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## **Asteroid-Effect in Society: The Formation of a Mannheim-type Historical Generation Post-COVID-19**

*Abstract:* Our conceptual paper argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has created conditions for the constitution of a new historical generation in Mannheimian terms. Current attempts in the sociology of youth to reconcile structure and agency with the concept of generation provide good starting points for interpreting a historical event such as the COVID-19 pandemic. While generations are not to be understood as homogeneous groups, constituting events can be compared to an asteroid that changes the trajectory of each social group. Thus, the concept of asteroid-effect helps us to overcome oversimplifying generational interpretations and to examine the effects of generation-forming events with an eye on structural inequalities.

Our study provides an overview of the classical generational theory of Mannheim in light of some contemporary approaches. Based upon existing information, we illustrate how the generation-forming events can be interpreted and how structural inequalities can be considered.

*Keywords:* Karl Mannheim, the new historical COVID-generation, asteroid effect, youth, social change

Our main thesis is that the global significance of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitates the reinterpretation of earlier generational theories, as the conditions are given for the constitution of a new historical generation. The following paper applies Mannheim's theory of historical generations. The article can be considered as a diagnosis of the times in the sense that it aims to identify tendencies that mark possible transformations of conditions (Hammershøj 2015).

The literature presented, systematised and (re)interpreted in this paper fall into three broad categories. The literature on generational theories draws partly on the classics, in particular the essay of Karl Mannheim, and contemporary interpretations of it, and partly on critical approaches to theories that have become popular in recent decades. On the one hand, scientific, statistical and policy papers that attempt to intellectualise the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic play an important role in our study, including small-scale studies (due to the ever-increasing amount of data available), but we only use works with clear and well-established methodology. In addition, we also intellectualise sources of a more journalistic nature that can help to illustrate the medium- and micro-level effects of the pandemic situation in domains where scientific analysis is currently less available.

Ever since the start of sociology as a scientific discipline, age as a defining socio-demographical dimension has been one of the leading analytical aspects of the field. Age has effects on social roles, individual experiences, and cognition. Stereotypes like the popular exclamation “back in my days!” have sociological relevance (Yang and Land 2013); the cultural conservatism of the elderly offers a psychological explanation for the element of nostalgia connected to the stereotype (Cornelis et al. 2009).

However, in sociological analysis, the consequences and effects of age are not as evident as in the above examples. Our study uses a generational approach that includes but is not limited to the category of age. We are examining whether the COVID-19 pandemic could be considered as a system of conditions for the constitution of a new historical generation. Recent articles touched upon but have not fully explored the opportunity for the constitution of a new generation as a result of COVID-19 (Goodwin 2020; Green 2020; Cherry 2020; Arreaza et al. 2020). Terms to describe this potential generation range from “generation C,” “COVID-19 generation,” “Zoomer generation,” “quaranteens,” “corona generation” or “crowned,” as several researchers consider the opportunity for the constitution of a new generation following the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of our paper is to provide a definition of generation that builds upon Mannheim’s original theory, and positions the term as a relevant frame for examining the COVID-19 pandemic’s defining societal effects without reductionism, age-centric or otherwise.

The COVID-19 pandemic can be interpreted as an exogenous shock similar to previous crises in Western history, which triggered borderline shellshock in the population<sup>1</sup> (Illés et al. 2020). Historically, global recessions like the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic had an overarching effect across every age group. However, young people going through their “impressionable years” were more strongly affected than other age groups (Clarke et al. 2014). Their personal and collective memories alike came to heavily feature patterns of crisis experience, which opens the possibility of a generational reading.

We examine the constitution of historical generations from a sociological point of view. Age affects social roles, individual experiences, and cognition, so birth cohorts can be analysed sociologically (thus sometimes the generational discourse entails only the age-element, see Szafraniec 2017). In contrast to the cohort-generation understanding, our niche is to point out how the societal changes connected to the pandemic can be analysed through Mannheim’s terms. Furthermore, we provide novel viewpoints for the interpretation of the constitution of a new generation, and we raise awareness to the significance of taking into consideration both structure and agency in connection with generational theory.

We first clarify the definition of generations, separating classical theories from contemporary ones, as these are often in opposition. Then we provide a theoretical frame which can reconcile the structural connections of societal change and inequality, which will demonstrate how such a theoretical framework can be used to construe the effects of the pandemic in generational terms.

