Change Agents and Generational Relationships: A Reevaluation of Mannheim's Problem of Generations*

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Abstract

Existing literature on the 1960s student movements identifies movement partici-pants as examples of what Mannheim referred to as "generation units." It is ar-gued here that this use of Mannheim's term is misleading and inadequately tests his understanding of intergenerational relationships and social change. Longitudi-nal and cross-generational data are presented which support a critique of the gen-eration unit concept as applied to social movement participants. An analysis of these data calls for an examination of the way in which political socialization may act as a tie between generations while facilitating collective efforts at social change.

Since the student unrest of the 1960s a growing body of literature has examined the political orientations and behavior of former student activ-ists. Nearly all of this research confirms the maintenance of liberal to radi-cal values among former activists and identifies the levels and types of political activity which separate activists from their non-activist peers (De-merath et al.; Fendrich and Tarleau; Jennings and Niemi,a; Meyer and Maidenberg; Nassi and Abramowitz; Whalen and Flacks). Several authors claim that these data confirm the presence of what Mannheim called gen-eration units. In this paper I argue that prior research on former student activists has been too quick to employ Mannheim's terminology. The re-sult has been a consistent neglect of important theoretical issues regarding socialization and social change as well as inattention to a fundamental disagreement between Mannheim and the empirical work on 1960s stu-dent movement participants.

Mannheim's Problem of Generations

In his 1927 essay entitled "The Problem of Generations," Mannheim addressed the question of how cultural consistency is maintained across generations. In the first half of this essay, he proposed that the continual production of new generations is inherently problematic for the transmission of a prevailing culture. New generations experience historical conditions differently than do older (parent) generations, and in this difference lies the potential for marked social change. Mannheim identified the change potential imbedded in generational succession when he wrote that persons belonging to the same generation share a "common location in the social and historical process" thereby "predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience and a characteristic type of historically relevant action" (291). The emergence of new generations produces individuals "whose attitude towards the heritage handed down by (their) predecessors is a novel one" (294).

For Mannheim, what is "characteristic" and "novel" about thought, experience, action, and attitude is the probability that all may depart from those held by members of an older generation. Intergenerational *discontinuity*, then, stems from adjacent generations' interpretations of the same historical events. Mannheim affirmed this view when he wrote that "the continuous emergence of new human beings (generations) certainly results in some loss of accumulated cultural possessions" and "it facilitates reevaluation of our inventory and teaches us both to forget that which is no longer useful and to covet that which has yet to be won" (294).

Smooth transmission of culture between generations is threatened on two accounts. First, the passage of cultural heritage from one generation to another is always less than complete. Elements of this heritage are lost or discarded, especially as they appear to have little meaning to a new generation which has not participated in the accumulation of this heritage. Second, and more importantly, new generations often interpret sociohistorical events differently than do parent generations, resulting in a conscious *rejection* of available cultural heritage as an adequate interpretation of these events.

The second half of Mannheim's essay turns away from the general problem of cultural transmission and new generations to the process by which that transmission is challenged. During periods of rapid social change, strains towards discontinuity between generations are intensified.[1] Members of new generations often emerge as change agents both challenging traditional interpretations of historical conditions and offering alternative interpretations. Mannheim labeled these change agents "generation units" and defined them as "groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in differ-

ent specific ways" (304). As a result, they are set apart from their peers, distinctive in their interpretation of shared experience. But more importantly, they stand in opposition to older generations and the cultural heritage these prior generations represent. Intragenerational differences highlighted by the existence of generation units are theoretically significant as a source of intergenerational conflict and change. Mannheim's treatment of differences within generations must be understood in terms of his central interest in identifying sources of strain between generations.

Theoretical Issues

Mannheim's concern with the problem of generations and the actions of generation units centers around: (a) disagreement between generations over an existing cultural heritage and proposed alternatives (229); and (b) the likelihood of lasting social change resulting from these disagreements and subsequent conflicts (209). As a theoretical approach to generational relationships and social change, Mannheim's work stands in direct contrast to those who emphasize the importance of political socialization as a linkage between generations. While there is much debate over the strength of this linkage (Aldous and Hill; Bengtson,b; Connell; Renshon; Tedin; Thomas), researchers who have explored it in relation to student movement participants of the 1960s find a clear tie binding activists and their parents (Bengtson,a; Block et al.; Flacks; Keniston; Westby and Braungart; Wood and Ng).

