

The Generation Gap

Hans-Joachim Wilke

Summary

The existence of a gap between the generations is not derived from clinical material, but from actual day-to-day-experience and life experience, from literal documents and from collective images about youth and seniority with its mutual projections, idealizations and demonizations. The influence of early life experiences and of secular and different cultural conditions on the personality makes it difficult to understand and communicate between the generations. To bridge this natural and probably archetypal gap we need a reduction of projections, idealizations and demonizations, but it also needs practice and a basic interest for each other. From a prospective point of interpretation, the generation gap is an important evolutionary factor which provokes development from one generation to the other.

An old German saying warns: “Young and old don’t mix.” In former times, moreover, they wisely used to build farmers’ retirement homes out of sight of the actual farm house. My goal in this paper is convince you that there is indeed a general generation gap—a gap which, in my view, has also structured developments in psychoanalysis.

Dr. Hans-Joachim Wilke, born 1931, is a Dr. of Medicine, Professional Member of the DGAP, Training and Supervising Analyst at the C.G. Jung-Institute Berlin and co-editor of the Analytische Psychologie. He has published widely about typology, treatment techniques, depression, and Fascism.

Regarding the Reality of Old People in General

We can observe that the medical profession is proud of the rising life expectancy of human beings. At the same time, however, geriatrics and care institutions are helpless when confronted with old age and ailing. Despite the recent public attention paid to this problem, the misery of aging remains unchanged.

Let me reduce it to a very simple proposition or image in which a life circle is closing: young children and very old, helpless people are punished instead of helped—if they do not yet or no longer manage to eat and drink properly and to control their body functions. Inability is misunderstood as malice, and provokes aggressive impulses.

Regarding Literature

I recall first A.Guggenbühl-Craig's (1991) *The Old Fool and the Corruption of Myth*, in which the author analyzes the archetypal image of wise old men and women as quasi-delusional and as a part he did not want to play. He clearly points out that archetypal patterns may be helpful as well as destructive—something that sometimes seems to have been forgotten in certain post-Jungian circles.

Another book I remember well is by the Swiss author Max Frisch (1980), *Man in the Holocene: A Story*, in which he describes with horrifying realism an old man's desperate struggle against his diminishing physical and intellectual powers. While we generally notice such struggles only as observers, Frisch's writing and descriptions are so vivid that they put the reader into the sufferer's shoes. Although we are not too far away from the age of the ailing and deficient person Frisch describes, we activate defense mechanisms against this identification. What people often do not realize is that the defense mechanisms against aging increase as one gets older. Given the situation described by Frisch, it is small wonder that a very old Norbert Elias (1985) wrote about the *Loneliness of the Dying*.

I once gave a paper at the Chicago Congress on my observations and thoughts about supervision, which was later published by Paul Kugler as an article entitled "The Aging

Supervisor." In the biological involutive processes of body and brain, we all generally have, earlier or later, difficulties in remembering names. In Michael Ende's (1997) novel *The Never-Ending Story*, the hero finally forgets his own name, evidence of a burnout syndrome in a highly creative process. As a biological rule, the capacities acquired late in development are the first to be lost. For an analyst and supervisor, this means that his ability for critical self-reflection, acquired during training analysis, will diminish first. Furthermore, one's threshold for shame becomes lower as one ages. The advantage is that the analyst is more open in many personal respects, but this also carries the risk that he will violate a younger person's threshold for shame. Young psychiatrists are often embarrassed by the unabashed openness of old patients. Since very fine nuances are of utmost importance in the analytical situation, the analyst's aging process can evoke critical moments. In my article "The Aging Supervisor," therefore, I pleaded for a flexible and sensitively handled age-limit for training analysts and supervisors.

A glance at literature, ethnology, and mythology also reveals several aspects of a generation gap. With respect to literature, Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, with its model of the killing of the father in the primary group, springs to mind first. This represents an archetypal pattern of the generation gap. Freud's model of the father complex is an idea of a prehistorical root of the Oedipus complex, or, in Jungian terms, the archetypal nucleus of the complex.

