**The Problem of Generalizing Generation**

***Abby Day***

Abstract: Research into the religious beliefs and behaviors of children, young people, adults and elderly people prompt questions about the way ‘generation’ is understood in the social scientific study of religion. What seems to the researcher at first to be shared values and beliefs on broad moral issues appear, at least to older people, to be lacking amongst the young. Such a different in perception could be an example of a ‘generation’ gap where generation is perceived to be, by theorists such as Mannheim, a shared identity by people sharing a social history. Extensive literature in both anthropology and sociology is explored to find how such concepts are understood and operationalized. Detailed ethnography amongst elderly Anglican women begins to problematize such notions as boundaries of ‘generation’ blur with gender.

Key words: generation, belief, youth, elderly, Anglican, Mannheim.

For the past ten years, the question of what religion means to people of different ages has been central to my work. In this paper, I summarize some of my key findings and reflect more generally on an anthropological understanding of ‘generation’.

**A Longitudinal Perspective**

Between 2003 and 2005, I explored the beliefs of a representative sample of the UK population, interviewing and through observation studying people aged from their early teens to early eighties living in towns and villages in northern England. Rather than asking them obvious religious questions like “do you believe in God” I asked them open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews to encourage them to talk about their lives, for example: what was important to them, how they knew right from wrong, what made them happy, sad or afraid, and who or what helped them during those times, how they thought the universe began and what they thought happened to people after death. My final question asked them what religious category they had chosen on the 2001 UK decennial census in answer to the question “what is your religion?” My research questions were designed to reflect themes in the study of religion such as belief, self-identification, modes of belonging, existential concerns and formations of ontologies. The research involved about 250 participants, including students at three schools, and I relied mainly on the texts of 68 recorded, transcribed interviews, chosen to represent a range of people aged from 14-83, evenly split by gender and skewed, as with the general population, towards middle and working classes.

My interpretive framework focused on my informants’ narratives and methods of constructing meaning to explore what people believed and how they discussed those beliefs. There is a long-standing anthropological debate about the difficulties in researching belief with many scholars (for example, Needham 1972; Ruel 1982; Lindquist and Coleman 2008) recommending we do not use that term, or at least use it with great caution. I have argued that a term so central to many people’s identities, and to public discourse about religion, needs to be reckoned with and contextualized (Day 2011; 2013).

Through extensive reading and re-reading of transcripts and notes, I traced themes, tropes and motifs that helped me structure what I described as my informants’ “belief narratives”. Those stories were then analyzed through exploring aspects arising through inductive analysis: content, practice, sources, salience, function (and during the second phase of the longitudinal study) time and place.

The main finding was that people ‘believe in belonging’, privileging salient, trust-worthy human relationships over gods or institutions, and often selecting a religious identity to strengthen other forms of social identities. That finding helped explain why people who were otherwise non-religious might self-identify as Christian on the census, particularly during a period when many expressed anxieties that other religious identities, such as Muslim, were threatening an English-Christian national identity. In 2009 I returned to re-visit my informants to investigate through interviews and participant observation how their beliefs and identities may have changed as their lives—especially teenagers’—had altered. I formally re-interviewed 22 of my original participants and also developed more intense fieldwork relationships, permitting me access to people’s homes, social events, places of worship, schools, and other significant sites. I found that most people described their lives and beliefs as relatively stable. As in my original study, the most important variable that helped explain why people believed different things was the source in which they did or did not trust. Most people, for example. said they thought they derived their sense of morality from parents, while a few said it was God-given and learned at church.

A major finding was the negative perceptions older people had about young people. It was striking in my interviews that the sense of affection and respect young people accorded to their elders was not reciprocated in my interviews with older people. What I uncovered did not conform to a model of generational rivalry as proposed by, for example, Eyerman and Turner, who described such conflict as “a structural aspect of social struggles over limited resources” (1998:299). There seemed, rather, to be an air of disapproval. According to many of my older informants, young people today are immoral, disrespectful of authority, and even threatening Things were different, they told me, when they were young. When my older informants expressed views that young people had no respect for ‘others’, what they usually meant by ‘others’ were older people like themselves. This view contrasts with my findings where I found that the kinds of moral issues young people discuss are the same as those described by older people. Young people believe in treating people well, not killing or stealing, doing well at school and getting a job afterwards or continuing to university. Even the most radical amongst them respect authority when they perceive it to be legitimate. While most of the young people I interviewed spoke little of religious beliefs, they usually expressed strong beliefs in other values of importance to them, mainly respecting and nurturing family and friends. When, for example, we discussed what was most important to them in their lives, or who they thought they got their beliefs from, ‘mother’ was mentioned most often. Grandmothers also featured strongly amongst young people, particularly as someone who would listen to them and support them unequivocally. The role of grandparents, and grandmothers in particular, as active agents in the process of religious identification has been insufficiently researched, but see, for example, Copen and Silverstein (2008) for a discussion of a longitudinal study on religious socialization over three generations. The importance of parents to young people became particularly clear when we discussed their worst fears: young people did not often express fears of dying, but rather a fear of losing a parent.