   The difference between political socialization and generation unit conceptual frameworks is fundamental. The one is based on a consensus model emphasizing successful socialization of the young by their elders. The other is rooted in conflict theory and highlights dissensus between generations which leads to youthful rebellion against the socialization efforts of older generations. However, the application of Mannheim's generation unit concept to student movement participants has masked these differences because of the exclusive emphasis which users of this term have placed on within-generation differences without consideration of between-generation differences as well (Fendrich and Tarleau; Jennings and Niemi,a; Nassi; Nassi and Abramowitz). Substantial empirical evidence supports the conclusion that student activists were and still are set apart from their non-activist peers in political orientation, attitudes, and behavior. But such evidence alone is insufficient for an accurate use of the generation unit concept. Do activists also stand apart from *parent* generations? If so, do the differences between generations represent a rejection of parental socialization? Affirmative answers to both questions are required if Mannheim's views of generational relationships and their social change potential are to be confirmed.[2]

Methodology

In order to assess the adequacy of Mannheim's work on generational rela-
tionships and social change, data from the Youth–Parent Socialization
Panel Study (Jennings and Niemi,b) are reanalyzed with special focus on
student activists in the anti-war movement of the late 1960s. The study
provides data from a national probability sample of high school seniors
and their parents first interviewed in 1965 and again in 1973. Included
within the 1,179 parent–child pairs are 119 members of the high school
class of 1965 who went on to college and, prior to graduation, participated
in "demonstrations, protests, or sit-ins," almost all of which were related
to United States military involvement in Southeast Asia.[3] These social
movement participants (P, N=119), their nonparticipant peers (NP, N=
359), participants' parents and nonparticipants' parents (PP, N=119; NPP,
N=359) are compared on eight measures of political orientation.[4] These
include political scales assessing civic tolerance, political trust, and inter-
nal political efficacy; political attitudes towards big business, school inte-
gration, and prayer in public schools; and political partisanship repre-
sented by preferences for 1964 and 1972 presidential candidates and party
identification.[5] An assessment of intergenerational conflict is provided
through answers to questions asking youth to specify the extent of dis-
agreement they experienced with their parents in 1965 and 1973 as well as
a retrospective comparison of parent–child relationships over a five-year
period.
    The longitudinal, within- and between-generation comparisons
which these data allow provide a unique opportunity for determining the
accuracy of the generation unit concept as a locator of intergenerational
conflict and change.

