class, race, and ethnicity, or that it stands apart from the rest as a separate basis of inequality." Neither conclusion seems justifiable. Nor does the separation of age relations from other dimensions of social power. Folbre (1994: 55–56) suggests that there are parallels between the dimensions of age and gender in social import: "Like gender, age is a category based on social interpretations of a biological characteristic, a category with particularly important imperatives for the organization of social reproduction." But, as we have argued, age per se is not generation.

Toward Theorizing Gendered Generation

Key to theorizing the concept of gendered generation is that at any given time, gender is not the same and generation is not the same but both are social relational and embedded in power relations. It is this temporality, impermanence, dynamic relationality, and power context which are essential to the concept of gendered generation. No one moves through generational processes in place or ages in place,

so at any given time, women of different ages experience current events differently, for *three distinct reasons*:

- experiences differ by age, so women at different ages interact with current changes differently;
- life course (distinct from age per se because it involves the accumulation of choices made at earlier stages, as well as non-choices) affects the way women experience any given change or challenge; and
- the situating of experience and systems of entitlements and opportunities are generational in that women's relations with those in previous and subsequent generations matter. Gendered generation, like gender and generation separately, is a relational and relative construct.

Walby (1997: 12) ties together parts of these key aspects when she says:

> Age and generation are important . . . not only in representing different stages of the life cycle, but because people of different ages embody different systems of patriarchy, different gender regimes. They bring to the present traces of different pasts.

Recent changes in welfare states and increasing globalization highlight crucial, and in some instances previously hidden, terrains of gendered generations and generational relations among women. Contemporary changes have been described as a "coup d'etat in slow motion" (Saul, 1997). Impositional claims are made that restructuring of societies (here the demise of welfare states and globalization are seen as part of the same socioeconomic processes) and lives are simply necessitated by the global marketplace, that the changes are essentially gender and class neutral, and that they bring bright opportunities for future generations (McDaniel, 1999b). All of these claims relate directly to the conceptualization of gendered generational relations. This takes place on three planes.

First, the contradictions of feminized caring come into sharp relief. As Bakker (1996: 2) argues, "[M]arkets operate without recognizing that the unpaid work of reproduction and maintenance of human resources contributes to the realization of formal market relations." This work is largely done by women and increasingly, in an aging society, *for* women. Caring is seen, at best, as troublesome for the global economy (McDaniel, 1997b; 1999a) because it is perceived as a drag on so-called economic progress: it is seen as "soft," unproductive, or minimally extra-economic. Caring, instead of being defined as productive work in the new economies, has also come to be seen as a personality attribute of femininity, comprising the "good woman." With the downsizing of welfare states, caring has become yet more privatized and feminized than previously, therefore more hidden in value both because it is home-based, and because it contributes increasingly to sustaining elders, differentially

older women, who are thought not to contribute productively in the present or future (or in the past for that matter). Caring by women is thus undervalued, although it can have benefits in cementing social relations among generations, sharply countering the economistic notion of competing generations.

> The prolonged building up of obligations over a lifetime of familial exchanges is a reflection of sustained dependency upon others for help . . . the build-up of obligations for reciprocal giving based on dependency is a foundation of social cohesion . . . there is a tendency to incorrectly perceive that they create intergenerational inequities that social policy needs to try to reduce (Stone, Rosenthal, and Connidis, 1998: 18).

Second, intergenerational issues among women emerge as a crucial, but largely overlooked, vector of global change in that women's gains made in one generation are being eroded for subsequent generations of women. Not only is negative mobility apparent in several western countries for the first time in the post World War II period, but women's opportunities have declined as well. This occurred first in developing countries with structural adjustment programs. O'Neill (1994) summarizes:

> [T]he economic crisis . . . , and the type of stabilization and adjustment measures taken in response to it, have halted and even reversed the progress in health, nutrition and education and incomes which women had enjoyed . . . during the previous three decades.

