

Advancing the Field

Ambivalence: A “Sensitizing Construct” for the Study and Practice of Intergenerational Relationships

KURT LÜSCHER

University of Konstanz, Konstanz, Germany

In recent years the idea of ambivalence has found rising attention in the field of intergenerational relationships studies and practice. It allows one to consider the contradictory dynamics of conflict and solidarity. Starting from the everyday usage of the term, an elaborated definition of ambivalence is developed that includes most of the applications in research and in practice. Before this background, it is suggested to generate for future theoretical and practical work with ambivalence the notion of a “sensitizing construct.”

KEYWORDS ambivalence, generational conflict, intergenerational solidarity, generational policy, socialization, methodology

THE MANIFOLD CHALLENGES OF INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Currently, we can observe a rising and widespread interest in intergenerational relationships in their different personal, social, and political

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Address correspondence to Professor Dr. Kurt Lüscher, Humboldtstrasse 15, CH-3013 Bern, Switzerland. E-mail: kurt.luescher@uni-konstanz.de; www.kurtluescher.de

manifestations. It is accompanied by the awareness, nourished by the omnipresent media, of their contradictory diversity which, in turn, is correlated with manifold developments themselves often imbricated and contradictory in all spheres of globalized postmodern societies. This situation confronts those who work in academic and in policy-oriented institutions with several interrelated challenges. There is a need for an impartial, authentic description of the ways intergenerational relationships are lived. At the same time, these descriptions should also be conceptually grounded so that the study of intergenerational relationships can be related to (or subsumed under) more general concerns of contemporary social and cultural theory. Last, it is desirable that these efforts and their results be linked to the initiatives that aim to promote common activity between the members of different age groups and generations often referred to under the heading of “generational dialogues.”

In this article, I argue that “ambivalence” can be used as a key to the study of intergenerational relationships as they are connected to those three concerns. Expanding the idea of a sensitizing concept introduced into sociology by Blumer (1954), I suggest understanding and using ambivalence as a “sensitizing construct.” I will begin with briefly recalling the two perspectives that have dominated the sociological study of intergenerational relations since the 1970s: conflict and solidarity. I then introduce step by step the concept of ambivalence, starting with its use in everyday life and conclude by proposing a heuristic definition that can serve as a reference for research, theory, and policy. I support this proposal with exemplary results from research.

Such an orientation is also backed by the observation of a particular “generational rhetoric,” as expressed in buzzwords like “intergenerational warfare,” “intergenerational dialogue,” “intergenerational contract,” or “the age burden.” They show just how much the public is preoccupied with intergenerational relations today. The concept of generational rhetoric refers to

the public discourse on how intergenerational relations ought to be lived and assessed. A characteristic of intergenerational rhetoric is its preoccupation with a generalizing antagonistic argumentation between idealization (solidarity) and threat (conflict). Frequently, intergenerational differences are dramatized. Metaphors are also important elements of intergenerational rhetoric. (Lüscher et al., 2010, p. 95)

Anticipating one of my conclusions, I will say that a sensitivity for ambivalences helps clarify the implications of generational rhetoric, which is also a strong concern of practitioners.

RECALLING TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Generational Conflict

There is vast literature on generational conflicts that relates the concept of intergenerational conflict to the belief that dynamic differences between the generations inevitably provoke conflicts. Moreover, conflicts between young and old are seen as more or less intrinsic to the (social) nature of these relationships. Just how they play out is seen as one of the drivers of a system-immanent development of society. Authority relations in family and kinship are considered as “natural” points of departure. The idea of a generational conflict can be traced back to ancient times to the earliest accounts of Abrahamic religions and to Greek mythologies. In most cases, the conflicts are between fathers and sons. At this point, it should be recalled that most of the traditional literature on generations, generational succession, and generational conflicts is gender-biased; it is a male discourse that is somehow paradoxical since the role of kin-keeping and the praxis of caring and caregiving have been tasks commonly assigned to women.