Findings

Figure 1 displays the relative position of each cohort[6] on eight measures of
political orientation grouped into the three categories of political partisan-
ship, political attitudes, and political scale scores for the years 1965 and
1973. An overview of change across this eight-year period identifies three
general patterns important to an assessment of the generation-unit con-
cept and its relation to social movement participation.
    First, a good deal of change occurred for all four cohorts. Over two-
thirds (22 of 32) of the changes between 1965 and 1973 were statistically
significant. This is especially evident in the measures of civic tolerance,
political trust, attitudes towards big business, and presidential candidate
preference. The ubiquitousness of social change supports the interpreta-
tion that between 1965 and 1973 a period effect occurred touching all
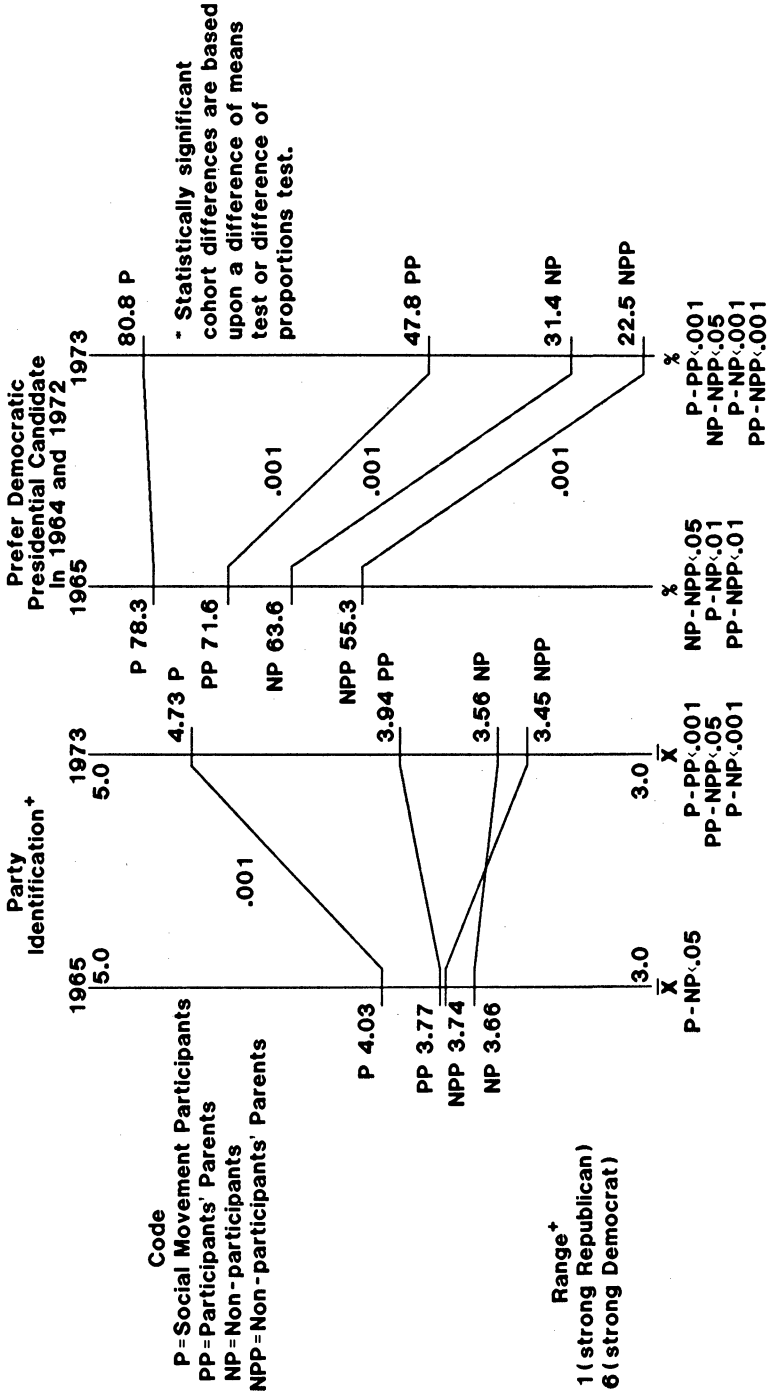
POLITICAL PARTISANSHIP

Figure 1. POLITICAL ORIENTATION MEASURES (POLITICAL PARTISANSHIP, POLITICAL ATTITUDES, POLITICAL SCALES) OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT PARTICIPANTS, NON-PARTICIPANTS, AND PARENTS: 1965 AND 1973*