Third, there is a gendered generation dimension that cuts to the core of shifts in polity and citizenship rights for women and others who are/were disadvantaged. Galbraith (1996) describes this aspect succinctly as "democracy of the fortunate." "The rich and well situated are now far more numerous and diverse than the erstwhile capitalist class," argues Galbraith (1996: 7) and, key for the purposes of this paper, the fortunate are increasingly the beneficiaries of entitlements by age, in this case corresponding to generation, and gender. Postwar male privilege has accumulated into pensions and investments on which contemporary political power rests, a hegemonic gendered generation. The profundity of this shift is noted by Quadagno (1998; 1999) in her findings about the multiple ways and the degree to which risks have shifted from the state to markets in the United States, leaving vulnerable individuals and families without protections against the unexpected, and as importantly, without compensation, or even acknowledgment, of structural absences in opportunities. Similar shifts have been found in Canada (McDaniel, 1999b). Skocpol (1998), as well as Galbraith (1996: 9–10), show compellingly how until the early decades of this century in the United States, rural agrarianism obviated the need for social security for older generations since as Galbraith (10) puts it, ". . . for here, the next generation looked after the last." The paradox is that the development of public

pensions, intended to provide security for *all* in old age, has had the effect, together with recent social and economic shifts in social and employment policies, of consolidating power bases among *men in older generations*, to the exclusion of women and younger people, particularly disadvantaging younger women. Now, the discourses of neoliberalism have atrophied the concept of the public and the public good—just at the moment when new generations of women might benefit—and marginalized those groups, including women, who are most likely to exist structurally outside the world of full-time paid work with full benefits, and are more likely to challenge social inequalities (Brodie, 1997). The contours of entitlements and responsibilities for women in various generations have altered.

Empirically, what are the basics of what is known that can contribute to framework development? Data relied upon here come from diverse sources including census data, trends data, unexplored new terrains of risks for women by generation, and findings from revelatory research sites. Triangulation takes priority over any attempts to be comprehensive. Layers of shifting risks, entitlements, and responsibilities among women of different generations which when overlaid, tell stories of gendered generations different than those typically told, that is the Cinderella tale of the twentieth century's ever-increasing opportunities for generations of younger women.

Looking first at shifting risks, entitlements, and responsibilities over time among each of the six major cohorts of the twentieth century in Canada, we note the major economic and social circumstances each cohort experienced at age twenty five and at age sixty five, chosen as exemplary years for entry into motherhood/adulthood and grandmotherhood/old age, and can speculate (or know) how each might relate to other generations of women. For each of the six cohorts at age twenty five, a formative year in women's life courses, the average economic growth rate that year, average unemployment, basic family/demographic contexts, major social policy changes, and importantly, major women's movement changes. To summarize here only three of the six major cohorts, the pre-1926 cohort (born 1916–1926), the first-wave baby boom cohort (born 1946–1956), and the post-baby boom cohort (born 1956–1975).[3] The pre-1926 cohort at age twenty five in 1941–51 experienced the war years, followed by very high economic growth, very low unemployment, low divorce rates, a family wage, low female labor force participation, small cohort with little competition for jobs, the beginning of social programs such as Unemployment Insurance and Family Allowances, and the precedent of women working in all sectors during the war years. By contrast, the baby boom cohort who were twenty five in 1971–80, experienced a similar very high rate of economic growth, but a much higher rate of unemployment, high divorce rates, the end of the family wage, higher female labor force participation, very large cohort with strong competition for jobs, and in policy the beginning of questioning of welfare state programs such as pensions, gender equity legislation, and the start of women's studies programs.

The Royal Commission on the Status of Women, begun in 1970, marked a turning point in public acknowledgment of women's changing roles. The post-baby

boom cohort, reaching age twenty five in 1990–2000, is experiencing very low rates of economic growth, unemployment rates that hover around 10 percent, rapidly growing family insecurity, actual drops in family income levels, a medium-sized cohort, more women breadwinners, deep cuts to social programs, and strong retrenchment in gender equity policies. The contexts of opportunities for these three cohorts of women are profoundly different and when placed in intergenerational relations contexts, far from linearly progressive for women's opportunities. Post-baby boomers, for example, although benefiting from the legacies of previous generations of women in struggling for rights and job equity, are finding jobs difficult to find and family formation/dissolution economically challenging. With the options of social programs lessening, those women of this cohort who can, are relying on older generations as supports (see Mitchell and Gee, 1996, for example). The support is provision of a social safety net, enabled by the capacity of older generations, mothers and grandmothers, to help out with shared housing (refilled nests), cash transfers, tuition assistance, child care, or emergency aid. Generations prior to this one, although experiencing ever-increasing mobility in relation to their mothers, a phenomenon which has become part of postwar expectations, could not rely on previous generations for exactly the reason that they had less.