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<sup>1</sup> It is no accident that several politicians and state officials (even the UN’s secretary-general) used warlike rhetoric in connection of the pandemic (cf. Johnstone and McLeish 2020).

## The Theory of the Constitution of Historical Generations

Hungarian-born Karl Mannheim established the basics of historical generations in his essay *The Problem of Generations* (1928 [1952]). We believe that returning Mannheim's original text helps us understand our current situation.

Mannheim believed that a given event, especially sociological or economic changes have a different effect on different age groups, from children to adults and the elderly. The major difference is in how these events are integrated into one's memory, as younger generations will regard these fundamental experiences as part of the natural order of things, unlike older generations ("shifting of the »polar« components of life") (Mannheim 1952: 299).

However, it is not enough to look at the historical perspective to understand the formation of generations. Young people live in the present and are exposed to fresh experiences that cannot be known at the moment, whether they are generation-forming or not. In the post-WWII period, there were surprisingly few events that became generation-forming, i.e. where the historical perspective was linked to the present and to a growing range of fresh experiences. We believe that these events become generational because they cause fundamental cultural change. According to Mannheim (1928 [1952]), the past, present and future are linked as generation-forming events when cultural carriers and the forms of approaching, assimilating and applying cultural goods are radically changed. It is the cultural aspect that is a fresh experience at a particular moment, while at the same time illustrating the changes of the past and the possible new paths for the future.

The key to the formation and emergence of a generation, therefore, is whether during the formative years young people are exposed to a trend of cultural change; whether they experience it in direct form, and whether the 'milieu' is infiltrated, unconsciously becoming part of the individual's daily life, by some new trend of change that goes beyond the previous normality. This can be the natural worldview of the new generation. In a renewing society, the creation and accumulation of culture will not be carried out by the same individuals who have been carrying it but by those who carry 'new approaches.'

The members of a given generation experience historical situations, events, and changes at similar ages. They all have an unmediated, first-hand experience of these events. The events themselves make the social group special. If the historical event is an external shock, then the characteristics of the generation must be described through said shock. Therefore, the constitution of a generation is connected to an identifiable historical context, which makes the members of the given generation "wanderers" between symbolic universes.<sup>2</sup>

The historicist philosopher Ortega y Gasset (1964<sup>3</sup>), similarly to Mannheim, talks about how the individual's life cycle contributes to the constitution of a generation in the context of post-war years (Ortega y Gasset 1964: 33). He points to a parallel between the change

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<sup>2</sup> Although the term 'symbolic universes' came to be used in a sociopsychological context in recent years to examine a cultural milieu's specific (simultaneous, but diverging) interpretations (cf. for example, Salvatore et al. 2018), we used the term in its phenomenological sense: "The symbolic universe provides order for the subjective apprehension of biographical experience" (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 115).

<sup>3</sup> Ortega's lectures quoted in the above volume were given towards the tail end of the 1920s.

of generations and the change of historical periods (an idea which will resonate with later “XYZ generation”<sup>4</sup> theories).

Most research on socialisation holds the consensus that every later life experience builds upon an identity formed in earlier years through “early formative experiences” (Bartels and Jackman 2014; Tilley and Evans 2014). Therefore, these early formative experiences determine later experiences, and similarly, the experiences of young adulthood heavily influence one’s future self (Jennings 1996; Sapiro 2004; Jennings and Zhang 2005; Clarke et al. 2014). Proving Mannheim’s original works, most studies show that significant changes are preserved in the personal and collective memories of the young people experiencing them (Jennings and Zhang 2005; Tessler et al. 2004).

Following Mannheim, we can interpret generation as a term denoting a sum of coeval groups which are constituted to become communities of experience (generational location) due to shared experiences of socialisation, generally direct historical experiences, and influences in an era of societal change. Mannheim points out that there are generation units within a historical generation, which can be interpreted as layers of a generation with opposing agendas, ignorant of each other (Mannheim 1952: 304) (figure 1). The Mannheimian generational position is a general category similar to a class, which can be interpreted as a potential generation (Bartels and Jackman 2014: 11). Not every generational position becomes a generation as an actuality. Therefore they do not always become an actualised, legitimate, self-aware generation (Bartels and Jackman 2014: 11).