More recently, conflicts between young and old have been identified in the distribution of societal resources and in access to institutions of the welfare state. And we may even say that generational conflicts are perceived in the public as a macro-social phenomenon, at least in those parts of the world where the mutual care of the generations is part of state-supported welfare systems. This view is, of course, inappropriate insofar as the organization of welfare is closely linked to the ways intergenerational relationships with families are lived. Just recall the insight of studies about “crowding in versus crowding out”; for example, the question of whether or not welfare state support substitutes assistance hitherto provided by the family (Künemund & Rein, 1999).

Intergenerational Solidarity

It is against this background that the interest in solidarity has to be seen. The concept of intergenerational solidarity has become popular primarily through research on ageing and intergenerational relations in the United States. In part, this rising popularity is a reaction against the conception of the isolated nuclear family, a general decline of family and kinship, and a one-sided perception of old age stressing the need for support. Frequently, the multidimensional model by Bengtson and Roberts (1991) is referred to. Critics of the concept argue that give-and-take or joint activities can also be forced or performed unwillingly. Also, the dimensions of solidarity may overlap or even contradict, and proposing “solidarity” as the key theoretical reference point for the study of intergenerational relations exaggerates its importance in social cohesion (or social integration). It thereby neglects

the potentials for personal and social development and for pluralism and innovation. Furthermore, crucial aspects of the inner dynamic of intergenerational relations have been disregarded, such as the fact that closeness often goes together with tension and conflict. Likewise, the ways contradictory social conditions shape these relationships are underestimated.

From the perspective of a “sociology of knowledge” we may argue that there are various reasons for the popularity of the concept of solidarity. It was and still is appealing, evidently also in practice, because of its normative implications inasmuch as it refers to the ideal of a harmonious and peaceful world. Critics emphasize the closeness to functionalistic and instrumental thinking and they claim that solidarity ultimately implies a static view of social life and neglects process. Others, in turn, draw the attention to the implicit tendencies toward what Janet Finch calls “prescription in the form of description” (Finch, 1989, p. 237). The protest against the dominance of the solidarity perspective and its annoying immunity against criticism cannot be overlooked in the contributions to the symposium on intergenerational ambivalence launched by the editor of the *Journal of Marriage and Family* (Connidis et al., 2002). These, more importantly, contributed to the growing interest in the ambivalence-perspective as formulated by Lüscher and Pillemer (1998).

At this point, it might also be useful to recall briefly the etymology of the term “generation” because it provides a logical-theoretical link to the concept of ambivalence and its dynamic implications. Nash writes in her article on the “Greek origins of generational thought,” that

our most secure standard for defining a generation rests on the Greek root of the word “genos,” whose basic meaning is reflected in the verb “genesthai,” “to come into existence.” . . . That moment when a child is born simultaneously produces a new generation separating parent and offspring—“gonos ergos genos”—and the very concept educes the paradox of an ever shifting threshold of time. (Nash, 1978, p. 1)

INTERGENERATIONAL AMBIVALENCE

Approaching and Defining Ambivalence

The just mentioned threshold is highlighted by the notion of ambivalence. In the sense of a formal logical argument, we may see here a link to the theoretical foundations of ambivalence, implying the dynamic interplay of difference and communality with autonomy and dependence. Yet, it may be useful to recall first the everyday usage of the term “ambivalence” and then head toward a more elaborated definition. As stated by the Oxford English Dictionary, the term often refers to the coexistence in one person of contradictory emotions or attitudes toward the same object or situation.

However, this daily usage is not restricted to emotions and attitudes but may also include simultaneous cognitive and volitional contradictions. Within the realm of intergenerational relations, examples are provided by situations like decision-making about parenthood, leaving the parental home, the ups and downs of caregiving or closeness and distance in mentoring. The term is now also used beyond the realm of microworlds as shown in the previously mentioned illustrations of “generational rhetoric” or in the debate about social policies.

The few examples just mentioned, which may be easily supplemented by personal experiences, point to a simultaneous awareness of dependence and autonomy such as in caring relationships. In other cases, we can observe personal preferences measured against an ideal of normality such as in the quarrels about whether to become a mother. In this way, social structures, ideas, and ideologies become relevant. Such struggles go on in daily processes of socialization within the family but also with formal education and, for instance, in mentorship relationships. Situations may accelerate into clashes between love and hatred.