The result of a twenty-five year shift, by age-group, in income redistribution, is shown in Table 5.1. This table extracts only the lowest decile of family income in Canada in 1970 and 1995, circumventing debates over what constitutes poverty. What emerges is striking and distinctly gendered. In 1970, single parents (differentially female-headed then as now) and older families (differentially male-headed then as now), were about equal in proportional representation in the lowest family income decile (about one-quarter each). Twenty-five years later, the pattern has shifted dramatically, with single parents making up 40 percent of those in the lowest family income decile, and older families only 6 percent. Often this is pointed by policymakers as a victory over poverty among elders, which may be true, but the victory is gendered and Pyrrhic since it has been at the expense of women who head young families. The transfer has been from generations of younger women, who are those who most often have dependent children in single-parent families, to older men who most often head older families.[4] Unattached women in later life, however, experience

Table 5.1. Family Income in Canada 1970–1995, Lowest Decile Only

	1970	1995
Single Parents	25%	40%
Older Families	27%	6%

Source: "Family Income: Twenty-Five Years of Stability and Change," *Perspectives on Labor and Income*, Statistics Canada: Spring 1999.

similar levels of poverty to those experienced by women who are lone parents.[5] That this is a long-term (twenty-five-year) trend in family income redistribution is a gendered intergenerational relations story, one that counters the typical tale.

A related illustrative example of shifting risks that depends on the convergent conditions of being born at a particular time (in this case the wrong time), living as women, being at a certain age and life cycle stage when risks markedly increase, is the risk of homelessness. There are others. For women, particularly lone mothers with dependent children, the risk of homelessness has changed profoundly over recent years in both the United States and Canada. Evidence (Merves, 1992) shows that lone mothers are now the group with the highest rates of increasing homelessness. If true (and homelessness is notoriously difficult to capture reliably), then women of those birth cohorts most likely to be mothers of dependent children in the 1990s experience a life risk that many older women, even those who were lone mothers in the past, never faced, or faced to a much lesser degree. Similarly, Hirschl and Rank (1999) find in a U.S. study that risks of poverty accumulate with age: by age sixty five, one-half of Americans had spent a year below the poverty line, and by

Table 5.2. Female/Male Earnings Ratios by Age Group, Marital Status, and Education in Canada, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1996

	1980	1985	1990	1996
Age				
15–24	78.2	80.9	87.5	90.3
25–34	70.6	71.1	73.8	80.0
35–44	59.6	64.2	67.6	72.1
45–54	61.2	58.6	61.8	70.1
55+	64.9	63.2	63.7	71.2
Overall	64.4	65.1	67.7	73.4
Marital Status				
Single	88.7	88.4	88.6	93.2
Married	60.3	60.5	62.9	68.9
Other	70.3	68.8	73.8	80.1
Education				
0–8 years	57.4	58.4	61.6	71.1
High school	64.7	65.4	66.6	72.9
Univ. degree	65.7	68.7	73.3	76.3

Source: Statistics Canada. 1996. *Earnings of Men and Women*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Cata No. 13-217-XPB.

age eighty five, two-thirds had encountered poverty. And risks are not only age-related: 91 percent of African Americans had experienced poverty at some point in their lives (Hirschl and Rank, 1999: 27). It would be interesting to have similar life course risks of poverty among women, although very difficult to estimate given how little is known about income sharing within families and households.

What is known about women's incomes by age is that they seem to have improved, at least relative to men's over recent generations. This is apparent in Table 5.2, which reveals the extent of the female to male earnings ratio change by age and by education in Canada since 1980. It also shows that the ratio is very much related to women's marital status. However, several factors affect the seeming growth in equality among younger women.

Given the economic contexts noted above in the six-cohort analysis, younger women are finding jobs harder to get and may work more for minimum wage at younger ages. Hence, the seeming equality of younger women's earnings with men's, may be a race to the bottom of the wage scale, for both men and women. It is also the case in Canada that men's earnings have declined in recent years, so the growth in gender equality in earnings may not be an increase in women's earnings so much as that combined with a drop in men's earnings.