Table 1  
Constitution of generations—key terms

Mannheim’s terminological triad	Bartels and Jackman (2014)	The level of examination	Our terminological triad
generational location	potential generation	macro	community of experience
generation as an actuality	actual	meso/micro	generational awareness
generational unit(s)	generation	micro	community of identity

Source: original.

Following Mannheim and other leading authors in the field (Ortega y Gasset 1962; Jennings 1996) we can define a historical generation as a large group of people who have their early life experiences in a similar sociocultural, economical, and historical environment; furthermore, they are affected by similar global events, be it economic, political, cultural, or technological; as a result, they have similar social attributes which are constant and difficult to change. Consequently, members of a historical generation will have similar reactions to the social, historical, and economical changes affecting their group.

In modern history, pinpointing events which would clearly separate one generation from the next is rather challenging. The changes of an external environment are mainly responsible for turning a potential cohort into a [historical] generation. Local social-political contexts can be analysed from the generational lens (see Sadowski and Mach

<sup>4</sup> We use this term in reference to theories typically using an American frame to name generations with the letters of the alphabet, starting with X. These theories presuppose a regular, periodical change in generations, an idea which has been thoroughly criticised as early as in the 1980s by Hans Jaeger (Jaeger 1985: 286).

2021), but since the effects of these events are not necessarily resulting in changing symbolic universes for most members of the young cohort, we believe the terminology of microgenerations<sup>5</sup> is more accurate to describe and interpret these groups in generational terms.

Before examining the potential effects of COVID-19 in terms of historical generations, we need to address some critical remarks regarding generational theory.

### Contemporary Generational Approaches

While generational theories steadily gained popularity around the millennium, they were increasingly met with criticism. Criticism targeting mainstream generational theories can be categorised through four groups of criteria, which can be loosely connected to each other:

1. Technologization, technological determinism: the practice of highlighting a single element of the socio-cultural context while defining and describing a given generation, namely, technical-technological advancements (for an example, see Marc Prensky's theory of digital natives). Note how this approach breaks away from Mannheim, who highlights the complexities of the historical-social context.
2. Methodological fallacy: wherein the theories rely on selective data or anecdotal evidence to support their claims (for example [McCrimble 2014](#)).
3. Generationalism: an overgeneralised, horoscope-like description of generations (cf. [Rauvola et al. 2019](#)).
4. Necessary cyclicity: the idea that within a given cycle, regardless of the historical-cultural context, generational changes must take place (for example [Strauss and Howe 1991](#)).

Moral panic has been connected to the evaluation of the youth from the perspective of adults ever since ancient history (especially when there was an evident change in forms of communication.) This may connect to how the idea of youth equals a sense of freedom and an emphasis on free time in the minds of many ([Pollock 1997](#)). Therefore, it can be argued that several generational qualifiers attributed to the youth are just characteristics of the life stage of youth. Perhaps this is the underlying reason why technological determinism is the most often cited criticism of generational theories.

The success of XYZ generation theories, which mainly rely on Strauss and Howe ([1991, 2000](#)), probably lies in how the rising popularity of digital technology and the spread of network societal structures transformed the life stage of youth ([Castells 2000](#)). These changes often lead to reductionist readings which overexaggerate the connection between specific technological eras and focus on middle-class individuals, especially middle-class youth ([Shaw 2020](#)).

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<sup>5</sup> The term microgeneration is in common use in contemporary sociology, yet the term is somewhat new and lacks an established definition. Taylor's approach ([2018](#)) is the most influential, which interprets microgeneration as an interim between larger generation, but Watroba's definition may be more exact: "[microgenerations are] avant-garde groups which constitute a distinct stimulus to overstep the generational boundaries" ([Watroba 2018: 185](#)).

Criticism targeting methodological fallacies argues that the mainstream discourse is out of touch with reality. A typical example centres on the digital media usage of younger generations. Many XYZ generation theories and Prensky (2001) alike utilise this approach, the latter in his digital natives' theory. Prensky's well-known theory argues that the cognitive structures of people born in a digital era adjust to digital technologies, while members of the older generation can only ever be digital immigrants, no matter how familiar they become with information technology; they will speak the language of technology with an accent (Prensky 2001). The supposed homogeneity of digital natives is refuted by the extensive literature on digital inequalities (see Helsper and Eynon 2010).