In sum, at play in any given situation or a given phase of common action are simultaneously contrasting feelings, thoughts, wishes, and intentions. Yet there are also comparable assessments of social relationships, social structures, societal forces, and interests. In many instances, some or all of these enhance and influence the others and lead to an accumulation of ambivalences. More systematically formulated: First, there is the dynamic search for the significance or meaning of persons, relationships, or objects. Second, the notion of ambivalence draws to our attention that we can be confronted with a specific kind of conflict. This conflict is between options, which are reduced (or which we reduce) to juxtapositions that we attribute to contradictory forces or conceive of as polarizations, often expressed as fundamental differences. These forces can be of different strength and thus are not balanced. We may become aware of social conditions and social situations that provoke such experiences of individual actors (or, under certain conditions, collective actors like an actual family when all its members express an established common view, a so called “we-feeling”).

A third element of the meaning of ambivalence can be derived if we recall the origin of the term. It was first introduced into scientific vocabulary exactly one hundred years ago, on November 27th, 1910, by the Swiss Eugen Bleuler in a psychiatric lecture about “negativism and schizophrenia” as a personality disorder, which is worth noting because it entails an implicit reference, in the terms of the social sciences, to the self or personal identity. It seems, therefore, useful to comprehend ambivalences as referring to conflicting experiences that are relevant for personal identity or for the personality and we can grasp why the idea of ambivalence has received increased attention in recent years, where individualization has become a keyword for the analysis of contemporary social life. The experience of

polarized tensions is also connected to one's ability to act consciously and responsibly and to consider alternatives.

As a consequence, we have to add a fourth element that contributes significantly toward an elaborated definition of ambivalence and its connection to practice. That element is the attention paid to the processes of oscillation between polarized juxtapositions. These are the oscillations, for instance, between difference and similarity, between autonomy and dependence, and between moral obligations and self-interest as well as their concrete manifestations in social situations. These oscillations may have longer or shorter durations depending on whether the polarized contradictions are interpreted as irreconcilable. This specific temporal implication accounts for a constitutional element of an elaborated understanding of ambivalence. It is bound to the frames of actions and to the temporal perspectives within which ambivalences are seen. In practice, the processes of oscillating interpretations generate different strategies for coping with ambivalences.

As a consequence of dealing with ambivalence, we may observe the confirmation of established, traditional patterns of action and of relationships. Or it may generate innovative, emancipatory actions and forms of relating. Or it may mean ending a situation or a relationship or being stuck in endless quarrels or in terminating a relationship by leaving a setting. Or, in the extreme, people may lose the ability to act and enter a stage in which their personality is completely divided. Identifying strategies or forms of coping with ambivalences and observing their different consequences are major challenges of working with the concept of "ambivalence."

In other words, ambivalence is relevant for the relationship between the self and agency. Therefore, the concept is useful for overcoming the old dichotomy between the subject and its (social and physical) environment insofar as the concept interrelates the two in the search for meaning. Such an orientation is not new in itself. It can be traced back, again, generally speaking, to a pragmatist notion of the self. G. H. Mead's theory is perhaps the best known and most widely referred to formulation of this idea in the realm of the social sciences (Mead, 1934). Its nucleus can be seen in his dynamic view of a dialogue between the "I" and the "me." The idea of such a dialogue is, in turn, compatible with the assumption that the subject can develop an awareness of this dialogue, which ultimately implies he or she is capable of seeing himself or herself relating to the other, to a social world, being aware at the same time of a constitutional difference between self and other. The notion of ambivalence confirms this assumption and extends the idea of this dynamic duality into the realm of experience that assumes that the dual dynamic structure of the self implies (or allows for) a sensitivity to similar dualistic structures in experience and their conditioning in the social, cultural, and physical worlds. These considerations, which, of course, can be further elaborated (Lüscher, 2010), are basic for the theoretical understanding why human beings are able to experience ambivalences.

In sum, I suggest the following elaborated definition: The concept of ambivalence refers to certain kinds of experiences. They occur while we search for the significance of persons, social relationships, and facts that are relevant for our identity and our agency, thereby oscillating between polar contradictions in feeling, thinking, wanting, or social structures, contradictions that appear temporarily or permanently insolvable. These oscillations can be asymmetrical, imbalanced, and reflect the impact of powers.

