



TOWARDS A FIGURATIONAL APPROACH TO THE FORMATION OF GENERATIONS: REVISITING NORBERT ELIAS'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF GENERATIONS

Ka figuracijskom pristupu formiranju generacija: doprinos Norberta Elijasa sociologiji generacija

ABSTRACT: *While Mannheim's "The Problem of Generations" has remained the most widely recognized classical reference in the sociology of generations, Elias's contribution has received limited attention in contemporary research in this field. Hence, this paper offers a discussion of the work of Norbert Elias as an underexplored resource for the study of generational relations and conflicts. The aim of this paper is to reconstruct a figurational approach to the formation of generations and the emergence of generational consciousness based on Elias's analysis of generational conflicts in the Weimar Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany, developed most thoroughly in "The Germans". The paper first presents Elias's reflections on generational conflicts and places them in dialogue with Mannheim's approach, before turning to a discussion on how his insights may illuminate the process of generation formation along with the emergence of generational consciousness through generational self-identification and differentiation. The analysis shows how socio-historically embedded conflicts between older and younger generations may acquire generational meaning through discursive practices and collective action, thus becoming a basis for a shared sense of generational belonging.*

KEYWORDS: *Norbert Elias, sociology of generations, generational conflict, generational consciousness*

APSTRAKT: *Dok Mannheimov esej „Problem generacija” predstavlja neprikosnoveni sociološki klasik u sociologiji generacija, Elijasov doprinos ovoj oblasti ostao je uglavnom zanemaren u savremenoj literaturi. Ovaj rad razmatra delo Norberta Elijasa kao nedovoljno korišćen izvor za proučavanje generacijskih odnosa i sukoba. Cilj rada je da na osnovu Elijasovih analiza generacijskih sukoba u*

Vajmarskoj Republici i Zapadnoj Nemačkoj, najpotpunije izloženih u delu „Nemci”, rekonstruiše figuracijski pristup procesu formiranja generacija i generacijske svesti. U radu se najpre, kroz dijalog sa Manhajmovim konceptima, predstavlja Eljasova analiza generacijskih sukoba, nakon čega se razmatra na koji način Eljasovi uvidi mogu doprineti razumevanju procesa formiranja generacija i generacijske svesti kroz generacijsku samoidentifikaciju i razgraničavanje. U diskusiji se prikazuje na koji način generacijski konflikti ukorenjeni u određenom društveno-istorijskom kontekstu, kroz diskurzivne prakse i kolektivno delanje počinju da se poimaju kao generacijski i postaju osnova zajedničkog osećaja generacijske pripadnosti.

KLJUČNE REČI: Norbert Eljas, sociologija generacija, generacijski konflikt, generacijska svest

Introduction

Despite the rediscovery of the generational approach in the 1970s (Bude, 2010: 428) and multiple efforts to emphasize its analytical potential (Pilcher, 1994; Eyerman and Turner, 1998; Edmunds and Turner, 2002; Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014; Woodman and Wyn, 2015; Roberts and France, 2021), the concept of generations remains relatively marginal in contemporary sociology. One can hardly overlook the striking consistency with which sociological research and debates on the concept of generations begin with Karl Mannheim's landmark essay *The Problem of Generations*. This piece has indeed become “the canonical, unifying point of reference in the field” (Purhonen, 2016: 95), consolidating Mannheim's status as a founding figure of the sociology of generations. Although Mannheim undoubtedly gave the concept of generations its most influential sociological formulation, the prominence of his legacy has left little space for drawing on other classical authors as complementary resources.

The work of Norbert Elias has thus remained in the shadow of Mannheim's seminal essay, receiving little attention within the sociology of generations, although insights into intergenerational relations occupy an important place in several of his major works and are discussed most thoroughly in *The Germans*. Some contemporary scholars have taken important steps towards addressing this neglect through both theoretical discussions of Elias's contribution to the sociology of generations (Connolly, 2019) and a small body of empirical research in the field drawing on his figurational approach to generational analysis (e.g. Hinrichsen, 2021). The aim of this paper is to reconstruct Elias's figurational approach to the formation of generations and generational consciousness, as well as to consider its relevance for empirical research. We discuss the relation between Mannheim's and Elias's perspectives on generations and argue that Elias builds on Mannheim's foundational insights by analyzing generational conflicts as processes embedded in historically changing intergenerational relations. The paper draws primarily on *The Germans*, where Elias develops the generational dimension of his historical sociology most extensively through analyses of the generational relations in the Weimar Republic and the Federal Republic