What became apparent to me was how much certain forms of relationship meant to young people. They were selective about the people in whom they believed, often rejecting the possibilities of re-uniting with, for example, absent and abusive fathers. My study illuminated many dimensions possible in the term ‘family’, and also how people change their understanding of family within their lifetimes, and also sometimes within the same interview. This is similar to a major finding in a long–running longitudinal study of families in the United States (Bengtson et al. 2002) that a belief in the importance of family was sustained over the three generations they studied, although the meaning of family changed, becoming progressively more informant-directed.

I found that young people’s beliefs were co-produced, through participating with family and friends in creating and maintaining beliefs. This observation problematized ideas about private, individualized beliefs, with beliefs being explicitly located, produced and practiced in the public and social realm. It seemed evident from my discussions with young people that few participated in conventional religious practices, most were indifferent to the idea of organized religion or deities, and they tended to find happiness and meaning in their relationships with friends and family. Evidence from larger, survey-based shows that this trend is found elsewhere. In the UK and most Euro-American countries, young people seem to be less religious than their parents, suggesting a generational decline in religiosity, insofar as being religious is measured by predominantly Christian beliefs and practices, such as church attendance, belief in doctrine, self-identification and personal religious practice, such as prayer. Other youth-focused studies corroborate my findings (Clydesdale 2007; Mason, Singleton and Webber 2007; Regnerus et al. 2004; Savage et al. 2006; Smith and Denton 2005). Those studies, from the United States, UK and Australia, all found that young people derive meaning, happiness and moral frameworks from social relationships. But, as was the case with my older informants, many academics dismiss those beliefs as insignificant. Smith and Denton concluded (ibid.:156-8) that teenagers today live in a “morally insignificant universe” where decisions are not guided by or grounded in larger, invisible, sources of either religion, philosophy or other supra-mundane moral forces. Savage et al. (2006: 170) suggested that young people’s “midi-narratives” are insufficient, because: “true happiness requires a meta-narrative which can only be found in a Christ like way of life, for in him alone is true happiness to be found”. I did not find, particularly when I returned with my re-study, that young people were drifting through an a-moral universe or were unable to cope with life’s challenges in the absence of grand meta-narratives. Further, I did not under-value the legitimacy of young people’s beliefs but argued they were just as significant and meaningful as religious beliefs, although differently located.

My findings that young people locate the source and maintenance of beliefs in their social relationships complicated some of Smith and Denton’s (2005: 143) conclusions that describe youth being “nearly without exception profoundly individualistic, instinctively presuming autonomous, individual self-direction to be a universal human norm and life goal”. (See Smith and Snell 2009; Smith et. al. 2011 for similar comments). Those conclusions match some theories advanced by other sociologists popular in the discipline.

For example, Bauman describesanabsence of:

the supercommunal, “extraterritorial” grounds of truth and meaning. Instead, the postmodern perspective reveals the world as composed of an indefinite number of meaning-generating agencies, all relatively self-sustained and autonomous, all subject to their own respective logics and armed with their own facilities of truth-validation. (1992: 35)

Bauman may be taking a theoretical leap too far. It is one thing to appreciate that the world is composed of others’ views, and another to create meaning and logics in an apparently autonomous fashion. I asked Jim Smith (pseudonym) my teacher-gatekeeper, if he had perceived any generational shifts during his teaching career of more than 20 years. His view was that there had been a postmodern turn:

If you want to use the word postmodern, might be the word that fits…children realize that they live in a pluralistic world, that there are lots of options there and people are free to choose very minority options and be treated with respect.

I would note that choosing minority options and respecting others may be practices ground in strong forms of relationality, rather than individualism. For example: in her study of teenage witches in Britain, Cush (2010: 86) found that young people’s concept of individuality was bound up in concepts of respect and choice, rather than selfishness or narcissism; Lynch (2002) concluded that the young clubbers he interviewed were seeking “authenticity” and Harris (2010) wrote of young pilgrims to Lourdes rejecting institutionalized religion at home, but seeking collective belonging on their pilgrimage. Their sense of communal identity was often strong. Singh (2010) reached a similar conclusion in his study of how young British male Sikhs were adopting the turban as a symbol of ethnic identity, often learning about the practice not from their parents, but from their friends, and wearing it as a symbol of belonging.