I call this definition heuristic because it is not definitive but encourages empirical validation and transformation. Moreover, in research, not every element is necessarily given the same attention depending on the specific problems or the methodological sophistication, which is a reason to say that the potential of the concept is still to be explored. The definition I propose retains the holistic character of the concept of ambivalence, but it also distinguishes several connected elements: the temporary or enduring oscillating search for the meanings of social experiences, their relevance for the self and for agency as well as their embeddedness in contradictory social conditions and powers.

What Does the Research Say?

In intergenerational research, we can observe an increased interest in the concept of ambivalence since the late 1990s. Both empirically and conceptually, this development can be seen as indicator of a rising pragmatic interest in the study of intergenerational relationships and, concomitantly, a search for authenticity including sensitivity for personal experiences and for practice.

In terms of methods, direct and indirect measures and interpretations have been used. The most complete presentation and discussion of them is still the article by Lettke and Klein (2004), but many of the research articles also contain detailed methodological considerations. Briefly summarized:

- Direct measures in quantitative research are based on standardized questions or statements that use the attribute “ambivalent” or equivalents in everyday speech such as “being torn in two.” In qualitative research, similar prompts have been used in semistructured or open interviews, generally asking about activities such as dealing with obligations, unexpected events like illness or death, or in autobiographical accounts.
- Indirect measures in quantitative research are based on the idea that contradictory answers can be seen as an indicator of ambivalence in scales that address the same topic. A formula proposed by Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin (1995) has been the most utilized calculating procedure until this point. Indirect observations of ambivalence in qualitative approaches use the established techniques, yet it seems to be worthwhile to examine

whether the procedures of the so-called grounded theory imply processes of oscillation, which have a similarity to dealing with ambivalences.

- Indirect measures in between qualitative and quantitative methods consist in the presentation of vignettes, a technique also familiar from research on moral development and moral dilemmas.

In terms of content, it is beyond the scope of this article to provide an exhaustive review of research. I shall thus focus attention on some exemplary themes that document the potential of the concept of ambivalence. There is clearly the question whether the notion of ambivalence can be connected to everyday experiences. Stated plainly, do ambivalences exist? Or, formulated more subtly, are there observations, attitudes, or behaviors that can be subsumed under the concept of ambivalence, a question that depends on our definition of it? One answer exemplary for others can already be found in Pillemer (2004), who summarizes a survey on older mothers' ambivalence with the following two statements: (a) the data offer convincing evidence that parental ambivalence regarding adult children is sufficiently widespread to be of scientific interest and (b) the intergenerational variables are significantly correlated with variables of interest to researchers on the ageing family. This conclusion has meanwhile been confirmed in a large number of studies. Yet we are also reminded that intergenerational relationships are not per se and universally ambivalent, but they have a potential for ambivalences.

An empirically based and conceptually sensitive comparison between ambivalences and solidarity is a major topic among others in a large scale cooperative comparative study of scholars from Great Britain, Norway, Spain, Germany, and Israel titled OASIS ("Old Age and Autonomy: The Role of Service Systems and Intergenerational Family Solidarity," Lowenstein & Katz, 2003; Katz, 2009). It is also representative for a large category of studies that focus their attention on one kind of activity and relationship. In the case of OASIS, it is caregiving and the horizon is even wider. It is caregiving as organized under different systems of social welfare. In this way, the structural preconditions of ambivalence come into the horizon.

Indeed, caregiving offers itself as an obvious topic for exploring ambivalences given the concrete tensions between autonomy versus dependence, self-interest versus other-orientation, sometimes even love versus hate, which has been shown, for example, in an innovative way by investigating how caregivers of older people in Germany, Italy, Poland, and the UK reconcile their caregiving responsibilities with employment (Principi, Hoff, Santini, Hamblin, & Lamura, 2010). Ambivalences, in this case, are correctly characterized as "pending conflict." But they can also be seen as challenges. We are also reminded that ambivalences can change over the life course. It is also a topic that stands both for the intertwining of gender and generation and the predisposition of gender relations for many forms of ambivalent

experiences. Briefly stated, ambivalences may accumulate, which leads to the application of the concept in complex family configurations such as those resulting after divorce (Widmer, 2010).