of Germany. The historical contextualization therefore follows Elias's account, while the use of additional historical sources falls outside the scope of the paper. Accordingly, we examine the conditions under which relations between older and younger generations acquire a specific generational meaning and contribute to the emergence of generational consciousness through processes of collective self-identification and differentiation.

Mannheim and Elias on the Study of Generations

The proximity between Karl Mannheim and Norbert Elias was biographical as well as theoretical. They were both shaped by the intellectual milieu of Weimar Germany, first in Heidelberg and later in Frankfurt during the early 1930s, where Elias worked as Mannheim's assistant and pursued his Habilitation under Mannheim's supervision. It is well documented that their early relationship was marked by personal and intellectual closeness (Elias, 1984/1994; Kilminster, 2007). Kilminster argues that Mannheim was "a significant figure in shaping Elias's sociological outlook", while also cautioning against reducing Elias to a mere follower or assuming a one-directional influence from Mannheim to Elias (Kilminster, 1993; 2007: 40–43). The two shared a broad set of theoretical premises that also bring their approaches to the concept of generations close, so that they, as Kilminster notes, "often embody the same idea expressed differently" (Kilminster, 2007: 44).

Mannheim's essay *The Problem of Generations* sought to establish generations as a sociologically relevant concept rather than a purely age-based category. For Mannheim, age proximity and biological succession represent a necessary condition for the formation of generations, but become sociologically significant only if individuals occupy a similar "generation location". He introduces the concept of generation location to capture the position within the socio-historical context that structures a range of possible experiences which may dispose individuals towards particular "modes of behavior, feeling and thought" (Mannheim, 1952: 291).² He considers childhood and youth to be particularly important as formative phases of the life course, since experiences acquired during this period tend to leave a lasting imprint on later dispositions. Generation location, however, remains only a potential basis for the emergence of a generation. An "actual generation" appears only when contemporaries within the same generation location become actively or passively involved in the social and intellectual currents that shape a new historical situation in their society and period (Mannheim, 1952: 304). Within an actual generation, distinct generation units may arise from different and potentially antagonistic interpretations and responses to a common historical situation (Mannheim, 1952: 304–306).

2 A similar perspective was later developed in demographic cohort analysis, where age is understood both as a position in the individual life course and as a location in historical time, thereby capturing the significance of shared historically specific conditions under which successive cohorts pass through key life-course transitions (Ryder, 1965).

Although Elias did not explicitly refer to *The Problem of Generations*, nor did he elaborate a conceptual apparatus as thoroughly as Mannheim, he repeatedly addresses questions central to the sociology of generations, most extensively in *The Germans*.³ He used the concept in a relatively loose sense, employing terms such as younger and older generations, parent and child generations, or pre- and post-war generations, without attempting to define its strict temporal boundaries. Elias also rejected biological determinism and was interested in the relationship between socio-historical experience and the way individuals of different generations behave and think. In *The Civilizing Process*, he traced long-term shifts in manners, bodily practices, sexuality and aggression alongside changing thresholds of shame and self-restraint, showing how successive generations grow into historically changing standards of conduct and feeling (Elias, 1939/2000). Since generations enter the civilizing process at historically different points, the social patterns of self-regulation acquired while growing up are themselves “generation-specific, and thus, in the broader sense, society-specific” (Elias, 1987/2001: 8). Unlike Mannheim’s more abstract formulations, Elias tends to empirically ground his approach by drawing on a range of historical evidence (Connolly, 2019: 8). Elias did not use terms such as generation unit or generation as actuality, but his insights closely resonate with Mannheim’s since he clearly distinguishes between groups within the same generation, most notably by contrasting the positions of middle-class and working-class youth in his analysis of the post-war generation’s student movement in West Germany.

