Voiceless: The ‘Gen Y’ discourse in Australia

In the early 1950s Karl Mannheim gave form to generational theorising. He asserted that those born within a similar time period experience ‘the same concrete historical problems’ (Mannheim 1952: 304). By the end of the 1990s, Wyn and White (1997) had raised concerns about the ways in which generational labels might ‘trivialise’ or ‘distort’ the heterogeneity of young people’s experiences and the danger of this for policy development. In spite of such cautionary calls, strikingly homogenous generational discourses have significant, seemingly immutable purchase in the public domain today. This paper argues that the din provided by the ‘Generation Y’ discourse in Australia, focussing specifically on the themes of ‘awareness’, ‘independent dependency’ and ‘impatience’ fails to provide a vehicle for understanding the lived experiences and life chances of a host of young Australians. Our concern is that with so much noise, there are a great many whose voices are not heard and whose needs are consequently overlooked.

**Key words:** Generation, Generation Y, Youth, Mannheim, Discourse
Introduction:

Subdivision, classification, and elaboration, are certainly the distinguishing characteristics of the present era of civilisation. (Salsa 1859: 218-219)

As exemplified above, the desire to assign locations and labels has been a core feature of social life for some time. Categorisation provides for us the means of orientation: It establishes for us the nature of the social scape, the boundaries of our own lives and a sense, accurately or otherwise, of the lives of others, thereby establishing the rules of engagement. Whilst generational analysis, a form of such ‘subdivision, classification, and elaboration’, is a fundamentally important sociological endeavour, the full potential of such approaches have not yet been exploited (Edmunds and Turner 2002; Eyerman and Turner 1998).

A little over a decade since this call for more explicit engagement with generational scholarship, sociological interest in this field does not appear to have increased (with the exception of Dwyer and Wyn (2001) and the exchange between Wyn and Woodman (2006) and Roberts (2007). The trend within the Australian public sphere is, however, markedly different: There seems to be an insatiable interest in generational works in general and with ‘Generation Y’ in particular. This paper takes as its focus ‘Generation Y’ (‘Gen Y’), those currently aged between 15 and 30: A group who constitute just over 5 million or 23% of the Australian population (ABS, 2010).

Whilst accounting for the shared experiences of those who share a common generational location is a meaningful endeavour, our concern is that discursive generational frames applied to those categorised as Gen Y are fundamentally narrow and profoundly exclusory: That they render segments of the category ‘voiceless’. This paper argues that the din provided
by the Gen Y discourse fails to provide a vehicle for understanding and responding to the lived experiences and life chances of a host of young Australians. We argue that these discourses are profoundly narrow and exclusionary and that needs of a great many have been silenced by the discursive framing of their generation.

**Collective location, identity and memory**

In light of the quantity of scholarship and public discourse about generational difference, conflict and change that can be observed on the shelves of Australian bookshops, one might assume that a unique intellectual tradition had recently emerged. In fact, much scholarship lacks necessary historical reference. Marías (1970) poignantly observes that generational observations can be found in Semitic literature in excerpts from the Old and New Testaments, in Hellenic literature by Homer, in the work of Heroditus in Greece and more recently in the work of Comte. Sociological theorising of generations, however, generally takes as its genesis the work of German scholar Karl Mannheim. In particular his 1929 work *Das Problem der Generationen* which was later reproduced in English (in 1952) in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*.

In Mannheim’s view, early modern society was structured around class-based collective identities, modern societies around gender-based identifications and late modern society around generation-based affiliations (Eyerman and Turner 1998). The implication being that class had been surpassed by generation as both a meaningful organising principle and as a unit of analysis. Eyerman and Turner (1998) in fact, purport that Mannheim’s theory was developed as an explicit alternative to the pervasiveness of Marxist theories.
There are broadly two approaches to conceptualising generations. The chronological approach accounts for a cohort born at a particular time which shares the transition across the life-course from birth to death. The alternative socio-historical approach conceives of generations as cohorts who share a ‘collective consciousness or memory’ (Edmunds and Turner 2002: 117). Mannheim (1952: 304) drew upon both approaches and asserted that those born within a similar time period experience ‘the same concrete historical problems’ and, as interpreted later by France (2007: 42) that this exposure elicits a sense of ‘collective location and identity’. This thesis is that generations are forged out of exposure to ‘traumatic’ events such as armed conflict, natural disaster or large scale demographic change.