(continued)
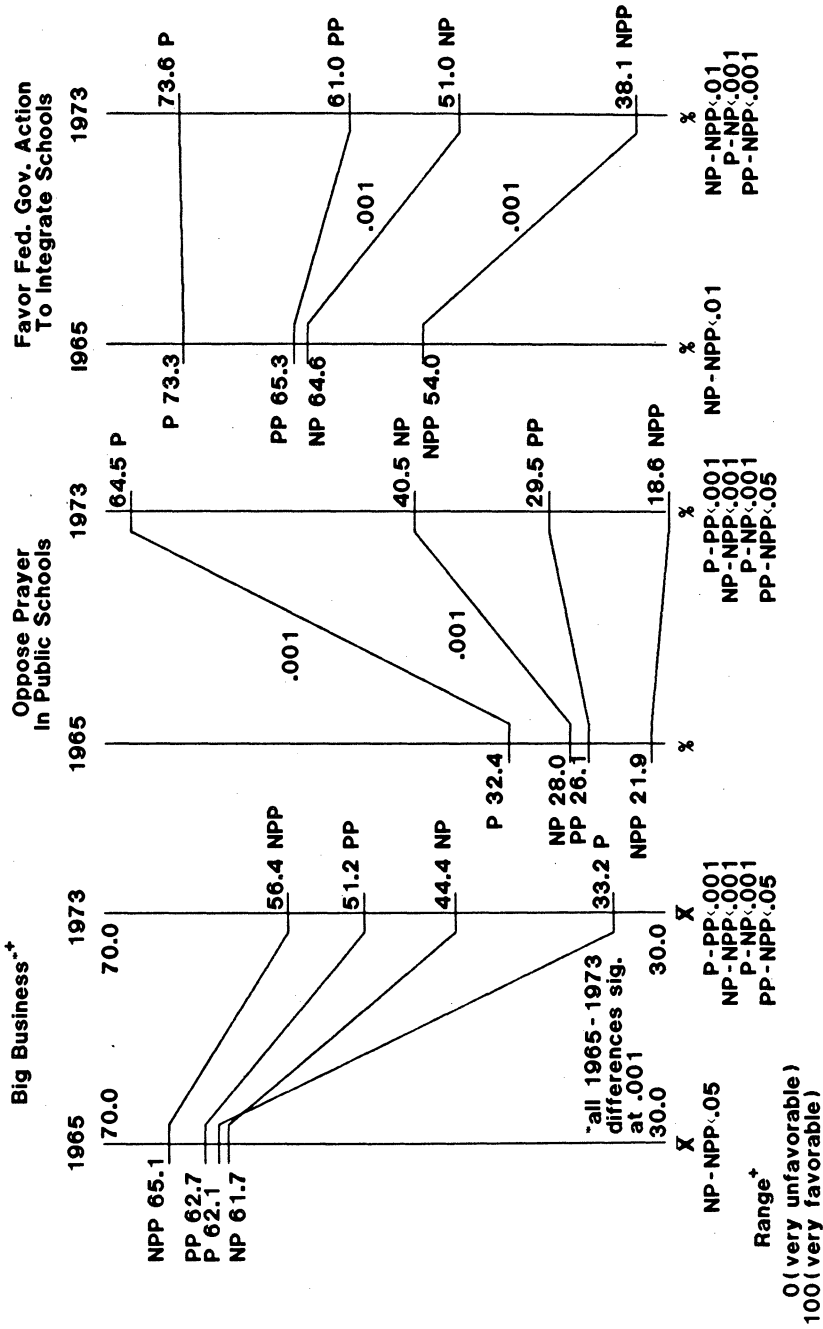
POLITICAL ATTITUDES

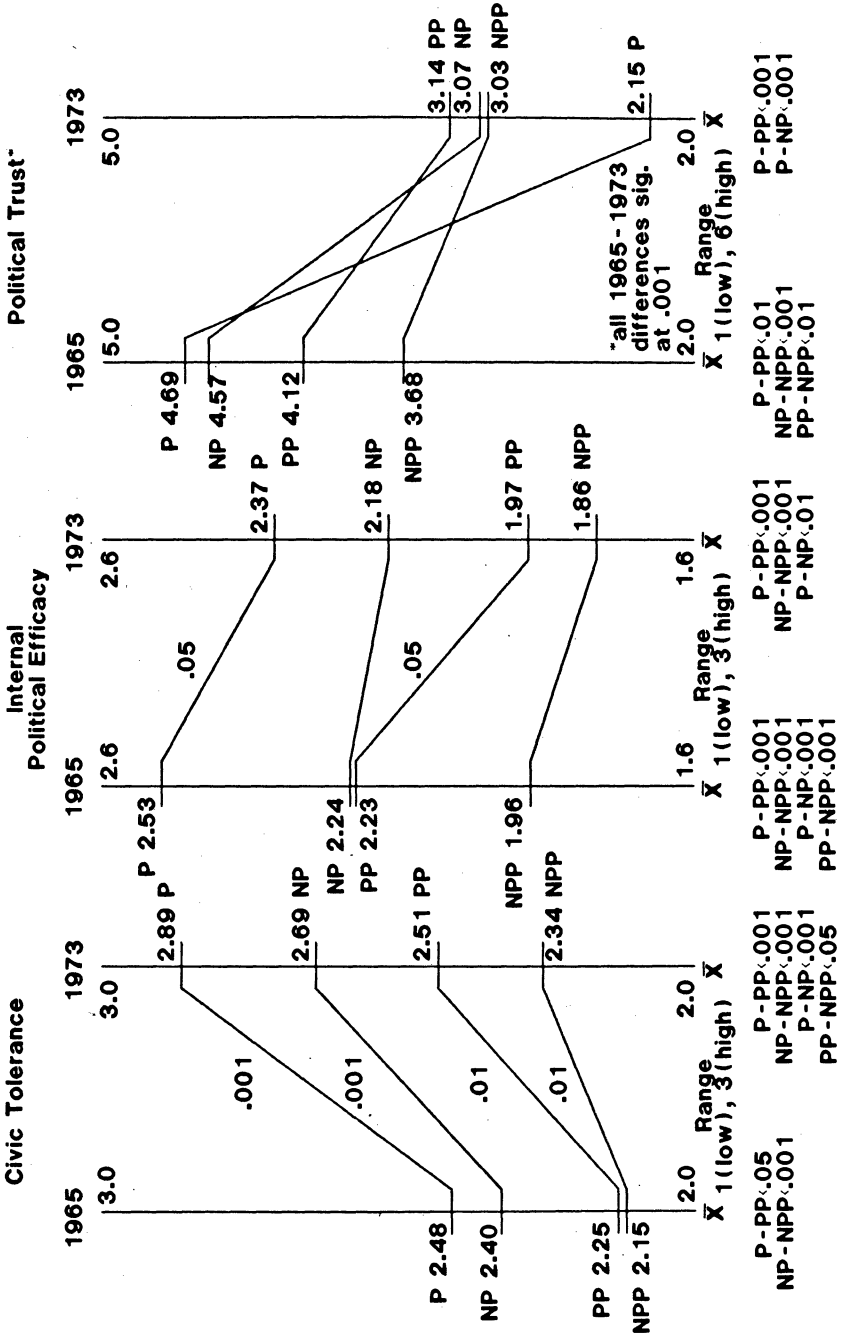Figure 1. (continued)

POLITICAL SCALES

Figure 1. (concluded)

groups, regardless of generation or political involvement. Our interest in social movement participants as a potential generation unit must take into account the fact that persons who were most politically active were by no means the only ones to experience considerable change over this eight-year period.

Second, accompanying this period effect is an increase in the differences between cohorts by 1973. The increased spread between groups over this eight-year period is evidenced in two ways. (1) The range of scores for measures of partisanship and political attitudes increased dramatically: 3.4 times for party identification, 4.3 times for attitude towards prayer in schools, and 6.8 times for attitude towards big business. Political scale score ranges were more stable between 1965 and 1973 with the range for civil tolerance measures increasing by a factor of 1.6 while political efficacy and political trust ranges remained relatively unchanged. (2) Cohort differences in 1973 increased for both within-generation and between-generation cohort comparisons.[7] The number of within-generation cohort differences which reached statistical significance increased from 7 to 14 between 1965 and 1973; statistically significant between-generation cohort differences increased from 8 to 13.

Attitudes towards prayer in the public schools exemplify this trend. Opposition to prayer in the public schools was relatively low in 1965 with a narrow range—low to high— of 10.5 percent. Eight years later the range of opposition spanned nearly half the scale running from a low of 18.6 percent to a high of 64.5 percent. By 1973, social movement participants differed significantly from their peers and their parents; nonparticipants differed sharply from their parents; and the parents of participants differed from the parents of nonparticipants.

Not all changes were as dramatic as these, but the general trend between 1965 and 1973 was one of increasing the magnitude and clarity of difference between cohorts. Small 1965 differences were magnified by 1973,[8] larger 1965 differences were usually maintained. All four groups tended to spread out from one another rather than social movement participants standing alone and apart from similarly placed peers and parents. This fact will become important for our discussion of the condition under which social movement participants may or may not be identified as a generation unit.

Third, while the differences between cohorts in 1973 are generally larger than they were in 1965, the position of social movement participants relative to peers and parents is usually a difference of degree rather than kind (direction). Social movement participants and their parents changed in the same direction on six of the eight measures, the two exceptions being endorsements of federal government action to insure integration of public schools and support for the Democratic presidential candidate. In

both exceptions, social movement participants maintained their 1965 level of support while parents' support declined.