Consistent with the framework of his figurational sociology, Elias interprets relations between older and younger generations as an established-outsider figuration. His reflections on generational relations are tied to his analysis of informalization as a long-term process of transformation in which power gradients

3 An important consideration in reading the historical analyses developed in *The Germans* is that Elias was reflecting decades later, as a German-Jewish emigrant, on a social context of which he had himself been a contemporary and, at certain points, an active participant. Born in 1897 to a German-Jewish middle-class family in Breslau, he grew up on the eve of the First World War, through its upheavals and into its aftermath, in Mannheimian terms, sharing the same generation location that gave rise to the politically divergent youth movements of the Weimar period. Elias was a member of Blau-Weiss, a Zionist youth movement which he appears to have joined while still at high school in Breslau. Blau-Weiss itself encapsulated some of the tensions of German-Jewish identity construction at the time. Its search for a renewed Jewish identity took shape as the idea of assimilation lost much of its appeal among younger German Jews, although the movement remained firmly attached to German culture and national belonging (Kilminster, 2007: 12). Elias’s own position embodied a similar ambivalence and could be read through the established-outsider dynamic as he later described the experience of belonging to a stigmatized minority while being raised in a prosperous German-Jewish milieu deeply embedded in the cultural, political and social life of the German majority (Elias, 1984/1994; Korte, 2001: 14–19). Elias was well aware of the difficulty of self-distancing when analyzing a historical configuration to which he himself belonged (Elias, 1989/1996: 1–2). Nonetheless, his own position within it situated him amid the relations in which processes of generational self-identification and differentiation unfolded. Korte accordingly interprets Elias’s early experiences as sharpening a question that was itself generational in character and occupied him for decades after: “Why am I forced to live in a certain way, distinguished from my contemporaries and different from my parents’ generation and from my forefathers?” (Korte, 2001: 16).

between unequal social groups gradually become less steep. Generational relations are thus situated within the same analytical horizon as other twentieth-century emancipatory shifts towards a more balanced configuration of power between established and outsider groups. In *The Civilizing of Parents*, Elias traces one expression of this process in parent-child relations, showing how the decline of formal symbols of parental authority and other markers of hierarchy accompanies a reduction in the power differential between parents and children (Elias, 1980/1998). In this respect, generational relations represent a changing figuration in which older and younger generations are mutually dependent but possess unequal power chances, with latent tensions potentially developing into open conflict as the power chances of younger generations increase over time.

The processes that most strongly affect power balances between generations are opening and narrowing of channels of opportunity, which represent “the kernel of social conflicts between the generations” (Elias, 1989/1996: 243–244).⁴ Older generations usually monopolize control over power chances and regulate the channels of opportunities available to younger generations, who may thus experience a “cutback in life chances and chances for meaning” (Elias, 1989/1996: 246). By “meaningful life”, Elias refers both to channels for upward mobility and career paths and to individual non-career opportunities for meaningfulness, which, above all, include political engagement and pursuit of ideals through which younger generations could imagine and shape a meaningful future. Although older generations can regulate the channels of opportunity in their own interest to some extent, their opening and narrowing is largely an unplanned process dependent on socio-historical circumstances such as wars and revolutions, which tend to accelerate the succession of the generations, while long periods of peace may slow it down (Elias, 1989/1996: 243–244). As these channels to life chances and chances for meaning narrow, “the latent generational-tension and the associated conflicts intensify”, although the forms taken by generational conflict remain “extraordinarily variable” (Elias, 1989/1996: 245). To illuminate these arguments, he develops his approach through a comparison of youth movements in the Weimar Republic of the 1920s and 1930s, and in the Federal Republic of the 1960s and 1970s.