Taking the above criticism into consideration, there are several ways to strengthen generational theories. An obvious solution would be to abandon the term altogether and examine age cohorts instead of generations when we analyse the correlations of age and socio-cultural features. However, this would result in uprooting age cohorts from their historical context. While we would gain a reliable analytical framework, we would lose the opportunity to follow Mannheim's footsteps and theorise the effect of key historical events.

An exciting experiment is connected to Dutch sociologist Henk A. Becker, who simplifies the term instead of abandoning it and does not treat generational identity as a definitive element. According to his definition, generation is "a category of contemporaries that shows in its behaviour effects of discontinuous macro-change experienced during the formative period of its members" (Becker 1997: 17). Becker also emphasises the institutionalisation processes of generational identification that underlines the importance of how generations can be examined as discourse constructs (see also Purhonen 2016).

The terminological dilemma may be solved with an important lesson learnt from youth studies. Youth studies had been running on *twin tracks* (cf. Woodman and Bennett 2015), wherein the youth was interpreted either through the concept of transitionality, or through (sub)cultural readings (Talburtt and Lesko 2014: 40). The latter foregrounds culture research: from the 20th century on, the discipline had been portraying the youth as creative counter-culture rebels, whereas transitionality examines the transition between structures (school and work) and different life stages (Woodman and Bennett 2015).

In recent years, Dan Woodman and some of his co-authors have become more and more open to the idea of returning to Mannheim's original concept of generation to bridge the gap between youth studies' twin tracks. This can also be interpreted as yet another attempt to reconcile structure and agency<sup>6</sup>. According to Woodman, the viewpoint of the sociology of generations "recognises the critical impact of youth experiences but understands that youth and generation can only be understood relationally, and that inequality cannot be separated from social change" (Woodman 2020: 42–43).

The renaissance of generation as a sociological term supports our thesis that it may be key to describe the sociological effects of COVID-19, especially in examining how it affects the youth.

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<sup>6</sup> "Agency is understood as the capacity of acting and willing subjects within existing societal and social structures to exercise choice—'to be able to act otherwise' (...)." (Rosengren 2000: 61). The relationship between structure and agency raises the question of whether "society determines the thoughts and actions of individuals, or whether individuals determine the nature of institutions" (Bene 2013: 27).

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic as an Asteroid-Effect**

We need to examine three significant aspects of the constitution of generations according to Mannheim in order to determine whether society is undergoing generation change. For such a change, an external exogenous shock needs to transform societal circumstances to an extent which strongly affects and changes the formative years of the youth. The following questions must be considered:

*1. Presence or absence of a direct community of experience, or the constitution of generational location*

We need to analyse whether the youth is experiencing a critical, revelatory historical event communally and directly (Dinas and Stoker 2014), that is, whether the event leads to fundamental changes in ordinary lifestyles, perception of life and ways of thinking. Such changes should be novel, unusual and unpredictable. The effects of the change should be felt long-term. They should be interpretable on the macro-, meso- and micro-levels. Furthermore, we need to examine whether the event's effect is global, regional, or local and whether it divides society vertically and horizontally.

*2. Is a generation as an actuality with a consciousness of generation constituted?*

Do they have common attributes, are they affected by the changes similarly, and what common reaction can be expected?

*3. Are generational units constituted, i.e., does the youth have a generational identity based on a sense of community?*

Do they process change in a similar fashion, and do they share and record these similarities?

Before we can discuss the chances for the constitution of a new generation, we need to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and how the youth and other age groups react to it. Therefore, our paper focuses on the first point in detail, as points two and three will need retrospective empirical analysis post-pandemic. We would like to demonstrate an urgent need for cross-border comparative studies with large sample sizes so we can detect changes as they happen.

### **Communities of Direct Experience, or the Possibilities for the Constitution of Generational Location**

We argue that considering the above-mentioned viewpoints, a Mannheimian generation is constituted when a major historical event intersects with significant changes in society which directly affect young people, and as a result leads to unusual, incalculable changes. These changes are felt on a local, national, and global level, which profoundly affect society horizontally and vertically.

We further argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is a cataclysmic, external shock which can be defined as an asteroid-effect. The sociological meaning of an asteroid-effect is similar to its meaning in astronomy: an asteroid's impact changes the trajectory of a planet and changes the conditions of life, but the changed trajectory does not necessarily unify diversity.