There is also evidence of racism decreasing in the UK and USA generationally. This decrease, measured in surveys conducted since 1900, has been attributed to improved education, increased social diversity and general societal discouragement of racist discourse (Ford 2008). Those changes may also reflect a desire for more acceptance of pluralism and socially-diverse modes of meaning and authority. Younger people are also less likely to express national pride than previous generations, argue Tilley and Heath (2007), because they have been growing up in more diverse areas and are more familiar with mixed, nuanced identities.Such studies corroborate my findings, I suggest, and the arguments that social relationships inform and are informed by who or what are seen as legitimate forms of both belief and belonging. Religion, and the accompanying faith in super-human authority, is perhaps one of those institutions that young people no longer feel is a legitimate form of authority. If their highest regard is for people with whom they have loving, reciprocal relationships then it would likely only be those forms of expressive, social religions that they would find legitimate. The above observations led me to consider more about what may be a ‘generation gap’ or at least a strong perception gap between the young and the old. To explore that further, I will summarize now some key theories about ‘generation’.

**Generalizing Generation**

Academic theories on generation differ by discipline and, perhaps as a consequence of that disciplinary location, by definition. The most important distinction is whether scholars conceive of generation in terms of an aging process, or as a manifestation of shared values and interests unique to a strand of the population. In anthropology, while there is a recognition of the difference between a date of birth and a kind of identity, anthropologists tend to avoid larger generalizations. Within anthropology there is terminology to distinguish amongst age-relevant groups, yet the meaning in use relates more to custom-specific analyses. An ‘age grade’ refers to a social category based on age, such as infant or elderly. An ‘age set’ refers to a distinct kind of grouping of age grades created, usually through initiation rites, across kinship lines, producing close life-long ties, shared responsibilities and shared histories. Anthropological direction shifted in the twentieth century from descent and alliance issues, studied largely as kinship within tightly bound groups, to an understanding of culture as a symbolic system not always tied directly or universally to biology (Kuper 2008; see also Parkin and Stone 2006; Peletz 1995).

Probably most influential in the North American kinship turn was David Schneider (1980) who showed that a strictly genealogical approach based on biology did not conform to the experiences and views of kinship understood by his informants. While Schneider’s contribution had a lasting impact, Fenella Cannell (2005) draws attention to the neglected role (at least in scholarly discourse) of religion in genealogy. Through her fieldwork with American Mormons, Cannell came to see how religion was rooted in their everyday and familial practices. Even heaven is permeated with family and sexuality, with Mormons believing that kin will be reunited, reproduction will recur and generations will replicate in perpetuity.

The sociological literature on generation is also notable for lacking reference to religion, and is sometimes troubling for an anthropologist of religion for two other features as well: although scholars occasionally discuss internal variations within “generations”, many reports continue to project a uniformity within a temporally constructed stratum and lack diversity or reflections on issues of representation; second, cognate terms such as cohort and life-cycle are often conflated (for sociology articles unraveling such concepts as cohort, aging and generation see Ryder 1965; Riley 1971; Buss 1974; Laufer and Bengston 1974; Glenn 1976; White 1992; Eyerman and Turner 1998; Edmunds and Turner 2002; Öberg et al. 2004. Biggs 2007 offers a unique perspective by claiming that clear concepts are necessary to form appropriate social policy; see also McDaniel 2004 for discussion of generation, gender and welfare).

The issues concerning representation are probably of most concern to the anthropologist accustomed to more finely tuned ethnographies and aware of recent conversations concerning potential for multi-sited and multi-vocal ethnographies ( Marcus 1985; Coleman and von Hellermann 2011). Different members of a social unit, be that a family or a nation, have different perspectives related to their own histories and locations in other socially constructed categories, such as age, class, gender, and status. The ethnographer always grapples with this issue, as Wassmann notes: “It becomes necessary to study individuals or categories of people in their own right rather than merely as some kind of cultural 'subunits.'" (1995:176).

Despite its weaknesses as an analytical tool, “generation” has caught the public imagination. A series of books published by political journalists Neil Howe and William Strauss were astonishing in their breadth, from 1584-2069 (1991; 1993; 2000) and detail. Their best-selling success, easily dismissed as pop-psych, is instructive as it speaks to a desire to understand, principally, “ourselves” as temporally-constructed inter-subjective actors with a defined identity. Burnett (2010) theorized this by placing temporality at the center of generational conscience, usefully demonstrating how ideas of generation are inevitably tied to socially constructed ideas of personhood and time (see also Corsten 1999). Van Gennep (1960) originally proposed that movement in various stages of personhood could be analyzed through distinct ritual moments. Halbwachs (1992) was instrumental in showing the importance of shared rituals of commemoration in embedding social memory and identity.