In the Weimar case, the defeat in war and the collapse of the imperial order in 1918 resulted in profound structural changes in German society, with increasing power chances of the organized working class and their representatives as formerly outsider groups. This redistribution of power in the new republic was experienced as humiliation, especially among the younger men whose expectations had been formed within the Wilhelmine middle-class and military milieu. Since the post-war reductions of the army simultaneously narrowed access to the military career that many of these young men considered to be the only one that accorded with their abilities and status expectations, participation in

4 As Connolly observes (Connolly, 2019: 6–7), Mannheim had also alluded to this process, although to a more limited extent, as he argued that the political orientation of younger generations depends primarily “on whether or not the existing social structure and the position they occupy in it provide opportunities for the promotion of their own social and intellectual ends” (Mannheim, 1952: 297).

the Freikorps and other right-wing groups and student associations was the path that provided a substitute for it (Elias, 1989/1996: 246). Their relationship with the older cadres in the army was deeply ambivalent, as the latter blocked their desired career path and chances for meaningful life and opposed all attempts to end the parliamentary regime by force, yet still represented the worldview they identified with (Elias, 1989/1996: 246). The generational conflict between them therefore remained in its latent form and was redirected into violence against groups they associated with the rise of the new republican establishment, such as organized labor, left-wing activists, and Jewish middle-class circles (Elias, 1989/1996: 247). It was Hitler who later transformed Freikorps' "elite barriers" into a broad populist movement through the concept of 'German race' which "opened the door for many more people than membership of the 'good' noble and middle-class society" (Elias, 1989/1996: 197).⁵

In the Federal Republic of the 1960s and 1970s, Elias identifies another instance of generational conflict centered around young men and women of predominantly middle-class backgrounds, many of whom were students or former students active in the extra-parliamentary opposition. While the underlying dynamics of the conflict was similar to that described in the Weimar Republic, its political content was fundamentally different, now articulated through a left-wing political register and directed against the established middle-class generation of their parents and grandparents which they regarded as individualistic, repressive and morally compromised (Elias, 1989/1996: 198–199). Although Elias also noted narrowing opportunities in some professions and facing "anonymous constraints of the state bureaucracy", he places greater emphasis on the struggles in the political sphere dominated by the older generations who claimed a monopoly over legitimate channels of political action and left little room for ideas that the younger generations perceived as meaningful (Elias, 1989/1996: 248–250). Extra-parliamentary organizations and mass demonstrations provided alternative channels of political action towards a meaningful future defined by social justice and against inequality and oppression, with some groups gradually shifting towards more violent practices (Elias, 1989/1996: 199–200). Furthermore, the generational conflict and the search for meaning contained a specific moral dimension related to the unresolved legacy of National Socialism. For the pre-war generations, facing the Nazi past was merely a matter of "personal guilt or innocence", whereas younger generations, despite being personally innocent, deeply felt the stigma attached to the German nation and increasingly began to question how such a regime had become possible (Elias, 1989/1996: 251–253). The authority of their parents' and grandparents' generations was therefore questioned not only because these generations restricted channels of opportunities and meaning, but also because they were perceived as directly or indirectly responsible for the rise of Hitler and as insufficiently confronting the legacy of National Socialism in post-war German society (Elias, 1989/1996: 252–253; 272–273).

5 A similar pattern of narrowing career chances in the Weimar Republic can be identified among young generations of other middle-class professionals, some of whom later formed a radicalized generation unit within the National Socialist movement (Peukert, 1987, as cited in: Bude, 2010: 429–430).

Discussion: Why Elias Matters?

Elias's significance and contribution to the sociology of generations become clearer when his work is read against the background of the limitations that subsequent research identified in Mannheim's approach. As already suggested in the introduction, Elias can be read as extending Mannheim's insights by developing several issues that *The Problem of Generations* had left open and unresolved. Contemporary sociologists drawing on Mannheim have repeatedly shown that the concept of generations itself is notoriously difficult to operationalize, since methodological implications of his approach largely remain underdeveloped. As Bude summarizes, despite the classical reference to Mannheim's essay, there is still no agreement on how generations are formed or how they are to be identified (Bude, 2004: 108). Some scholars have even pointed to epistemological inconsistencies of the essay with respect to the premises of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, arguing that rather than "setting out immediately from the scientific concept of generations", Mannheim's own approach would first require analysis of how certain social relations come to be understood as specifically generational, "as relations of difference and connection between generations" (Matthes, 1985: 364–365). In her critical appraisal of Mannheim, Rosenthal similarly notes that he "remains, to some extent, bound to a relatively static concept of generations", and therefore argues for developing further his discussion of the interactional constitution of generations, proposing that generations and their units are formed "in an interactional process with other generations" (Rosenthal, 1997: 58). This concern is also found in later attempts to move beyond age-cohort conceptions towards approaches that place "social relations and processes" at the center of generational analysis (Edmunds and Turner, 2005: 561).