The COVID-19 pandemic does not only constitute microgenerations on a local or national level but that it has a global impact and thus can be described as a constituent for an actual generation (generational awareness and identity).

The COVID-19 pandemic may have started significant, sometimes even traumatic processes, the intensification of anomic processes, the dramatic peak of inequality issues, or a change of cultural habits. These will have long-term effects on society as a whole, especially the youth.

We believe that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic period, the youth may develop a collective personality rooted in collective generational trauma. Expanding on the idea of the asteroid effect, we can observe a change in trajectory on macro-, meso- and micro-levels. Whereas micro-level tendencies, the psychological and social-psychological effects of the pandemic can only be deeper analysed from a generational aspect in retrospect, the first two levels can already be sought to be interpreted from a sociological viewpoint.

### **Asteroid-Effect on the Macro Level**

As we indicated in the introduction, we consider the cultural-change aspects of the asteroid effect to be of key importance, based on Mannheim. Thus we will analyse them, drawing on a comprehensive report and specific case studies, to describe the possible directions of change.

Macro-level effects of the pandemic situation can be best observed in economic trends and (in relation to this) social inequalities. While a rebound of economic activities is expected, and—in some cases—already observed (Saunders 2020), longer term consequences can be examined.

Our first example is tourism—on the global and on the European horizon. This shows how economic trends might influence individual (micro-level) lifestyles: the restricted mobility (Eurocontrol 2021) can lead to longer-term changes both in terms of the industry (Assaf and Scuderi 2020) and in tourists' behaviour (Li et al. 2020). "In December 2021, the number of commercial flights in the EU increased by 130% compared with December 2020. However, this is still below the pre-pandemic levels (–24% compared with December 2019)" (Eurostat 2022). Another important aspect of this example is the partial disappearance, or at least the long-term inability, of cross-continental transit. In other words, the undoubted transformation of the concept of globalism.

Another macro-level example, more critical than the previous one, can be linked to the growing social inequalities as a result of the pandemic. One aspect of this can be understood through the effects of online schooling. The UN reports that COVID-19 caused the largest disruption of education systems in history, and it affected nearly 1,6 billion students in more than 190 countries on all continents (UN 2020). The report goes on to say that "[c]losures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 per cent of the world's student population, up to 99 per cent in low and lower-middle income countries. Some 23.8 million additional children and youth (from pre-primary to tertiary) may drop out or not have access to school next year due to the pandemic's economic impact alone" (UN 2020).

The closure of schools has significant social and economic consequences, and it will have a lasting effect on teachers, children and the youth, their parents (especially women), and society at large. A quick study was conducted by Engzell et al. (2020) that shows that the sudden switch to online teaching caused severe damage even in countries with a solid online infrastructure like the Netherlands or Germany. It amplified social inequality to an extent which may be impossible to fix in the foreseeable future (Grewenig et al. 2020). In a less advanced country like Hungary, 25% of students was left behind by the online education system, whereas in Poland data from 2018 suggested that a similar proportion of students have struggled with proper access to online education (7,1% of households with students had no internet access, 17,1% had no sufficient devices); there is little hope for re-integrating them (Kiss Hubert and Keller 2021; Mick, Oczkowska and Trzciński 2020).

A report of the World Bank shows that “COVID-19 has dealt a severe blow to the lives of young children, students, and youth and further exacerbated inequalities in education. “Due to prolonged school closures and poor learning outcomes, recent World Bank estimates document that increases in learning poverty—the share of 10-year-olds who cannot read a basic text—could reach 70 percent in low- and middle-income countries.” (World Bank 2021). An important finding of the report, the COVID will have lasting impacts on future earnings, poverty alleviation, and reducing inequality. According to latest estimates, this generation of students now risks losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings” (World Bank 2021).

Although the situation may have improved somewhat in almost all countries in the second academic year of the pandemic, the consequences of partial closures of online learning are visible in country reports on the education system. Interview surveys with students and teachers show that “...the majority of students painted a rather negative picture in terms of their learning progress” (Monostori 2021: 15). According to the report, the most vulnerable groups are, a.) those living in economically disadvantaged regions, b.) those living in poverty, c.) the gipsy and the migrant youngsters, d.) those lives in families with three or more children, e.) the first grade students of the 2020/2021 school year, and another vulnerable group in digital education was f.) those with learning difficulties. These factors are often connected. (Monostori 2021).