One revelatory site of gendered generation is lesbian motherhood (see Dunne, 1997, 1998). This site is important for the purposes of this paper not so much for what is told about lesbian mothers, but for what it can reveal about women in general in generational contexts. Dunne's research shows how lesbian couples invent motherhood roles, entering a new intergenerational relation that they socially create since there are no defining rules, and a particular freedom from patriarchal definition. This reveals aspects of intergenerational relations for women not as visible in other circumstances. For example, Dunne (1998: 17) points out the self-assurance that women in her sample feel about their identities as lesbians, a fact which she attributes to "historical period, being in fulfilling relationships, their achievement of motherhood, and the process of soul-searching that preceded this." Generation is a self-reflective achieved status for lesbian women interviewed by Dunne, with that achievement intersecting with their being born at the right time to achieve it in social terms, and their clear invention of a process whereby gendered generation can work. Motherhood in this sense is something that for lesbian couples is both an essentially social relation, since lesbian motherhood is seen by the women as "a positive alternative to the financial dependency . . . in a heterosexual relationship," and an acknowledgment of generation as distinctly created and gender as socially formed.

An Analytical Framework of Gendered Generation

A number of themes emerge from the above which are summarized in brief here and then used to develop an outline of a new conceptual framework for analyzing

gendered generations, and subsequently generational consciousness of, and for, women. Themes noted include:

- Attention to generation sociologically is captivating but undertheorized;
- Generation is central to understanding women's lives—women are more embedded in generation for a number of reasons;
- Generation is not equivalent to birth cohort, but actually orthogonal to it;
- Generation organizes the social world as profoundly as gender, class, or race/ethnicity;
- Gender and generation are both social relations, part of systems of social relations;
- Gender is much more fully theorized;
- Gender and generation are constantly changing, particularly for women with the rapidity of social changes;
- Different generations embody different gender regimes;
- Welfare state restructuring and globalization bring out dimensions of gendered generations previously inapparent such as its pivotal contribution to social cohesion;
- Contradictions emerge about feminized caring as both undervalued in the global economy and the cement of social cohesion;
- Erosion of intergenerational benefits among women is a vector of global economic change;
- Democracy of the fortunate consolidates older mens' positions at the cost of women's, particularly younger women's;
- Policy has shifted income from younger women to older men over past quarter century;
- Risks of homelessness and poverty among younger lone mothers increasing and not something faced by older generations of women who may have been lone parents;
- Relative incomes of women improved but only because men's have not;
- Generation and gender both socially formed in modernity.

Building on Folbre's (1994) subtitle, "Gender and the Structures of Constraint," and the above themes, we propose a conceptual framework sketched in Table 5.3, titled Gendered Generation: Structures of Constraint, Entitlement, and Responsibility. Key to the framework are two concepts: first, that there are essential currencies of gendered generational constraints, entitlements, and responsibilities; and second, that these are different across the main life sectors for women: family, work, and the public sphere. Computations of relative risks and benefits by generation are possible, and how they change over time as birth cohorts intersect with temporal change and generations are entered and exited. The potential dynamism of the framework is its capacity to capture changes, both individual and

social, and to tally on a cumulative basis, generational differences, and intergenerational relational implications.

The proposed conceptual framework distinguishes among family, work, and the public sphere which can have dramatically different patterns of gendered generational relations. We ask, in the first instance, what is the distribution among women's generations? It is not known, for example, how many women live in one-generation families, although there is speculation that with changes in childlessness, there may be more than previously. Or in five- or six-generation families? It is simply not known. In work, it is not known how many occupations or industries have the potential or the reality of intergenerational links, and therefore the potential

Table 5.3. Gendered Generation: Structures of Constraint, Entitlement, and Responsibility

	Family	Work	Public
Distribution of generations	Proportion of women in population living in how many gendered fams?	Proportions of women in work (occupation, industry) in how many gen'ions?	Proportion of women in public programs of what generations?
Direction of transfer	Who gives? Who receives?	Who gets most? Least?	Who benefits most? Least?
Infrastructural relations	What is legacy in families?	What is legacy in younger women workers? To older?	What is public legacy? Who benefits?
Currencies	What are constraints, entitlements, and responsibilities across and among gendered generations along these dimensions of value and exchange?		
Time			
Money			
Cultures			
Politics			
Prefs/attitudes			
Choice/perception of choices			

for development of generational consciousness, among women. In the public sphere, statements are sometimes made about intergenerational transmission of poverty, or of wealth, yet remarkably little is known about the degree to which this occurs among women. For that matter, overarching statements about the extent to which "we" (with "we" seldom fully defined) are living in more generations, seem in need of sharper answers. Who has more generations? Are they familial, work, public/societal? What are the connections among generations of women? What is the direction of any transfers in any of the currencies listed in Table 5.3? What infrastructural legacies are transmitted, such as education, equity legislation, rights, programs, etc.? Who benefits?