There is no evidence that participants and parents consistently diverge in their political orientations. Social movement participants changed most markedly between 1965 and 1973 in their level of political trust, attitude towards big business, opposition to school prayer, and party identification; but in every instance, that change was in the same direction as the change shown by their parents. By 1973, participants were more Democratic than their Democratic parents, more opposed to prayer in the public schools than their parents who were also opposed, less favorable to big business than their parents who had also developed a less favorable attitude, and low on political trust—a scale on which their parents had also dropped precipitously.

Differences in degree between cohorts cannot be dismissed and may even be large enough to explain differences in the type of political action chosen by different cohorts. But these differences and the political action that may have flowed from them do not reflect a generational conflict during which younger cohorts rejected the sociopolitical heritage of their parents in favor of a new and opposing viewpoint. The data in Figure 1 suggest a rival hypothesis: social movement participation was based on a political similarity between generations wherein the activism of younger cohorts was an extension of political values shared with parents.

Differences between social movement participants and nonparticipants followed a similar pattern with one exception: participants and nonparticipants moved in *opposite* directions in their party identification between 1965 and 1973. This variable is unique in that younger cohorts diverge. They appear to follow paths marked out by parental cohorts.

In light of the three trends discussed above, what is the evidence that social movement participants exemplify Mannheim's generation unit? If the formation of a generation unit is operationalized only by the existence of statistically significant differences between peers and parents, there is evidence that by 1973 social movement participants formed generation units on all three measures of political orientation: political partisanship, political attitudes, and political scale scores. However, if the formation of a generation unit also requires evidence that filial generations reject the orientation of parental generations in favor of an alternative view of the world, these data do not provide evidence of generation units. Similarities in the direction of change between social movement participants and their parents severely question the development of a generation unit among these participants as Mannheim presented the concept.

Cohort comparisons by themselves do not speak directly to generational (lineage) similarities or differences even though the cohorts identified in this longitudinal study have a generational component. However,

Table 1. PERCENTAGES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT PARTICIPANTS (P) AND
NONPARTICIPANTS (NP) DISAGREEING WITH THEIR PARENTS: 1965 AND 1973*

1965		Disagree with Parents	1973	
P	NP		P	NP
56.1	32.4	yes	71.1	45.5
43.9	67.7	no	28.9	54.4
100.0	100.1		100.0	99.9
(114)	(340)		(97)	(279)

*These data are in response to the question:
"Are there any important things about which you
and your parents disagree?"

data taken from within-family comparisons of parent–child relationships
are available, and, like the cohort data, they question the conclusion that
student protests signaled a rebellion against parental generations. Social
movement participants and their peers were asked to describe the level
and topic of disagreement with parents in 1965 and again in 1973 along
with an assessment of their relationship with parents in 1973 compared to
that relationship five years earlier. Table 1 indicates a greater proportion of
social movement participants than nonparticipants disagreed with their
parents in both years. This proportion increased between 1965 and 1973 as
did the importance of political and social issues as a major topic of dis-
agreement (see Table 2). In 1965 social movement participants were more
likely to disagree with parents over political and social issues than were
nonparticipants—13.0 percent compared to 5.6 percent. By 1973 these per-
centages had doubled for participants and tripled for nonparticipants.
Such marked increases are most probably due to the general salience of
political and social issues during this eight-year period and correspond
with the increased polarization of political orientation reflected in the data
of Figure 1.

In light of the fact that social movement participants were more
likely to disagree with their parents than were nonparticipants, the data
in Table 3 are most important. Over half (51 percent) of the social move-
ment participants in 1973 indicated their relationship with parents had
improved over the previous five years compared to 40 percent of the non-
participants. Even though the proportion of social movement participants
disagreeing with their parents increased between 1965 and 1973, inter-
generational relationships improved for a greater proportion of partici-
pants than nonparticipants over the last 5 years of this eight-year period.