As the examples show a possible COVID generation cannot be described as a homogenous entity. The lockdown and the switch to online teaching had different effects on upper class youth than the lower classes. The lower classes may have suffered irreversible damage, as they may be unable to successfully re-join the educational system. The COVID generation has noticeably diverse generational units.

### **Asteroid Effect on the Meso Level**

The most tangible effect of the Mannheimian cultural value shift, which is the basis of generation formation, is perhaps the lifestyle change. The lifestyle of the youth has been fundamentally transformed by closing borders, lockdowns, curfews, the closure of clubs, sporting facilities, restaurants, cinemas and theatres, and the limitations on social interaction. An increasing number of psychological studies reported (cf. Power et al. 2020;

Liang et al. 2020) that these might have caused mental issues for the youth, including insomnia, anxiety, and fatigue.<sup>7</sup> From January 2020, youth culture was, in many cases, radically transformed, and some of its most visible examples are related to cultural consumption and leisure time spending (closed or partially open cultural and sports venues, the delay of international events), or changes of everyday practices like the forms of greeting or clothing.

Many more effects can be observed and intellectualised (for example, a decrease in the willingness to have children [Wilde et al. 2020] or the sense of an increased surveillance [Couch et al. 2020]), which, along with the above-cited examples, are the cornerstones of the change in the symbolic universe. They all increase anomie and a sense of isolation and are likely to lead to an interruption of generational transfer.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the differences between the youth and the elderly in ways never seen before. Not only do younger and older generations view the world differently, but they have opposing interests during the pandemic. In the first wave of the pandemic, the youth was less affected by the virus, so they mainly focused on the adverse effects of safety measures. Besides the restrictions, the youth was made responsible to look out for the elderly; the elderly might have felt that the youth had not been careful enough.

There are further aspects to highlight. Zinnecker was writing about how the autonomous “youth” stage of life expanded in middle-class German and Western European youth from the 1980s (Zinnecker 1990). There was increased acceptance of an independent, young cultural milieu and life stage separate from the adult world. The lifestyle and mindset of the post-1980s youth was defined by a casual, unconstrained, hedonistic/egocentric consumerist lifestyle, which resulted in the rejection and remediation of responsibility (Oross and Szabó 2019). 2020 certainly changed this, as local governments and international organisations alike make the youth responsible for the survival of the elderly. The youth’s conduct, lifestyle choices, the way they follow the rules and norms, that is, the responsible behaviour of the youth, could save elderly or chronically ill citizens.<sup>8</sup> The youth, regardless of their class, must do what they have been rejecting: take responsibility for their family, as well as their local and regional communities.

Socialisation processes may be undergoing a paradoxical change. System-centric effects influenced by politics may simultaneously weaken and strengthen, meaning that the former balance of agents might be tipped over. Due to the sudden shift to online education, the direct socialising function of schools and universities may have been weakening since spring 2020, as the family became a more critical factor. In the eyes of the youth, 24/7 online presence has been validated as the correct way of life. The social separation typical of youth has become mainstream in the entire society. This increased the importance of digital literacy, and highlighted the digital inequality between the young; furthermore, traumatic effects such as cyberbullying may have increased as socialisation had become exclusively digital (cf. Karmakar and Das 2020).

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<sup>7</sup> Statistically representative data show that “about a fifth of U.S. adults (21%) are experiencing high levels of psychological distress” (Keeter 2021).

<sup>8</sup> It must be noted that in the 2021 waves of the pandemic young people are more affected than before, thus questions of responsibility might shift.

The spontaneous strengthening of the nuclear family's<sup>9</sup> socialising effect can override the school's role in socialisation, which have been regarded as a more substantial factor in this regard. However, the long-term co-living of families with numerous new tasks may expose some specific problems, such as domestic violence or the subversion of family roles. A shift towards conservative gender and family roles is visible in data from the United States, where "mothers were more likely than fathers to say they had many childcare responsibilities while working" (Barroso and Horowitz 2021).