The currencies outlined are adapted from Folbre (1994: 51–59) as a partial list of the dimensions of the structures of constraint. *Time* is an increasingly scarce currency for women yet may vary across the three domains of family, work, and the public sphere broadly defined. As a currency of gendered generational relations, it may structure degrees of inequality as much (or more) than the traditional masculine currencies of power such as money and influence.

Money, or assets generally, are a clear currency of power and a vital issue of gender inequality. Money (or assets) is also the means by which generations maintain class power. How assets transmit among generations of women and what the implications of such transmissions are to women's potential power and shifting entitlements and responsibilities is an important unknown.[6] In work, how important is money to power or to maintenance of inequalities at work? In the public sphere, particularly in social programs, the absence of money for younger and older women may structure identities in different generations, as well as entitlements and responsibilities.

Culture is a currency in which we can begin to sort out the extent to which gendered generational groups have a sense of identity, of belonging, of a cultural self-definition. There are those who argue that entry into a new generation for women, particularly the entry into motherhood, is akin to entering a new cultural group (Nelson, 1999). In work, there are cultures that are known to be gendered but the degree to which generation works in gendered work cultures is not fully known. *Politics*, of course, matters greatly to women's movement issues, and except for the *pro forma* thank yous proffered to older generations of feminists, generation may be brittle/divisive among women. The extent to which this is so or not is as yet unknown.

To Folbre's list we have added *preferences and attitudes*, and *choices and perceptions of choices*. These seem central to gendered generation, and generational consciousness among women in that they provide the terrain on which changes in women's lives across generations have occurred. The conceptualization of gendered generation is thus moved into the realm of ascertaining collective constraints and the social psychological perception of those collective constraints of and for women, and of and for women by generation.

Preferences and attitudes across the three realms (family, work, and public) give the impression of change among women, yet some obligations to aging parents and to children in families by women remain. The extent of gendered generational change in preferences and attitudes with respect to work are better understood. And in the public sphere, the *currency of preference and attitude* by gendered generation have been only partially examined. Choices and preferences in the context of collective constraint, and very importantly, the degree to which choices are perceived by women to be made, is vital to the concept of gendered generation, gendered generational relations and generational consciousness.

The legacy of choice for women is an oft-mentioned generational bequest by older generations of women's rights activists. How this transmits across generations of women in the realms of family, work, and the public sphere is a research question with many facets.

Capturing Generational Consciousness of and for Women

In asking the question of whether women's generational consciousness is thicker or more brittle, or possibly both for different women, than men's, the challenge is to capture generational consciousness of and for women. There are two significant challenges to capture: voice and narrative. Consciousness of generation must bubble forth to be heard by sociologists; it must find voice. Consciousness of generation of and for women must also be captured in reflexive narrative.

The Voice Challenge

The experience, the sense of generational consciousness of and for women, is found in voice. It may exist in unvoiced feelings, but these are difficult for the sociologist to apprehend. As is well understood by sociology, voice is a power relation, an intricate component of the relations of ruling. Those given voice are those with power. Others are silenced. With respect to women, the silencing historically was defined by illiteracy for all but a few women, by witch burnings, by defining women as groups rather than as individuals with voice (i.e., aboriginal women in Canada's fur trade who had relationships with the traders were referred to collectively by most social historical accounts as "bed-warmers"). This silencing separates women of contemporary generations from previous generations because women's voices were not recorded or only weakly heard. It makes brittle the generational interconnections among women. Given that the current generation of women is the first in recent history that will have lived their entire lives with full human rights, the disjuncture between past and present generations of women is large and, to a degree, unbridgeable.