Mannheim’s theory drew attention to both the differences between and within generations: ‘actual generations’ and ‘generational units’. In his view, the first are formed, not simply through a chronological connection, but through collective experience of major event or trauma (Edmunds and Turner 2002). When accounting for differences observed within generational cohorts, Mannheim (1952: 304) wrote of ‘groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways’. This implies something of a sub-culture: the development of a ‘collective location and identity’ of a smaller collective.

Today we see reference to ‘Baby Boomers’, ‘Gen X’, ‘Gen Y’ and increasingly ‘Gen Z’ amongst others. It is uncertain whether those employing these terms intend them to stand for chronological cohorts, ‘actual generations’ or ‘generational units’. It is possible that the events of September 11, 2001 in the US and the subsequent ‘war on terror’ or perhaps the recent Global Financial Crisis might act as catalysts to the formation of collective memory and identity. In relation to the events in New York in 2001 Edmunds and Turner (2002)
suggest that this may well be the case. It is also possible that generational formation today might more readily be explained in terms of the expression of a shared set of values and beliefs and patterns of consumption. The answer to such questions will be known in time.

At the end of the 1990s, Wyn and White (1997) raised concerns about the ways in which generational labels ‘trivialise’ and ‘distort’ the heterogeneity of young people’s experiences and, importantly for us here, the inherent danger of these conceptualisations informing policy. We argue that references to generational cohorts continue to be littered with universalities and overstatements. As is the case with much ‘youth’ scholarship, Gen Y, the focus of our attention here, are often characterised in contradictory ways: as a selfishly independent, no-nonsense generation with dangerously and perhaps unwarranted levels of self-esteem, but also as a socially committed, highly connected and motivated. In some texts it is the former of these characteristics which is most often encountered (see, for example, McQueen 2008). In recent years there has been an explosion of literature seeking to offer advice about the circumstances, needs and management of Gen Y. Literature which Woodman and Wyn (2011) would likely describe as ‘lazy stereotyping’. The discourses produced in and through these texts suggest that Gen Y are so markedly different from previous cohorts that those who seek to adequately parent, teach, sell to and work with them require entirely new ‘management’ skills.

The work of Peter Sheahan, a key figure in this field of scholarship in Australia (Zardo and Geldens, 2009) and author of ‘Generation y: Thriving and surviving with generation y at work’, provides a meaningful organising framework for this paper. Whilst Sheahan declares that he is concerned only with “talent” rather than “labour”, we argue that such distinctions are not made in the reading of this discourse. The narrative presented across Sheahan’s
(2005) work and throughout the Gen Y discourse more broadly are that Gen Y are: ‘Street smart’; ‘aware’; ‘lifestyle centred’; ‘independently dependent’; ‘informal’; ‘tech savvy’; ‘stimulus junkies’; ‘sceptical’ and ‘impatient’. These themes are repeated in countless other publications, Australian and otherwise (see for example Huntley (2006) Tulgan (2009) and Erikson (2008)). In this paper we address our critique to notions of ‘awareness’, of being ‘independently dependent’ and of ‘impatience’ as a means of illustrating our concern. We could have chosen any of the above listed themes but have chosen to focus on these three as exemplars for this paper’s argument. We have engaged readily accessible, public sources of information in order to point to some of the fallacies of the Gen Y discourse.

**Critiquing the Gen Y discourse**

The following is a distinctly progressive, perhaps utopian view of Gen Y’s engagement with broader society, one which presupposes that tolerance is born of exposure. The excerpt is offered in relation to Gen Y being ‘aware’:

*The differences are no longer those of race and gender, but of age. At least for Generation Y. They don’t care what colour your skin is, where you or your family were born, the way you look, your sexual inclinations or anything else for that matter. Generation Y are a socially and culturally aware generation.*

(Sheahan 2005: 18)

Whilst it may well be that it is desirable and/or beneficial to purport blindness to the various forms of social stratification that have divided previous generations, if we examine reports relating to bullying this position quickly unravels.
The *Writing themselves in again* report on the sexuality, health and wellbeing of same-sex-attracted youth drew on online surveys conducted with 1749 participants aged between 14 and 21 (Hillier et al 2005). The authors reported that: 40% of participants had been verbally abused and 16% physically abused because of their sexual orientation and that most abuse took place whilst at school. A more recent study with a sample size of 819 determined that 11 per cent of Australians aged between 12 and 17, and as such members of Gen Y, had been cyber-bullied (ACMA 2008). Further to this, another Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) publication observes as a ‘serious issue’ the bullying via social media of adults by young people (ACMA 2009). Specific concerns were raised about the rates of cyber-bullying of teachers. These reports raise questions about how ‘aware’ or progressive some members of this generation are. Whilst there is no detail about the nature of the bullying, it is not unreasonable to assume that racial, gender and sexual intolerance are given form through bullying. The research presented above suggests that distinctions remain very important: That even if Gen Y is indeed a more ‘aware’ generation, this awareness is not an inoculant against intolerance.