While Mannheim leaves underdeveloped the relational and practical mechanism through which shared generation location is translated into "generation as actuality", that is, how "individual members of a generation become conscious of their common situation and make this conscious the basis of their group solidarity" (Mannheim, 1952: 290), we argue that Elias's understanding of generations as firmly grounded in this relational premise, with his analytical vocabulary being correspondingly processual, provides a basis for reconstructing the emergence of generations and a shared sense of generational belonging. He describes the relations between older established and younger outsider generations as marked by "mutual, but unequal and highly complex, dependencies" (Elias, 1989/1996: 276). In the analyses of the Weimar Republic and the Federal Republic, it becomes apparent that the formation of generations occurs at the intersection of the biographical positions of young people, a particular historical context and changing power balances between younger and older generations. Elias's work could therefore be read as anticipating later conceptualizations of the intertwining of biographical and historical time within a shared generation location (Pilcher, 1994: 490; Corsten, 1999: 257–258; Leccardi and Feixa, 2010: 12).

As already indicated, the question that follows is how specific experiences and relations come to be perceived as generational. Bude argues that generational belonging is “initially and mostly defined not by identity markers, but by markers of difference”, since people are often unable to say which generation they belong to, but are certain about the generation they do not identify with (Bude, 2010: 426). The process of generational differentiation has been further elaborated through “discourses of difference” (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014: 168) and “generational semantics” (Corsten, 1999), pointing to discursive practices by which both generational boundaries and generational self-reference are articulated. Generational differentiation proceeds alongside generational self-identification, expressed through a distinctive generational “we-sense” within which shared experiences acquire the meaning of generational belonging (Bude, 1997, as cited in: Corsten, 1999: 258). This vocabulary resonates closely with Elias’s use of “we-identity”, “we-image” and “we-feeling” in *The Society of Individuals*, where identification with a we-group is closely tied to its collective self-image and the emotionally charged sense of belonging (Elias, 1987/2001).

In Elias’s reflections on the dynamics of generational conflicts, it is possible to trace how generational consciousness emerges through self-identification and differentiation, which appear as two analytically distinct but closely related dimensions that make the process by which a generation takes shape empirically observable. Just as within established-outsider figurations, generational we- and they-images themselves operate as resources of struggles over power and thus contribute to either reproducing or challenging the existing power balance (Elias and Scotson, 1965/1994: 21–22). Generational self-identification and differentiation are therefore grounded in the structural configuration of generational conflict, with the narrowing of career and political channels and diminishing chances for a meaningful future providing the basis of conflict that is experienced as generational through discourses, moral evaluations and practices (Elias, 1989/1996: 244–245). In line with Bude’s argument, when discussing the cases of the Weimar and the Federal Republic, Elias notes that “in neither case did the young opponents have a clear picture of the form of society which could satisfy their desire for meaning. But they knew exactly what they did not want” (Elias, 1989/1996: 257). Generational differentiation, particularly when it rests on a negatively charged they-image shaped through struggles over power chances and meaning, may precede the emergence of a clearly articulated generational self-identification. For young middle-class generations of the 1960s and 1970s, this negative reference was directed towards the political and moral worldview of the fathers’ and grandfathers’ generations⁶ with the term ‘fascism’ providing the discursive frame within which the legacy of earlier ruling generations fused with the worldview of the contemporary established middle-class generation to embody “the symbolic counter-image of the meaning-bestowing objectives of their own endeavours” (Elias, 1989/1996: 231). Marxism and its derivatives, by

6 It is worth noting that Elias links changes in individual parent-child relations with the broader transformation in intergenerational relations, whether in the wider society or in its particular strata (Elias, 1989/1996: 240).