Table 2. PERCENTAGES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT PARTICIPANTS (P) AND NONPARTICIPANTS (NP) DISAGREEING WITH THEIR RESPECTIVE PARENTS OVER SELECTED TOPICS: 1965 AND 1973

Topic of Disagreement	1965		1973	
	P	NP	P	NP
Social life & activities	17.4	10.7	1.0	.7
Home life & personal habits	7.8	3.0	8.3	8.6
Future plans	6.1	4.4	5.2	3.2
Political & social issues	13.0	5.6	29.2	18.7
Moral, religious & ethical matters	4.4	3.0	16.7	8.3
Other	7.8	5.3	10.4	5.8
None	43.5	68.1	29.2	54.7
	100.0	100.1	100.0	100.0
	(115)	(338)	(96)	(278)

These data on family relationships do not include information about the intensity of parent–child disagreement nor are specific political issues singled out for investigation. But they do indicate that social movement participants were able to maintain and even improve relationships with their parents at the same time that they developed a political orientation leading to social protest. The fact that relationships between participants and parents improved more than they did for nonparticipants and parents runs counter to the view that the 1960s students broke from parents as part of their political activism. Taken as a whole, the above data suggest the need to revise Mannheim's conception of cross-generational ties as it applies to youth's involvement in collective efforts at effecting social change.

Discussion

The data reported above indicate that a great deal of social change occurred within and between cohorts, over time, and within families. The eight-year period spanned by this study was a turbulent one and no co-

Table 3. SOCIAL MOVEMENT PARTICIPANTS' (P) AND
NONPARTICIPANTS' (NP) RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS IN
1973 COMPARED TO 1968 (%)

Relationship with Parents	P	NP
Better now than 5 years ago	51.0	40.3
Same now as 5 years ago	42.7	52.5
Worse now than 5 years ago	6.3	7.2
	100.0	100.0
	(96)	(278)

hort escaped its influence. Similarities in the direction of change across
cohorts supports the conclusion that social movement participants, non-
participants, and their parents responded in like manner to societal-wide
change influences. Absent from these data is evidence that the student
activists of the 1960s rejected the political orientation of their parents be-
fore or after their involvement in collective protest.

That there were cohort differences which often placed social move-
ment participants at the most liberal end of political orientation measures
may warrant the use of a descriptive term highlighting this cohort's politi-
cal attitudes and behavior. But there is little support for employing the
term introduced by Mannheim which postulates filial generations aban-
doning the ideas and ideals of parental generations in favor of alternative
perspectives.

Data on parent–child relationships further questions the existence
of youth's rebellion from parents. Social participants as well as nonpartici-
pants disagreed with their parents over political issues more in 1973 than
in 1965, but participants stated that their relations with parents were bet-
ter in 1973 than five years earlier. Surprisingly, increased disagreement
with parents accompanied improvement in parent–child relations. If in-
creased disagreement is taken as an indication of issue salience to partici-
pants and their parents, then Tedin's finding that parental influence over
adolescent attitude increases with issue salience is replicated in these data.
Intergenerational disagreement, then, does not preclude the operation of
parental influence just as it does not prevent an improvement of parent–
child relations.

The significance of these findings, however, goes far beyond the
immediate support they give to existing literature which has criticized

the generation gap hypothesis of student protest (Bengtson,a). At issue is the relationship between family political socialization and social change. Mannheim's definition of the problem of generations is founded on the assumption that this socialization is problematic and that younger generations break new ground when they reject it for alternative interpretations of collective experience. But might social change permit intergenerational consensus rather than cleavage? Cannot youth be in the vanguard of social change while retaining linkages with parental generations? Might these linkages themselves be essential variables accounting for social change efforts? The data reviewed here suggest affirmative answers to all three questions.

Others have explored connections between tradition and social change (Gusfield) including political radicalism (Calhoun). At a societal level, these analyses stress the importance of existing culture and social structure as foundations for the development of new forms of political action and organization. At the individual level these connections appear to be maintained through a socialization process linking adjacent generations to similar political values and orientations. The result is a condition which amends Mannheim's view of generations as change agents, that is, generation units "work up the material of their common experience" by using rather than rejecting the values of parental generations to interpret this experience.[9]

The suggestion that political socialization accounts for similarities between activist youth and their parents is clearly not a complete explanation of these data. The strong period effect which touched all four cohorts must not be ignored. Yet parent generations can play a crucial role in predisposing offspring to particular value orientations, and recognition of such a role need not require what one author has called "an 'over-socialized' perspective on the development of values" (Bengtson,b,360).