The emergence of basic differences in the lifestyles of children can be a source of ambivalences in their relationships with their parents. The “coming out” of sons or daughters regarding their sexual orientation is an obvious example (Cohler & Beeler, 1999). A comparable case is the switch to a fundamental religious practice since fundamentalism is formally opposed to ambivalence (Roer-Strier & Sands, 2001).

A phenomenon that is of interest to those engaged in extrafamilial, intergenerational relations is mentorship. Oglensky (2008) has located the ambivalences involved. Her data show that the mentoring attachment rooted in a protective, devoted, affectionate side of loyalty can also compel conformity, suppress dissent, and curb professional growth. The ambivalence stirred up by loyalty issues manifests itself in the nuts and bolts of ordinary interaction. Considering what each other party does for the other and what each party comes to expect from the other in return, conflicts can emerge between strategic, emotional, and normative striving. Ritualized expression of loyalty, involving material and emotional work, reflects the asymmetry of authority in the mentor-protégé relationship.

Most of these findings bring up an important practical issue: How is the experience of ambivalence to be judged and evaluated? By the actors themselves? By the researcher? There are several studies demonstrating positive correlations between direct or indirect measures of the frequency and intensity of ambivalence and personal well-being (Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008). These findings can be interpreted as confirming a connection between ambivalence and identity. Yet it strengthens the understanding of being ambivalent as negative or a burden, as undesirable and unwelcome. First, such a negative connotation imports an a priori normative component into the analysis sometimes even unobserved. Second, a negative connotation of ambivalence prevents us from seeing the liberating and socially creative aspects of ambivalence.

The alternative, of course, is not seeing ambivalence as positive but as given, as a possible reality of life and thus as a challenge. An outstanding example is Roszaly Parker’s study on “mother love–mother hate” where she is able to paint an innovative historical portrait of motherhood (Parker, 1995). In essence, she shows that mothers have always had ambivalent relationships with their children but also developed different ways of acknowledging and coping successfully with these ambivalences.

If we take the previously discussed examples and many other research reports as well, we realize that all examples can be located under the roof of the suggested definition. At the same time, the different studies do not account for or refer to all elements of ambivalence as mentioned. But we can say, in agreement with recent accounts of intergenerational relationships

(such as Biggs, 2007), that after some 15 years of accentuated interest, the idea of ambivalence is now established as a relevant and fertile perspective in the study of the field. And the sensitivity for ambivalences is also attractive for those working in the fields of practice because it warns against a widespread idealization of intergenerational relationships (which partially replaced the idealization of the family). Instead, an awareness and a recognition of ambivalences helps us acquire a realistic view of the manifold and often difficult tasks to be pursued in such relationships while also attempting to maintain them as such. In many instances, we may even observe a liberating effect when realizing that the experiences of ambivalence can lead to new insights and to innovative actions.

WHERE TO GO IN THEORY AND PRACTICE? AMBIVALENCE AS A “SENSITIZING CONSTRUCT”

I would like to conclude with some considerations that combine between theory, methodology and practice by exploring and extending the widespread characterization of ambivalence as “sensitizing concept.” Let us recall that Blumer (1954) introduced the term “sensitizing concept” in an article titled “What is wrong with social theory?” in which he wished to defend and to propagate the perspective of symbolic interactionism. Blumer claimed a need for openness and empirical realism that required

sensitizing concepts, even though they are grounded on sense instead of on explicit objective traits, can be formulated and communicated. This is . . . accomplished . . . instead by exposition which yields a meaningful picture, abetted by apt illustrations which enable one to grasp the reference in terms of one’s own experience. This is how we come to see meaning and sense in our concepts. (Blumer, 1954, p. 9).