contrast, provided an ideological and interpretative framework of generational belonging as “it facilitated a decisive distancing from the atrocities of their fathers, and promised entry into a new, just world.” (Elias, 1989/1996: 230). This is consistent with Rosenthal’s argument that “social worldviews – or habituated ways of relating to the world – are constituted not within a generation alone, but through intergenerational dialogue” (Rosenthal, 1997: 58). Elias develops this point by distinguishing between generational chains marked by continuity, as in Weimar Germany⁷, and those in which younger generations define their worldview in opposition to older generations, as in the Federal Republic.⁸ He further observes that discursive frameworks through which social actors interpret conflict may obscure its generational dimension, arguing in the case of the Federal Republic that “behind the ideological use of class conflict stands the reality of a generational conflict as a driving force” (Elias, 1989/1996: 201). Additionally, apart from discursive practices, Elias noted that a sense of generational self-identification and differentiation also takes shape through collective action, stating that for young people who participated in the student movement and extra-parliamentary opposition “communal activities, communal living and mass demonstrations all gave the participants not only a feeling of belonging together, but also the feeling of having a meaningful goal” (Elias, 1989/1996: 199). These practices can thus be read as forms of generational displaying that function as a mechanism through which self-identification and differentiation unfold simultaneously, as young people publicly enact values and orientations that distinguish them from older generations while shaping and consolidating their we-image and sense of generational belonging (Vlajić, Tomanović and Stanojević, 2026: 42, 50–51).

Identifying intragenerational variation, particularly with respect to the ways generational formation is related to class and other socio-structural categories, is one of the key concerns of empirical research on generations (Scherger, 2012: 5), and one that is integral to Elias’s analysis. Although he clearly recognized the gendered character of generational experience, he devotes substantially more attention to the intersection between class and generation. Elias points out that in both the Weimar and the Federal Republic the articulation of generational conflict was driven by young people from middle-class backgrounds. He considers class and generation as analytically inseparable categories, arguing that social power shifts cannot be understood without considering the particular classes whose relations are changing, but neither, in many cases, can they be explained without taking into account “the generational conflict and the problems of generational change in general” (Elias, 1989/1996: 244).⁹ Despite

7 Elias uses the Weimar case to note that the resentment of a younger generation towards the established older generations of its own class may be displaced onto other social groups, which then come to constitute the opposing “they-group” (Elias, 1989/1996: 247).

8 The issue of intergenerational transmission within families is also addressed in *The Established and the Outsiders* (Elias and Scotson, 1965/1994) and *The Society of Individuals* (Elias, 1987/2001).

9 This position stands in direct contrast to the approaches that subordinate class analysis to generational analysis (e.g. Edmunds and Turner, 2002).

not using Mannheim's concept of the generation unit, in his analyses, especially of conflicts in the Federal Republic, Elias recognizes that "the problems which arise here are class-specific" (Elias, 1989/1996: 244), since young people from middle- and working-class families had different experiences over the life course and therefore different potential for collective action and response to the same socio-historical context.

In his account, generational conflict is more prevalent within the middle class than within the working class. His explanation for the predominance of middle-class youth in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s lies in class-dictated differences in their life course trajectories. Limited opportunities for their upward mobility meant that, for most working-class children, the education-to-work transition led them into adult life broadly similar to that of their parents. It was precisely the "relatively taken-for-granted character" of this continuity that satisfied their desire for meaningfulness (Elias, 1989/1996: 470). On the other hand, middle-class children followed a more reflexive life-course trajectory. They remained longer within education and outside established adult roles.¹⁰ Their relative independence from the parental household, together with the prolonged transition to professional life, made questions of their future and meaning "a very pressing and central issue" and the quest for that meaning "accordingly more conscious" (Elias, 1989/1996: 202). This structural position made a collective political response more likely by giving them "a better chance of organizing themselves as a generation, and of closing ranks with their own goals, ideals and patterns of behavior against the older generations" (Elias, 1989/1996: 272). By acknowledging the importance of the life course perspective for the research on the formation of generations and their relations, Elias develops Mannheim's argument a step further, in a way that resonates with later approaches in which "the similar age in which the members of a generation experience important events only becomes meaningful because it is closely linked to similar transitions and related biographical challenges" (Corsten, 2001, as cited in: Scherger, 2012: 8), an insight later extended in some interpretations to formative phases occurring also later in life.