Most sociological research on “generation” situates the core of its ideas in the work of Karl Mannheim, particularly his original essay *The Problem of Generation* (1952 [1923]). His work was taken up by sociologists of knowledge and aging and, as a result, several other theories on aging are (inter)related with theories of generations, for example, life course transitions and generativity (Erikson, 1968). Mannheim makes it clear from the outset of his paper that although the job of analyzing generation is potentially dangerous, it must fall upon sociologists more than any other discipline:

Any attempt at over-organization of the social and cultural sciences is naturally

undesirable: But it is at least worth considering whether there is not perhaps one

discipline—according to the nature of the problem in question—that could act as

the organizing center for work on it by all the others. As far as generations are

concerned, the task of sketching the layout of the problem undoubtedly falls to

sociology. It seems to be the task of *Formal Sociology* to work out the simplest, but

at the same time the most fundamental facts relating to the phenomenon of

generations (Mannheim 1952 [1923]:164).

An attribute of Mannheim’s “formal sociology” is the use of large-scale, survey-based, statistically analyzed data. While these may produce broad, aggregated pictures of “generation”, statistics alone do not offer insights into processes or meanings (see Becker,1992; Becker and Hermkens 1993), and will also mask internal heterogeneity. While one of the most notable sociologists operationalizing the idea of generation, Shmuel Eisenstadt (1956), tried to account for that, the result was inevitably overly-generalized and unsuitable for the kind of fine tuning more familiar to anthropologists. In his review in the *American* *Anthropologist* of Eisenstadt’s book, John W Bennett observed that for all its useful data, the book “may not make sense if one is not inclined toward sympathy with such broad analytical classifications” (Bennett 1957: 722).

Mannheim’s key idea is that a generation is not simply a cohort of people born at roughly the same time, but a collection of people born at a time of historical note and even trauma that has shaped their identity. He distinguishes between a generation and a “concrete social group”, such as a family or a tribe, which exists through knowledge of each other—a “union of a number of individuals through naturally developed or consciously willed ties” (ibid.:165). Mannheim’s reading of class reflects Marxist-essentialism, rather than subjective self-identification: “Class position is an objective fact” (ibid.:166). Belonging to a generation, alternatively, does require a self-awareness, he says, because it is that awareness of that cohort’s location in a certain time and place that makes it a generation.

From this point, the concept of generation becomes more complicated, as Mannheim tried to counter the potential weakness of over-generality by distinguishing between generation as location and generation as “actuality”. He introduced the concept of a “generation unit” for analysis by saying that it was not the fact of people being born at the same time, but that they experience the same kind of historical events in the same location that creates a unique “stratified” consciousness. He qualifies this further by saying that the generation location is defined by historical and “cultural region” (ibid.:182) and that “generation as an actuality” (ibid.) is further defined by “*participation in the common destiny* [italics his] of this historical and social unit” and, further, by those who are exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization (ibid.:183). This rather narrows the range of those qualified to be defined as a generation and implicitly implies an elite. Being an actual generation only depends on participation, not consensus. There may be many generation units within an actual generation who oppose each other but in so doing are nevertheless “oriented” towards each other and therefore are an “actual” generation (ibid.:187). According to his definition, generations are not defined by biology or time spans of, say 30 years:

Whether a new generation style emerges every year, every thirty, every hundred

years, or whether it emerges rhythmically at all, depends entirely on the

trigger action of the social and cultural process. (ibid.: 191)

The term “generation” is therefore tied intrinsically to an idea of participation, and at least in Mannheim’s terms acknowledges that not everyone born at the same time can participate equally in the cultural and intellectual life of the time.

Klatch’s book (1999) on the 1960s took up precisely this point about internal variation, telling the story of young conservatives who grew up in the 1960s alongside the hippies and radicals. While other members of their cohort were smoking dope and listening to Bob Dylan, they were drinking ginger-ale and reading Ayn Rand. Mannheim tried to account for this variation in generations by allowing for differences experienced by ‘generational units’. See also Cornman and Kingston (1996) and Riggs and Turner (1998) for discussion of variations within the so-called “baby-boomer generation” and Elder 1974 for insights into children born in the “great depression”.

I can illustrate this tendency with examples from my current fieldwork. The Second World War spawned terms to describe members of that so-called generation. In the UK, the term ‘air-raid generation’ (and in the United States, the G.I. Generation) is sometimes used to describe people who were young in the War and endured the hardship of constant deprivation and fear. Even so, variations render such concepts of commonality unworkable. One of my informants, for example, told me about her younger sister and brother dying in a bomb blast; another of my informants said she never heard a bomb nor saw an air raid shelter, but she did enjoy going to dances with the Canadian soldiers stationed nearby.

The issue becomes even more complicated when we add variations such as ethnicity, social class or gender. The elderly women I study were actively involved in the workplace before and during WW11, but largely returned to the domestic sphere once the war ended. They were therefore less visible in the public, political sphere and may be considered less active, but only if we discount their unpaid labor that kept their husbands and children active and healthy, their homes clean and, for many, their churches busy.