A narrowing of the aperture of what constitutes generation for women in the past as well as the present, meant an eclipsing of generational consciousness by the interests of class, race, or ethnicity (typically all three operating in unison). One example is English-speaking first wave feminists in Canada (Valverde, 1992) whose verve for political and social rights for women deliberately excluded native women, immigrant women, and women of color. *Their* generation of women did not include such women. Human "race" was defined in turn-of-the-century (the twentieth century) Anglo-Saxon thought as the Anglo-Saxon ruling elite, an elite which justified its status on the basis of duty to humanity (themselves) and control over wanton urges, by both women and men. Anglo-Saxon women were seen as having "bodily sovereignty" which meant not having control over their own bodies per se (which they recognized they decidedly did not have in light of the power of Anglo-Saxon men over their lives), but as a kind of moral duty to their "race" to reproduce. The ideal promoted was one of generational consciousness, perhaps in reality conscientiousness, that responding to one's reproductive duty as Anglo-Saxon women was for the good of their "race," and further, that it prevented "race degeneration" by countering the "overbreeding" of the "barbarous," "polygamous and sensual" classes and races (Valverde, 1992: 6). So, on the one hand, the sense of generational responsibility and consciousness of these Anglo-Saxon matrons was clear, but it was not at all related to a wide sense of generations of women either in the familial or the societal senses of the term.

To take a more contemporary example, reference is becoming commonplace to the "generation of the sixties" (never really according with the decade beginning in 1960, but defining of supposed social generation). Images of the "generation" young at the historical moment of the sixties are various but often include free love, rebellion, social protest, rock music, and drug use. In historical fact, those who participated most in these now cult-like activities were white, urban middle class, well educated youth, with men dominating most of the period. Immigrants, minorities, rural people, working class youth and people of colour were not hugely represented in the period. Women had few leading roles, and were frequently cast as typists, lovers ("squeezes"), cooks, and cleaners. The question then arises as to whether remembered generational consciousness of the sixties is also not gendered as well as raced. The question has rarely, if ever, been posed.

Voice, ineluctably, is a social, linked and contextual construct. Voice cannot be heard without a hearer as well as a communicator. But this is only necessary not sufficient in apprehending voice. Voice depends as well on what is not said, what is asked about as much (or more) than what is answered in response to our social science questions. Gubrium (1995: 72) reflects on his extensive research on voice:

> A growing interest in how experience is given voice tells me that expressions such as "it depends" and "I've never thought about that before," are signs of intelligent people, and are rather different in general character than

> the "judgemental dope" regularly imagined behind the respondent. . . . The intelligent respondent does not just break out into a response.

Context then figures in how voice is given in any research, and may include shared traditions or meanings, shared life experiences/linked narratives, collective symbols, friendship circles, support groups, and all matter of other contexts. Each of these evoke means by which women's generational consciousness can be brought to the fore. Each clearly requires a reflection on difference, i.e., "I am of this generation, not that one, not yours." In voicing this sense of generational consciousness, the respondent is both reflexive and relational.

In managing and attempting to order/reorder, the social science process may be blocking authentic generational voices of women, and thereby block their expressions of generational consciousness. Horizons of meanings—linked meanings of generations by and for women—may be sculpted (and whittled down) to fit into social science cohort or developmental conceptual frameworks. Take the example of one case study: an eighty-four-year-old woman in full possession of her faculties who lives on her own who talks more of being a daughter than being a grandmother or great-grandmother (she is all of these). When she refers to "the kids," she is most often referring to her two younger sisters (one aged eighty-two, the other seventy-eight), who are "kids" to her because she called them that when as a young girl her mother died and she filled in raising these "kids." Her voiced generational consciousness is unexpected and could be unheard without care taken to hear her authentic voice.

The Narrative Challenge

The challenge of capturing the narrative of lived lives of women as generational is both simpler and more complex than capturing voice, and of course, not unrelated. Narrative relies on several pegs. There is the peg of focal optic: what one sees as important to put into a story, what matters socially. There is the peg of narrative structure, how the story is crafted and rendered for the telling. And, of central importance for women's story, the peg of interest, who cares about my story, and central to generational consciousness and social change among women, who would care given that so much for women has changed. In other words, by comparison with women's lives today (whatever today might be), my story, however interesting I might find it, may seem boring, or may be presumed by the teller to be of less interest than the story of a younger woman. Generational consciousness and self-reflection about it, in this sense, can have the consequence of depriving women's narratives of the very experience of generation, but, paradoxically, it is in the implicit consciousness of generational relations (or comparisons) in which the older woman's narrative gets buried.