Thus, Blumer counts on the power of unprejudiced observation followed by interpretation. Not surprisingly, the idea provoked criticism. But it was also welcomed and went on to stimulate the development of qualitative methods, mostly in close connection with grounded theory (Bowen, 2006; Gubrium & Holstein (2001). From a contemporary point of view, we may even say that, in his way, he anticipated the idea of a performative use of concepts. Without engaging in a philosophical debate on methodology, I think that in connection with the proposed understanding of ambivalence, the idea of a sensitizing concept could be systematically extended. For this purpose, I propose the term “sensitizing construct.” By introducing the term “construct” I would like to emphasize that the general constitutive theoretical elements are to be concretized with features of ambivalence found in the study of intergenerational relations. I will briefly illustrate this intention.

1. Ambivalence as a scientific term did not emerge from everyday language (as compared, for instance, with the concept of the social role). The term was “invented,” constructed for a new purpose. Some encyclopedias see a similarity to “equivalence,” but without reference to Bleuler himself. The two components of the term contain an easily deducible reference to a major component of the meanings to be grasped: “ambi” (twofold) and “valence” (value, force) and the intended usage imply an obvious reference to the idea of a patient as “person.”

The general acceptance of the concept of ambivalence has certainly been facilitated by the widespread usage of polarized juxtapositions or dualities in everyday thinking and speaking and in theory. Here we are encouraged to ask about the dualities applied to intergenerational relations. Which of them go together with the search for meaning of tasks to be solved by members of different generations? Which dualities refer to the meaning of the relationships as such? In concrete situations within families and in other contexts such as neighbourhoods or community projects?

In regard to the latter, we are confronted with a topic still underdeveloped in the study of ambivalence namely, the clash of different perspectives. The image the young and the old have about each other may be not only contradictory but also incongruent due to differences in the historical socialization into customs, the priority of norms and of values.

Another important aspect of intergenerational projects concerns the roles of those who are professionals vis-à-vis those who are in the role of volunteers. Whereas the former may oscillate between empathy and distance, the latter may be stuck between engagement and personal gain. Both parties may differ in the ways they evaluate the tensions between routine and innovation. The uncovering of these ambivalences, often hidden in banalities, may already help us find liveable solutions (Eisentraut, 2007; Sanchez, 2007). This observation is also relevant for the next point.

2. Ambivalences cannot be seen as such. As stated before, this concept serves to characterize a certain kind of experience based on thoughts, sentiments, volitions, actions, relationships, and the impact of social structures. Which of those are labeled as “ambivalent” by the subjects as such? Which are assumed as indicators of ambivalence by the researcher? By the professionals? What procedures exist to uncover and to unveil ambivalences? Do the subjects describe behavioral consequences of the experience of ambivalences? Often, ambivalences have to be uncovered. It is well known that such uncovering, labeling, and tolerance of ambivalences may be topics of family counseling in which intergenerational relationships are certainly an important issue. In extrafamilial intergenerational work, a certain equivalent is provided by supervision. Coaching the sensitivity for ambivalences may turn out more fruitful than transmitting simple rules and tools.

3. The history of the reception and application of the concept in different disciplines go together with the addition and clarification of constitutive

elements interwoven with one another. As an indirect result, we can formulate an elaborated definition as suggested above. Thus, any definition is bound in time and context, serving as a provisional heuristic. In this way, the openness of the concept, a major trait in the idea of “sensitizing,” is preserved. Beyond this, my proposal of a “sensitizing construct” implies the ongoing concern for a dynamic definition, which can serve as a heuristic focus. It also points out the necessity of working with a version applicable to a specific topic while preserving the constituents. Finally, the notion of a construct underlines the theoretical foundations and the connections between disciplines. In this way, the theoretical implications are strengthened without giving up openness.

Another methodological step working with a construct of this kind can be seen in the formulation of a diagram, in itself a systematic, heuristic device, which attempts to combine different dimensions in the experiences of ambivalence such as a subjective dimension between closeness and distance and an institutional dimension between reproduction or tradition and innovation. In this way, typologies of experiencing, acknowledging, and dealing with ambivalence can be developed (see, for instance, Lüscher, 2002, 2004; and, as additional applications of the typology, Letiecq, Bailey, & Dahlen, 2008; Teo, Graham, Yeoh, & Levy, 2003).¹

4. The application in different disciplines and in regard to different topics encourages one to search for empirical and theoretical connections. In other words, as a sensitizing construct, it retains an overarching holistic nature but with a grown differentiation of components. As a result, it serves as a “bridging construct” between disciplines as well as between research, theory, and, not least, practice. Examples of such bridging functions may be found by comparing narratives of ambivalences in fictional literature and their scholarly interpretations and everyday life. Fruitful insights may be gained for the treatment of ambivalences and their relevance for the constitution of identity in sociology, social psychology, and the psychotherapeutic literature.