The idea of generation thus far involves an apparently shared event affecting a cohort in a manner at least similar enough to produce a ‘collective conscience’, to which they will respond in a manner that earns them the description of an ‘active’ as opposed to a ‘passive generation’. What is important here, suggest Edmunds and Turner, is the self-awareness of that generation of its own particular identity and consciousness:

But the social processes that shaped the generation of the trenches, the depression and the post-war boom are not simply determined factually by a specific time. In a general sense, we may define a generation as an age cohort that comes to have social significance by virtue of constructing itself as a cultural identity (2002: 7).

Edmunds and Turner take the position Mannheim set up, but moved it further to stress the global nature of today’s generations (somewhat the opposite point of Cornman and Kingston [1996] who argued for narrowing any generational study to a small community). Further building on Mannheim, Edmunds and Turner develop the idea of an actual generation, as Mannheim described it, to a distinction between active and passive generations. The latter model, taking as its focus of analysis the ‘generational unit’ conceives of people as belonging to a particular cohort of other people who are distinguished by their shared ideas, values and behaviors.

A popular proponent of this idea was Douglas Coupland’s novel *Generation X.* He introduced readers to young people defined by their attitudes and practices and spawned numerous eponymous or at least similar works (see, for example, Lipsky 1984, Mahedi and Bernadi 1994, Nelson and Cowan 1994; Beaudoin, T. 1998; Flory and Miller 2000; Pardun and McKee 1995; Rushkoff 1994). Wade Clarke Roof (1993; 1999) captured this approach to generations by exploring what he argued were shared attitudes, beliefs and behaviors emerging at a particular time in American society and influencing a specific cohort of post-war babies born in the 1940s.

Those sociological approaches reflect an interest in large-scale, macro societies and issues of societal change. Further, they tend to reflect classic structural-functionalist norms by assuming a clean system of interdependence, rather than one that is rather messier and itself in a state of flux. The struggle to be more specific and located about the people we study is a familiar one to an anthropologist, but Mannheim was sternly critical of what contribution anthropology can make. Mannheim’s critique of an anthropological approach is, however, rooted in a particular time without more recent advances through, for example, cognitive theories, postmodern approaches or developments in kinship theory as described above. Mannheim viewed anthropology as wholly focused on biology and fixed roles.

Using several examples from my empirical work, I will now explore how a sociological view of ‘generation’ becomes difficult to apply in anthropological fieldwork.

**A Case of Anglican Elderly Women**

Older women attend church disproportionately: 4 per cent of the general population attends the Anglican Church regularly; about 10 per cent of women over 60 attend and less than 2 per cent of women under 60. Evidence suggests that this is a unique generation that will not be replaced: women under the age of 60 attend church much less often than their mothers and their attendance has not been increasing over time.

And yet, as Prelinger (1992) noted: “Oddly, few so far have addressed the situation of women in the mainline or asked what it may have to tell us about the mainline’s widely analyzed “decline”.” I wondered who this ‘pre-war’ generation is, who attend the mainstream churches every Sunday, who polish the brasses, sing in the choir, attend council and Synod meetings, organize fund-raisers for the church and community groups, visit vulnerable people in their homes, and whose often invisible labor not only populates but sustains the physical space of the church. The majority of women who attend the Church of England are over 60, and this cohort-specific segment seems to be connected to particular historical contexts, most obviously marked by war, and connected to other political, social and cultural movements: post-war, 1950s’ revival of domesticity, 1960s rebellions, and changes in legislation and practices concerning abortion, divorce and sexual orientation.

For the past 14 months, since March 2012, I have been conducting a two-year ESRC-funded ethnography specifically focused on Anglican women born in the 1920s and 1930s. To understand the women’s religious lives meant becoming as much of an insider as possible, and I therefore became a member of an Anglican church in large town near London. I joined the congregation in order to immerse myself in the women’s church-related lives and, with their knowledge and consent, to record observations and engage in conversations related to my research. Attending Sunday services most weeks, and regularly attending mid-week services and Bible study as my schedule permits, means that I have come to know the members of the congregation by sight and most by first name (there are 93 on the Church’s electoral roll, although only 30-40 attend weekly). I have also joined the rota for various scheduled tasks, such as serving refreshments after the services, helping out at regular social functions such as church lunches and fund-raising sales, and being a member of the ‘Church Watch’ team that opens and remains in the church for two hours during non-service times to allow the general public to enter. To continue maintaining a comparative perspective outside the one church, I also visit other Anglican churches and cathedrals (including the American Episcopal and Church of Scotland churches as they are part of the same global body, the Anglican Communion) when I am away from my field-site and volunteer occasionally at their functions. After only a few of such visits, in England, Scotland, the USA and Canada, I realized how I knew I had entered an Anglican church: the people look the same. Similar age, clothing, make-up, accessories, hair color and style, way of walking, sitting, talking. The word ‘conservative’ best describes this, and led me to consider more the value of “habitus” Bourdieu (1993). And yet, as I become closer to the women, I am more often struck by their heterogeneity. Educational backgrounds, former occupations, marital status and economic circumstances differ more than I had expected. Even the image of the consistently religious woman has been challenged. My emerging findings reveal some general themes but also considerable variation. Most, but not all, of the women I know through the churches have been going there all their lives. As one woman said to me “I haven’t known anything different”. Two other women I have come to know had started going to church as a result of an intense spiritual experience, rather than a childhood upbringing, and have never stopped. Another left after a personal trauma and then, many years later, returned.