At the same time, an interpretation of social change as fueled by intergenerational similarities does not preclude sharp departure from existing political beliefs and action nor does it presume that youth are bound to replicate the views and perspectives of their elders. The data presented here confirm Mannheim's observation of generational differences as they correlate with periods marked by social change. They *also* suggest the existence of a strong linkage between the political values and beliefs of one generation and the social change efforts of another. The succession of generations becomes both a continuation of existing political orientations alongside the unfolding of different perspectives and understandings. The fact that the two processes may be marked by conflict and confrontation does not lessen their interconnectedness.

The data reviewed here along with earlier studies of political socialization and social movement participants suggest the need to refine Mannheim's concern with intergenerational tension and conflict in order

to make room for intergenerational continuity. In light of this refinement, the problem of generations becomes one of understanding the relationship between socialization and social change rather than viewing change as a result of breakdown in the socialization process.

Notes

1. Mannheim clearly stated the relationship between rates of change and generational conflict which was formulated 13 years later by Davis: "The rate of social change increases the likelihood that new generations will break from tradition" (Mannheim,309–10). Davis, however, predicted the consequences of this conflict would be temporary while Mannheim saw them as permanent.

2. The concept of "generation unit" is only part of Mannheim's larger treatment of generational succession and social change. The data and analysis in this paper are intended to refine one aspect of Mannheim's work as it is applied to the specific population of social movement participants.

3. Social movement participants were considered to be those who responded affirmatively to the question: "Have you ever taken part in a demonstration, protest march, or sit-in?" In order to insure that 1965 measures were preprotest indicators of political orientation, respondents who engaged in such activities prior to 1966 were excluded from this analysis. In order to increase the comparability of participants and nonparticipants as well as the comparability of participants in this study to the literature on student activists of the 1960s, participants and nonparticipants were limited to respondents who completed a college degree. Over 80 percent of the social movement participants were involved in political protest between 1967 and 1970. Over two-thirds indicated this protest dealt with United States foreign policy and military action in Southeast Asia.

4. While the number of social movement participants (119) is relatively small compared to the thousands of students who actively protested U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia during the late 1960s, compared to samples in research on former activists, this sample is second in size only to the survey of Free Speech Movement arrestees at Berkeley (Meyer and Maidenberg). The Youth–Parent Socialization Panel Study from which my sample was drawn has added significance due to the fact that it employed a national probability sampling procedure. For a comparison of published research studies on former student activists which includes information on sample sizes, see DeMartini.

5. For specific questions used to construct measures of political partisanship, political attitudes, and political scales, see Jennings and Niemi,b. A more complete test of Mannheim's work would include a comparison of youth and parents on measures of basic or core values upon which political orientation most probably rests. Unfortunately, the Youth–Parent Socialization Panel Study did not include such measures for all four cohorts in 1965 and 1973.

6. While social movement participants and nonparticipants are cohorts distinguished on a political dimension, participant/nonparticipant and parent cohorts are linked on a lineage dimension. Each member of a youth cohort has a parent in one of the older cohorts. Therefore, comparisons between participants/nonparticipants and parents could be referred to as comparisons between "generational cohorts." While I have chosen not to use this term in order to keep separate cohort and lineage (generation) comparisons (Cutler; Kertzer), the generational component of these cohorts makes them particularly valuable for an empirical examination of political relationships between generations.

7. Within-generation cohort comparison refers to comparisons made between participants and nonparticipants or participants' parents and nonparticipants' parents. Between-generation cohort comparisons refers to comparisons made between participants/nonparticipants and their respective parents. See note 6 for an explanation of the generational component in cohort composition.

8. One exception to this statement is the shift in scores on political trust between 1965 and 1973. By the latter year, social movement participants separated themselves from nonpartici-pants and the two parent cohorts, all three of which had moved closer together since 1965.
9. Mannheim recognized the possibility of linkages between generations supporting social change efforts on the part of the young, but dismissed these as incidental to his main thesis of intergenerational conflict.

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