Of course, we do not argue that the post-pandemic rearrangement of society will not give an opportunity for the return of the autonomous youth stage of life. Resilience can be a critical factor in the examination of generational units. However, the life experiences in the wake of restrictions will fundamentally affect many: the lost months cannot be brought back. In light of the previously discussed labour market data, we can assume that underprivileged youth will face the most significant disadvantage. Lacking resources, they cannot afford to delay the life period of job seeking and/or starting a family, and therefore in their case, the youth life stage had been cut short. Nevertheless, the above examples clearly show that the fundamental change in normalcy, even if some aspects of the change are only temporary, affects nearly everybody and consequently will create a community of experience and generational location.

## Conclusion

### Historical Generations and its Generational Units

We wish to contribute to the validation and rethinking of generational theories with the present study. We believe that the constitutions of generations must be examined according to Mannheim's principles, which give opportunity to the simultaneous acknowledgement of the youth's agency and social inequalities (Woodman 2020).

In our contemporary age, generation constituting events can be interpreted as asteroids, which affect "inequalities, sets of unequal social relations, regimes and social systems" (Walby et al. 2012: 236). These effects, however, are not uniform: they must be examined through the translocational lens of intersectionality (Anthias 2020) with an eye on social structures. If we complete Mannheim's theories with Henk Becker's on the formation of generations (through the institutionalisation of generational discourses), then societal attributions, or even the criteria of generational memory can be integrated into the theory.

Reflecting on the problem of structure and agency, we believe that these social and even global changes do not affect young people to the same extent. We can thus describe the asteroid as a structural effect that affects agential processes, but these effects do not lead to uniform outcomes.

As we have seen, the interpretations of the greatest global events of the postmodern age can be highly contradictory. The most important ambivalent element is the COVID-19 pandemic's societal ingratiating, paired with its cataclysmic, asteroid-like effects. Regarding the question of whether we are facing an event with revelative power, which may induce

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<sup>9</sup> At least the parents, as the grandparents may be outside of the direct social network due to their vulnerability.

profound changes in society, based on the results of this study, we believe that the answer is obvious. It has become evident that the shock affecting societies, i.e., the asteroid-effect may have started many long-lasting traumatic processes not included in this study. We think that the COVID-generation may not only carry the traumas analysed here, but a secondary syndrome might develop too, which can negatively impact their mental health.<sup>10</sup> The direct and indirect experiences with sickness and death may have a profound effect on this generation similarly to the traumatic experiences of “Silent” generation of World War Two.

A counterargument could be made citing the expectation of a return to normalcy,<sup>11</sup> as it is difficult to foretell—even on a local level—who will be socially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and for how long. There may be groups of young people who are much less affected. Nevertheless, we believe that the COVID-19 pandemic can be interpreted as the symbolic peak of ongoing social shifts. It also creates an opportunity to refresh the glossary of youth sociology, for example by applying Rob White’s large-scale theory, who argues that youth sociology must employ an eco-global outlook (White 2011), and by clarifying generational theories. We believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has created a situation where public as well as academic discourse needs to discuss the world in terms of *pre-pandemic* and *post-pandemic*.

We do not believe that homogenous groups are constituted based on age alone. We must examine the most receptive age group and how the changes of their trajectories can be analysed and interpreted. To describe different age groups and trajectories, we can use intersectionality, understood as a systemic examination of social inequalities, as a theoretical and analytical framework. Present data already shows us that class, gender and participation in education can all have a significant impact on the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic’s asteroid effect. Further research is needed in other dimensions of inequality. However, the existence of global communities of experience makes it possible to use a generation-based interpretation of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also enables to examine generational awareness as well as communities of identity, which can be constituted from a desire to overcome old structures, as well as from a traumatic experience and a feeling of uncertainty.

We believe that the interpretation of post-covid normality itself requires serious sociological studies. As our article has shown, there are myriad aspects of cultural value change that can be captured, each of which requires the development of new interpretive frameworks. Changes in the youth lifestage, the transformation of the notion of globalism, and the intensification of social inequalities between and within nations suggest that post-covid will offer new possibilities for the construction of social order. Thus, just like no uniform trajectories of young people can be predicted, no universal normative interpretation can be postulated either.

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<sup>10</sup> Though micro-level tendencies are out of the scope of our article, evidence seems to support this hypothesis (see Horigian, Schmidt and Feaster 2021), research suggests longer term negative effects too (Hvide and Johnsen 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Dan Woodman’s interview from Summer 2020 <https://socialsciences.org.au/news/baby-boomers-gen-x-millennials-generation-covid/>.

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