Nonetheless, a distinct grouping seems to be visible. As I carefully record my observations at each event, my first notes are always best guesses about gender and generation: how many people; how many under 50; how many women; how many men; how many women over 70. The notes follow the same pattern week after week and within every (mainstream) Anglican church I have visited over the past 14 months: smallish congregations of between 25 and 50, rarely anyone under 50; mostly women; about a third are women over 70. Bauman (1992: 45) pinpoints a problem that resonates with the main one provoke d by literature and my observations: as I look around the church and count the numbers in the congregation and the glaring imbalance of hair color the question constantly forming in my mind is, as he puts it, why is there “the present inability of the social system *to secure its own reproduction* [his italics] in its old ‘classical’ form?” He argues that the most significant change from current to previous social forms is from the person-as-producer to the person-as-consumer, with consumption imbuing the moral and social significance once attributed to labor. The key motivating force, he continues, is no longer a desire, noted by Durkheim, to join in collective awe of something beyond ourselves, but to immerse ourselves in the sensual pleasures of consuming through all its material forms: food, sex, drink, dance, glittering objects, and clothes.

This is not to say that a desire for materiality did not exist pre-consumer culture, nor that the pre-consumerist culture did not exhibit a need for social approval through material gain. The difference, Bauman suggests, is that such desires were not valorized. To center on oneself in a material physical way was not done; it was not just in poor taste to flaunt wealth through conspicuous consumption, it was immoral. (See also Rawls, 1971: 107 on the morality of generations, where a ‘responsible generation’ is one that manages its resources so not to diminish chances of future generations.)

The elderly women I talk with would partly disagree. Whenever we discuss why there are fewer young people in church nowadays, they usually say it is because people are busy shopping, doing housework, or taking children to various other activities. When they were younger mothers, they tell me, they would take their children to church and then return home to a family lunch. Sunday was a family day but nowadays, with women working and so busy, Sunday is more a day to catch up on shopping and other chores. To that extent they may accept that “shopping” has taken over church attendance, but I never hear their description of shopping or consumerism imbued with that Baumanian moral tinge. It’s just work, usually on behalf of others.

Linked to the above discussions arising from my longitudinal study was partly emerging a sense that this generation might be different, particularly in their performance of duty and self-sacrifice. When examined more closely, duty was not a simple, one-dimensional concept. Duty, in the sense I observe, experience and hear it expressed, is deontological (coming from the Greek *deon,* meaning ‘duty’) and in philosophical, notably Kantian terms, the opposite of Consequentialism. Carol Gilligan (1982) presented an alternative to the two main moral theories of Kantian and Consequentialsim by proposing an ‘ethics of care’ theory, based on her evidence and conclusions that women’s moral judgments are based on empathy. She further argued that that care-based ethics are under-valued in society, should be taught, and should be performed equally by men. There is a strain of essentialism that runs through this analysis: “care” itself must be a social construction, operationalizing another construction, such as “empathy”, and undoubtedly having different manifestations and characteristics depending on place, time, class, culture and so on. The kinds of duties-of-care I observed did not, I suggest, conform to that model and seemed rather to be more rooted in performances of obligation and reciprocity. I observe and experience the women’s performance of duty in two ways: work duty and moral duty.

**Work duty** is a description of responsibilities that are carried out in the church, such as Sunday greeting at the door, the church-opening rota outside of service times, or the weekly cleaning, and are generally referred to in speech and in writing as ‘duties’. The “work duties” to which the women commit are held to be absolute, and non-negotiable following commitment. The rota is usually displayed in churches in a prominent place, with people’s names against tasks and dates. The heading is often phrased as ‘Rota of Duties’.

My emotional response to becoming part of the “rota” was a feeling of belonging and also of accountability. When, for example, I mentioned that I was going away for a few days to Italy, the woman with whom I shared duties of church-opening that month instantly asked if this would “interfere with your duties”. I hastily explained that I had already checked my schedule and, no, it would not. My emotional reaction of near-effrontery was a reminder of how I was becoming naturalized in my own fieldwork—her question had offended me, suggesting in some way that I was not cognizant of my work obligations, had therefore no sense of proper duty and, and, possibly more important, that I did not belong. Those who have duties are seen to be part of the church activity and therefore of its people; to fail in those duties would be an admission of being an outsider. The work duty schedules our regular attendance, either in church service or in church related activities. Feeling accountable for attending or performing Christian acts is not, however, reducible to elderly women, as I will discuss below.