The class-specific life-course positions also shape the search for meaningfulness, which lies at the core of Elias's analysis. The experience of blocked opportunities for a meaningful future among young people may generate the potential for collective action. Although what was considered meaningful differed radically between the younger generations in Weimar Germany and the Federal Republic, Elias identifies the same underlying mechanism of generational conflict: "a younger generation searching for a meaningful life for itself and which finds the channels to such a life restricted or blocked" (Elias, 1989/1996: 197). In the Federal Republic, this search for meaning acquired a distinct moral charge, as the possibility of a meaningful future became tied to renouncing not only the Nazi legacy, but any kind of inequality and oppression. Elias identifies a

10 Elias links this prolonged transition to adulthood with the growing complexity of modern societies, arguing that it creates a greater scope for young people to explore different activities, relationships and modes of behavior before entering the more specialized and restrictive roles of adult life (Elias, 1987/2001: 123–124).

similar pattern of generational conflict across other post-war European societies, which he interprets in the light of the collapse of European global supremacy and younger generations' questioning of the ideals and values of their fathers and grandfathers, embodied in colonial rule and other defining features of the pre-war order.¹¹ This should be understood as closely intertwined with, and read against the background of, ongoing changes in codes of behavior and feeling, which involved conflict over the "formal rituals of behavior" (Elias, 1989/1996: 41) and differences between generations' respective normative patterns expressed across many social practices and relations, most clearly in sexual morality. As Elias notes, the younger post-war generation was particularly unwilling to accept inherited civilizing principles as injunctions of the older generation and instead experimented with different forms of sexual relations (Elias, 1980/1998: 205). These normative conflicts therefore provided further grounds on which younger generations differentiated themselves from older generations and consolidated their we-image and sense of belonging. Generational conflict was thus one of the arenas through which informalization unfolded, and the less unequal distribution of power that remained after the conflict altered the conditions of subsequent generational relations (Elias, 1989/1996: 41–42). By connecting the formation of generations to changes in everyday norms and relations, Elias ultimately moves the analysis beyond the political and intellectual domains of self-awareness emphasized by Mannheim (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014).

Conclusion

This article aimed to reconstruct a figurational approach to the formation of generations by drawing on Elias's analyses of generational conflict. Although Elias did not explicitly theorize this process or develop specific concepts for addressing it, we argue that his analyses provide a basis for identifying two analytically distinguishable but interrelated dimensions key to the formation of generations and generational consciousness: generational self-identification and generational differentiation. These dimensions develop within the socio-historically specific power relations between older and younger generations, particularly in the process of opening and narrowing channels of life chances and channels of meaning. However, these structural conditions acquire generational significance only through the ways they are experienced from particular class positions and along young individuals' specific life course trajectories, which play a decisive role in whether and how different groups within younger generations interpret them as a generational issue and develop a collective generational response through social movements. These different biographically and historically shaped experiences provide the basis for the emergence of political and moral

11 Connolly points to the relevance of Elias's insights for discussions of the emergence of transnational and global forms of generational consciousness (e.g. Edmunds and Turner, 2005; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2009), particularly his reflections in *The Society of Individuals* on the lag that may arise between changing social conditions and the social habitus of particular individuals and groups (Connolly, 2019: 15).

discourses through which younger generations interpret their position and struggles over life chances and meaningful futures and construct a generational we-image in opposition to a they-image of older generations. Such discourses contribute to shaping a sense of generational belonging and difference, as well as the potential for collective action. Through collective practices of generational displaying, younger generations further enact and reinforce their generational self-identification and differentiation. Therefore, discursive and displaying practices constitute the underlying mechanism through which shared experiences become the basis of a conscious sense of generational belonging and difference, and through which a social conflict comes to be understood as generational in character.

This analysis suggests that Elias offers an empirically grounded framework for examining the formation of generations and generational consciousness. His reflections follow the lines of Mannheim's theoretical framework and extend it at some of its least developed points, while also resonating with dominant contemporary perspectives in the sociology of generations. In this sense, given the limited attention his work has received within the field, Connolly's judgement remains particularly apt: Elias has not so much been "written out of research on the sociology of the generations" as he has "yet to be written in" (Connolly, 2019: 17).

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