In this way, generational interconnectedness among women may be more brittle than among men, but not entirely as a result of patriarchy. Feminism, too, can be a schism among generations of women, seeming to diminish the experiences of both older and younger generations, in the former case because their life narratives may seem less compelling as a result of changed opportunities for recent generations of women who are seen to live "more interesting lives," and in the latter case, because it may be perceived that women have "made it" and that therefore, there is nothing to learn from the generational experiences of preceding generations of women. Here, Gershuny's (1998: 35) "recursive model of biographical action" could prove useful in integrating opportunity structures, institutional arrangements and individual decisions and also taking into account the "linked lives" for instance of family members and others in society. This is similar to Baldus and Kruger's (1999) notion of contingent life courses, mentioned earlier.

Life narratives can be, and are, built around generational consciousness of and for women. When the intersections of biography and history are particularly unfavorable, entire lives of women are shaped and stunted by the experience. Examples of this abound both historically and at present. Women, for example, are the spoils of wars; they are raped routinely as part of war. If the women are young at the time of any given war (World War II, Uganda, Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, the list goes on, unfortunately), this becomes formative/destructive of these women's futures. Older women may be destroyed too, but for lesser portions of their lives, and very young children may be affected too, but differently. It is perhaps the intersection of the emergence of adolescence with the horrors of the Holocaust that makes the self-narrative of Anne Frank so consistently compelling for so long. Had she been forty five or five at the time she wrote her diary and experienced exactly the same events, the narrative may not have emerged and our sense of her generational consciousness may not have been as gripping.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have asked a cascade of questions about generational interconnectedness among women, partly in comparison with men, partly with comparisons among women. More questions than answers have emerged from the teasing through of the conceptual and practical challenges of apprehending the multilayered dimensions of generational consciousness of and for women. Nonetheless, some important conclusions can be drawn that are summarized here in no particular order of priority.

Women's generational consciousness, of themselves as women and as generational, and for women in general, is profoundly different than men's. This is so both because of the multiplicity of ways in which women's lives have transformed,

and crucially, the ways women themselves have made those transformations and shared them with their daughters, granddaughters, as well as mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters. Social change among women may be, in its essence, change in generational consciousness. At the same time, sharp disjunctures are vivid in women's generational consciousness, textured by historical silencing, by building gains by class and race/ethnicity instead of generation, and by the voice and narrative challenges that women may simply have never thought about generation as a platform for a sense of consciousness.

Experiental generation by and for women may come to the fore particularly clearly in times of rapid social change, or in situations where there is a sudden break with traditions either in families or societies. In the contemporary situation of rapid socioeconomic change, the sense of transformation felt by women may surface as a deepened sense of generational consciousness, that is, we are doing things, being things and becoming things that our mothers and foremothers never dreamed possible, or, in the case of immigrants, the search for traditions may accentuate generational consciousness of women since they are cast most often as kin-keepers and family tradition preservers.

That it is a task of sociology to conceptualize and capture shifting generational consciousness of women seems evident. That this task is only beginning at the start of the twenty-first century is also clear.

Notes

1. Paper prepared for workshop on *Narrative, Generational Consciousness, and Politics*, University of Cambridge, U.K., June 2000. Parts of this paper are based on previous work McDaniel, (2001). The author thanks *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* for its permission to use portions of that work in this chapter. She further thanks the workshop organizers, Bryan Turner and June Edmunds for their invitation to participate, to colleagues at the workshop for their engaged response to the paper and useful suggestions, and to Stephanie Knaak for her always helpful research assistance.

2. This was originally written in 1952 long prior to contemporary debates on intergenerational equity, to "generational accounting," and to generational identity signifiers.

3. These cohorts are chosen in accordance with usual practice, but there is no established convention as to what birth dates define particular cohorts. In that sense, there is a certain arbitrariness to any selections.

4. Although women represent more of the older population, particularly among the very old, they often are alone in old age, so "older families" generally means older couples where, if the man is not actual head of the family, then the couple benefits from his typically greater economic circumstances.

5. In 1996, for example in Canada, among female lone parents, there were 60.8 percent below Statistics Canada's low income cutoffs, compared to 53.4 percent of unattached elderly (aged sixty five and older) women. The comparable rates for men were 31.3 percent

among lone parents, and 33.3 percent among the unattached aged sixty five and older (Statistics Canada, 1997: Text Table IV: 34–35).

6. For underlining the importance of women's roles in wealth transmission, the author is indebted to Allen Steeves.

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