**Moral duty** appeared to me to be a moral obligation to others who have sacrificed something on our behalf. This ‘moral duty’ is a more generalized sense of obligation to honor someone or something, such as Jesus or nation, who commands the duty through their own sacrifice. This idea was summed up for me recently in the following terms: “Oh dear, sometimes it’s not easy being a Christian”. The woman uttering that was becoming impatient, as was I, as a visibly drunk and foul-smelling man asked for yet another cup of tea at an event when the church was open to the public. Not easy, perhaps, but she poured his tea with a smile, as her Christian duty demanded.

The moral duty extends to one’s country, and the sacrifices made by their fathers, brothers and husbands who served in the war, and displayed through marked moments of allegiance to the Queen and country on Remembrance Day and during, in 2012, celebrations for the Silver Jubilee. These moral duties are also embedded in the prayers led by individual lay members, in a hierarchical form every Sunday, beginning with prayers for the national and international church and church leaders, followed by prayers for the Queen and Royal Family, for political leaders, for ill people and for countries in trouble. Moral dutiesare also performed by maintaining awareness of people in the congregation who may be ill or otherwise in crisis. The conversation before or after the services usually centers on exchanging such information—how someone in hospital is faring, why someone else has not been in church lately, whether or not we have seen so-and-so. This is the kind of emotional labor that others have also recognized as almost wholly gendered. I would argue, following, for example, West and Zimmerman, that processes of social differentiation have assigned faith and other emotional labors to women. That women are responsible for society’s moral health or downfall is a familiar one, argued Brown (2000). This relates to a gendered, Christian discourse that located piety in femininity from about 1800 to 1960. He argued that the age of ‘discursive Christianity’ collapsed during the 1960s when women stopped subscribing to that discourse and “the nature of femininity changed fundamentally”. While I think Brown has a powerful argument about the nature of discursive Christianity, I am not convinced that the nature of femininity has changed fundamentally for all women. Women do still look after their husbands and children, even while working outside the home. Hochschild and Machung’s (1990) ‘second shift’ argument illustrates that women in dual-income households still perform the majority of domestic labor, as well as care duties for their immediate and extended families.

My observation of moral duty extended to the Bible-Study meetings, where those gathered—mostly the elderly women I am studying—took turns to read sections from the Bible and discuss it, sometimes along with another text. The conversation touched on the apparent historical and literary aspects of the piece, before settling into a richer and more animated discussion about the moral implications and applications to contemporary life. This experience resonated with my earlier study of Baptist women’s prayer groups (Day 2005) where I argued that the women’s ‘chatting’ about their prayers and the people involved acted as a form of theodicy, helping to restore faith in their world ruled by their God.

Both work and moral duty come with membership and signal shared values and distinctiveness. Such a sense of duty, however, cannot be reducible to Christian women. Anna Strhan’s recent (2013) ethnography of young Christians in London identified “accountability” as a significant practice for her informants. Nor is it reducible to Christian women. Saba Mahmood (2005) describes how the women she studied in Egypt were motivated by duty. Before continuing with this example, I want to stress that I am not offering a cross-cultural comparison between ‘women in Egypt’ and ‘women in England’: there are far too many potential ways of describing ‘woman’ to suggest such simplicity. As noted in their review of research into such a task, Mukhopadhyay and Higgins (1988; see also Skeggs 1997) conclude that:

First, gender must be studied with reference to historical, economic, social,

and conceptual context; understanding gender requires more than exploring its

relationship to biology and economics. In addition, gender theorists must be

alert to how androcentric and Eurocentric folk views influence scholarship(Mukhopadhyay and Higgins 1988: 486).

A Pakistani-born woman who introduces herself as someone strongly influenced by Critical Marxism, Mahmood ponders a question familiar to many feminists (and echoing Ozorak’s similar question in 1996 about Christian women) as she observes a turn to more strict forms of religiosity in the Muslim world, particularly the “mosque movement”. She introduces her work in the context of feminist relationships to religion and Islam where, she suggests, many feminists believe that “women Islamist supporters are pawns in a grand patriarchal plan” (2005:1). As Mahmood asks : why would such a large number of women across the Muslim world actively support a movement that seems inimical to their “own interests and agendas”, especially at a historical moment, co-inciding with the “Islamic Revival” (roughly since the 1970s) when these women appear to have more emancipatory possibilities available to them? (ibid.:2 ). The women involved in the mosques she studied were younger than the women in my study, mostly in their thirties and forties.