The following quote frames Gen Y’s complex connections to parents, family, society and to the familial home. We note, however, that this complexity largely represents the experiences of the privileged and that an examination of research addressing youth homelessness and disability suggests that there are a great many made invisible through this discourse. This excerpt follows the subheading ‘independently dependent’:

*Despite being intensely driven by the need to be independent, and to carve their own path in life, Generation Y are the most over-parented, over-indulged, over-educated, welfare-dependent generation ever. Generation Y stay at home longer*
and are in education longer than any other generation. Yet if you were to ask them what they value most, independence would rank near the top every time.

(Sheahan 2005: 43)

This generation was born during a period in which rates of one-parent households have increased (AIHW 2011). When we take this alongside the findings of the National Youth Commission (2008) which estimated that almost 22,000 young people aged between 12 and 18 are experiencing homelessness, and that Gen Y are overrepresented amongst those seeking assistance through the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (the highest rate of use recorded for young women aged between 15 and 19) (AIHW 2010), it is clear that tens of thousands of members of Generation Y in Australia cannot make the above claims. Further to this, it is apparent to us that the experiences of many of the 7% of young Australians (aged between 12 and 24 – statistics for our target group were not accessible) with a disability (AIHW 2011) have a more complex identification with notions of dependence and independence than are represented through this discourse.

References to education were privileged in the characterisation of Gen Y as ‘impatient’. This aspect of the discourse establishes Gen Y as being unwilling, if not unable, to work towards long-term goals:

*Patience is a virtue. Good things come to those who wait. YEAH RIGHT! Those who spend their life waiting get run over by the people who are doing. You can’t tell me you believe either of these statements to be true. We all live in a world obsessed by speed…Australia has increased both wealth and levels of education as Generation Y have grown up, so it is little wonder they are a little tense about*
time. They aren’t just a little tense. They have no concept of time. It should be instant, and if it is not, then it is not good enough. (Sheahan 2005: 81)

In the first instance, this is a representation of a distinctly socially and financially privileged group. It is profoundly illogical to assert that that spoils of the nation are shared equally by all. Data presented in the most recent AIHW report (2011) indicates that rates of unemployment for this group continue to be double the general rate and a third of those aged between 18 and 24 live in conditions of ‘financial stress’ (AIHW 2011). Suggestions of unabated affluence are, simply, incorrect.

In relation to educational attainment, statistics indicate that 57% of Australians aged between 15 and 24 are enrolled in a course of study (AIHW 2011). Given that a great many of these young people are of working age, this figure suggests that far from expecting ‘instant’ reward many young Australians are demonstrating the patience and determination required to complete a course of study before going on to full time work. Further, many young Australians choices, and ability to demand and receive what they want, are constrained. For example, the impacts of qualification inflation and the Governments ‘earn or learn’ mandate (DEEWR nd) mean that young people must be in full time work or full time study. The image of Gen Y created above suggests levels of agency that belie the structural domains which shape their decisions.

Implications

It is too early to determine whether Gen Y is, in fact, a generation in Mannheimian terms. In the Australian context, Gen Y does not, at this stage, appear to have formed a collective identity through exposure to traumatic events, and may in fact more closely reflect a simple
chronological category. We note that the GenY discourse almost exclusively suggests an ‘actual generation’ and leaves little space for acknowledgment of ‘generational units’.

We reiterate Wyn and White’s (1997) concerns about the danger of allowing homogeneous characterisations to inform policy. For us, it is clear, that the Gen Y discourse represents a distinctly privileged location. We are concerned for those young people existing outside of this frame, whose positions are likely to be further disadvantaged as a result of the significant purchase of the dominant discourses of Gen Y. This paper represents a call for a concerted, critical, public engagement with generational discourse. It asks that even the simplest notion of homogeneity be interrogated. We argue that what is most damaging about the rise of the Gen Y discourse in Australia is that the voices of Australian youth whose lived experiences and life chances are at odds with the dominant discourse, and who require support, some of whom are identified here, are drowned out by the noise and weight that this discourse carries through the public domain.

References


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