If we reduce the element of polarization to its most abstract meaning, we may say that the experience of ambivalence refers to the confrontation with fundamental difference and, consequently, dealing with ambivalences requires the acknowledgment of such differences as challenges. In general as this argument seems to be, it may even allow a very practical conclusion in the context of an intergenerational project. There is evidence that among those participating in such projects, some are just attracted by intergenerational differences (Franz & Scheunpflug, 2010, p. 7). From this finding, we can conclude that learning to cope constructively with such ambivalences may be a major goal of intergenerational projects. We can even forward this argument one step further. Learning to accept ambivalences and to deal with them appears to be, at least, in the context of our definition of ambivalence, a major component of socialization and personality development. Looking

at these theoretically funded connections certainly underlines the practical social and political relevance of intergenerational projects.

In this way, the concept of ambivalence may even remind us or suggest that the very notion of a generation may be understood as containing a reference to the personal and societal dynamics of identity building and the capability to act responsibly under concrete social conditions and in concrete social situations. Perhaps studying intergenerational ambivalences brings us closer to understanding the specific nature and attractiveness of intergenerational relationships, specifically that we can and must deal with the individual and the collective differences we share with the other and all others. And we have to deal with these differences in ways that are open to the destiny of future generations.

Such a view opens the horizon for yet another topic: generational politics and policies. It principally concerns the ethical negotiations about “intergenerational justice” and welfare (state) institutions with respect to the redistribution of resources between generations. Normatively, we can say that the creation of intergenerational policy implies establishing societal conditions that allow for the creation of private and public intergenerational relations in the present and future. A major guideline is the idea of intergenerational justice. On the one hand, such policy should guarantee the development of a responsible and community-oriented personality; on the other, it should assure social development as a whole (Lüscher et al., 2010, p. 114ff).²

I would like to close on a personal note. The study of intergenerational relationships is somehow special because we all are living them daily in the family, with our kin, in the workplace, and in our cultural and political commitments. What are the connections between these personal experiences and our professional views? The problem, of course, exists in many professions, especially those including advising and consulting. There, it is also discussed, and there we find institutionalized practices such as supervision. Interestingly enough, among those studying intergenerational relationships scientifically (as well as in family studies), this topic seems to be suppressed on account of the idealization of claims for objectivity in science. But how do we really handle this issue? Of course, we do not allow ourselves to extend our personal experiences and insights into our interpretations or even into theoretical generalizations. But, perhaps, we may consider looking at the problem from the other side by asking: Can we subsume our personal experiences under the theoretical propositions that we formulate in our scholarly work? For we may become aware of some instances in the experience of ambivalences in our own professional work.

Whatever the concerns, questions, doubts, and even our ambivalences about what our own ambivalences may be, we cannot think them without experiencing ourselves as subjects, as beings who rely, explicitly, or often implicitly, on the notion of a self. For “self” is a way to refer to

the responsibility we attribute to our actions as well as to the conduct of our relationships with close or distant others and, in turn, with ourselves. Therefore, if we accept the fruitfulness of the idea of ambivalence as a guiding idea for our research, our theories, and our practices, we are taking a position in the still ongoing debate in the social and cultural sciences about the necessity of the idea of a responsible subject. It is certainly more than a coincidence that this question and the answer will arise within the concern for intergenerational relationships.

NOTES

1. The instruments, in German and in English, of the Konstanz studies and a deeper discussion of the module are available from the author.

2. Here is a reference to a trilingual compendium (German, French, English) on “Generations, Intergenerational Relationships and Generational Policy,” published by the Swiss Academy of the Humanities and the Social Sciences. Additional version in Spanish and Italian are in preparation. For downloads see: www.kurtluescher.de.

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