The concept of ‘duty’ describes one of the goals of the mosque movement according to principles of “*da’wa*”, meaning a call or summons. It is also used as a description for women in the mosque movement where it is understood as a “religious duty that requires all adult members of the Islamic community to urge fellow Muslims to greater piety, and to teach one another correct Islamic conduct” (ibid.: 57). Mahmood’s analysis of the piety movement moves beyond the role of women and contested versions of feminism, to a central anthropological concern about the construction of personhood. It also reminds me that concepts such as duty or ‘sacrifice’ are not necessarily experienced negatively or as a form of oppression, despite how they might initially seem through my feminist lens (Strathern 1994).

Further, a sense of duty and caring for others is not even reducible to religious women. Most women I interviewed and observed in my longitudinal study were all working hard in the workplace and home, and emphasized their feeling of looking after others. Viv, 54, a seamstress, described being “good” as “being loving and caring towards other people, definitely. Thinking of others before you think of yourself”. Fran, 26, an advertising executive, said she thought being morally good was “not behaving selfishly or greedily. Evil was something you do for yourself that upsets other people”. Nicola, 37, a care-worker, said being moral was remembering others.

Nicola, cited above, lives with a partner, but she never discussed him in our interview in terms of her role as a parent. She said her purpose in life was “to bring my family up”, to look after her children until they leave home, at which point she will spend more time on herself. Until then, she said, if she had a spare day and no one to look after, she would not know what to do. She explained why:

And that’s because I don’t spend a lot of time on myself. I might have a bath, I might do my toe nails, I might take the dog out, but that’s about it. I don’t really—I can’t remember what I like to do.

Throughout our interview she returned to her narratives about being caregiver, not attending to her own needs, but looking after her family. Laura, a 23-year-old single receptionist who lives with her parents, said that “right is trying to abide by the law and trying to keep everybody happy, not just yourself”. Lindsay, a 14-year-old student, said she prays and she believes God answers her prayers unless it was a “selfish” prayer. When I asked her what she meant by a selfish prayer she said that it would be about something just to do with oneself and not anyone else. Similar findings from another study (Collins-Mayo 2008) amongst 11-23 year old young people in the UK described how young people generally prayed for other people, particularly family.

These reflections from women about their roles are remote from what is sometimes characterized as a selfish generation who want to “do our own thing”, as Bryan Wilson once wrote, referring (2001: 44-45) to the modern family being “split apart” with parents insufficiently present to take a role in the moral inculcation of their children. This, he says, is not only because family structures have changed but also because individuals are being encouraged today to: “discover their own identities”, to “be themselves”, to “do their own thing”. These comment seem to be coded criticisms of women.

**Conclusion**

The experiences in my fieldwork have provoked for me certain questions about how the term ‘generation’ is understood in the social scientific study of religion and raised issues to be resolved.

The main issue is methodological. Tracing changing beliefs, attitudes, values, and opinions over time has generally been the preserve of quantitative social scientists, asking people in established cohorts, panels or waves the same questions every few years to see how their views and values might have changed. Little research into change over time has adopted qualitative approaches and we therefore lack more nuanced, richer insights beyond broad patterns.

An inter-connected issue is how to resist crass generalizations. To understand ‘generation’ becomes only possible when all other variations are accounted for and a specific community is identified. Once that task is complete it will have taken us away from larger, more generalized statements to smaller, more in-depth studies. Throughout the last decade, there is only one major variable I have found to distinguish consistently one group’s beliefs from another’s: the source of authority and power in which they trust and to which they attribute legitimacy and causality.

Whether that differs by age, gender, ethnicity, or other categories, may be difficult to trace in small-scale research, but the depth and nuance of what legitimacy means to people, how they negotiate it and how they perceive their agency within it will only be found through close exploration. Whatever may or may not be labeled by researchers as a category called ‘generation’, it will still be necessary to explore what work the category does.

That leads me to my final point. Who is the person or people constructing the category? Is it the elite member of an age-group who may claim the title of ‘active generation’? Or are they the members of another group who conceive of themselves only in relation to how they define others? Identity theorists would argue that such self-awareness is only possible through awareness of one’s relationship to another (Berger and Luckmann 1976; Hall 1996). It seems therefore plausible that the work of generation-izing is a process of identity building, serving to reinforce boundaries and claims to uniqueness.

Dr Abby Day has researched belief and belonging across three generations for more than 10 years. She is Reader in Race, Faith and Culture at Goldsmiths, University of London, a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Kent, Canterbury, UK and Chair of the Sociology of Religion group in the British Sociological Association. The research described here is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Department of Religious Studies, School of European Culture & Languages, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NF, United Kingdom  [a.f.day@kent.ac.uk](mailto:a.f.day@kent.ac.uk)

*(note to editors – may update email address at proof stage)*

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