
Mannheim, Karl 1893-1947

Karl Mannheim, a European sociologist, developed the field of the sociology of knowledge. His theoretical work on how people’s understanding, ideas, and knowledge of the world are influenced through their membership in generations (or birth cohorts) was an important contribution to the sociology of the life course.

Mannheim was born into a Jewish family in Hungary, where he studied and then taught at the University of Budapest. During his tenure there, Hungary experienced political turmoil from 1918 to 1920: A short-lived Communist government was followed by a military uprising, violence, and the restoration of the monarchy. Mannheim left Hungary, initially moving to Austria and then to Germany, where, in 1921, he married a Hungarian psychologist, Juliska Lang. Mannheim held academic posts in Germany at the universities of Heidelberg and Frankfurt. The rise of Nazism forced Mannheim to leave Germany in 1933. He spent the rest of his academic career in England, working as a lecturer in sociology at the London School of Economics and, later, as a professor of education at the University of London.

Mannheim’s (1952) theoretical essay on generations is the most relevant publication for understanding his contribution to the sociology of the life course. For Mannheim, knowledge (defined by him as a style of thought or worldview) is socially conditioned by membership in a generation (or birth cohort). People of different generations therefore have distinct and “definite modes of behaviour, feeling, and thought” (p. 291).

For Mannheim (1952), a person’s generational membership arises from the “biological rhythm in human existence—the factors of life and death, a limited span of life, and ageing” (p. 290). Mannheim emphasized, though, the overriding and ultimate influence of social factors, so that biological aging must be understood as embedded within social and historical processes. This view became a foundation of the life course perspective.

In Mannheim’s (1952) analysis, it is during the life course stage of youth that experiences, ideas, and impressions gel together, stabilize, and form “a natural view of the world” (p. 298). Individuals then carry this with them throughout the remainder of their life course. People are therefore crucially influenced by the sociohistorical context that predominated during their youth. In this way, adult generations are formed, each with distinctive historically determined worldviews. Mannheim therefore suggests that, at a given point in time, adults in different life
course stages will not share the same view of the world because of different formative experiences during their youth.

Mannheim proposed that in order to share generational location in a sociologically meaningful sense, individuals must be born within the same historical and cultural context and be exposed to particular experiences and events during their formative years. More specifically, Mannheim argued that not every member of a generation will be exposed to exactly the same experiences because of variations in geographical and cultural locations during youth. He also recognized that whereas some groups within generations will actively participate in the key social and cultural events of their time, other groups will not. Moreover, among actual (or active) generations, responses to social and cultural events can differ in that they may be oppositional or supportive.

Mannheim's (1952) work on generations also illuminates links between the life course and social change. Mannheim proposed that the likelihood of a youthful cohort developing a distinctive worldview (i.e., of becoming a generation) is dependent on the pace of social change. In turn, generations are regarded by Mannheim as a key element in the production of social change. The “fresh contact” of new adult cohorts with the preestablished social and cultural heritage always means a “changed relationship of distance” and a “novel approach” to doing things (p. 293). The progression of social change is made smoother by the presence of intermediary generations, which act as a buffer between those generations with the greatest difference in worldviews or styles of thought. In times of accelerated social change, however, when the tempo of change quickens, the new generations have even greater opportunity than the natural, gradual changeover allowed by the aging and eventual death of all members of a birth cohort.

Beyond his contribution to life course studies via his work on generations, Mannheim writings engaged more broadly with the social conditioning of knowledge, including the structural positioning of intellectuals and their role in society. Linked to this, Mannheim’s work increasingly became concerned with the planned social reconstruction of societies through the application of social policy (including education) to counter both totalitarianism and individualism and sustain democracy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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