The oldest fragment of Germanic literature, the *Hildebrandslied*, recounts a struggle between a father and a son who belong to different armies. Unfortunately we do not know the outcome of their struggle, who is killed by whom. In Zurich's ethnological Rietberg Museum, however, an old Indian painting shows a father mourning the son whom he killed in battle (which may be hinting at the migration of Indo-Germanic *topoi*). In the context of heroic myths, the generation gap is played out as a battle to the death. The saga is correct in our psychological understanding because the deadly struggle is always enacted against an absent and unknown father, who—as in the *Hildebrandslied*—lived outside of the country for thirty years.

In terms of ethnology, we find idealizations and cultic forms of idealization of the old, but these are often counterbalanced by the murder of old family or society members in order for the young to survive—or for them to obtain the older generation's position, money, and power. The German journal for archetypal psychology, *Gorgo*, recently published an article by Verena Tobler (1999), an ethnologist, entitled "On the Social Construction of Age," which broadly surveys contemporary nonindustrial cultures. The cultic and ritualistic soothing or purging of the threatening spirits of the dead, which represent the immaterial continuation of the negative aspects of old people, demonstrates the threat emanating from the old generation.

As members of the older generation, we have to ask ourselves how we deal with the actual phenomena of aging and with the collective imagos of age. I believe we have to take both of those very seriously: our weaknesses in order *not* to be ridiculed; the contradictory imagos with their implicitly high, horrifying, and idealizing expectations in order not to *deceive* ourselves about the social realities. The ghettoization of old people is disguised with the friendly but misleading image of a "sunny autumn of one's life." Nevertheless, Philemon and Baucis, the friendly and pious old couple, were disposed of by Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*—because they stood in the way of progress.

Old People Viewed from the Perspective of Youth

An old woman tries to separate two young schoolboys who are fighting. Both of them size up the old lady, and one replies in typical Berlin jargon, "Get lost, old graveyard flower!"

The generation of the 1960s coined slogans about their professors as *Fachidioten*, people who could think of nothing else but their own subjects and disciplines. Furthermore, they ridiculed them with the phrase "An old donkey is still a donkey." This resulted in a general reduction of the heretofore sometimes hypocritical respect toward elders and their authority. As a representative of parental, paternal, civilizing, and authoritarian imperatives and mandates, the older teacher is a classic object of ridicule and caricature. In Germany, this has

been most ably illustrated in the movie *Die Feuerzangenbowle*, a comedy about school life.

In our analytical training as well, some of our teachers became the target of acerbic mockery. What is it that turns the teaching analyst into the laughing stock of his trainees and the analyst in general into the laughing stock of the larger public? First, let me remind you of the image of the *Fachidiot*, with its connotations of ideologizing and unbalanced theories which are frequently arbitrary and subject to changing fashions. (We loved open-minded teachers.) Second, relatedness is surely a factor of the personal equation, on the one hand; on the other hand, it is certainly also a question of neurotic dynamics. Can a teacher give his students the feeling that they are not only objects but also addressed personally? They will recognize him for his personality and will be able to love him. The third point is closely related to the second: engagement, some kind of passion, and mutual identification—*docendo disimus*. (I like full-blooded analysts.) That may facilitate respectful interaction on both sides.

A deficit in any of these three points, however, diminishes the teacher's air of competence in the eyes of his students, even though he might possess it.

To summarize youth's perspective with Goethe's *baccalaureus*:

Confess then, that your cranium, bald and old
Equals in worth these skulls that lie around

.....

A man with thirty summers on his head
Has seen his best, and is as good as dead.
It would be best to have you put away.
(Man schlägt euch tot beizeiten)

The Older Generation's View of Youth

To put the issue in historical perspective, I would like to remind you of the dialogue of the life-weary Egyptian—4000 years ago—with his Ba-soul. The man became suicidal because he witnessed the decline of habits, death rituals, and the care of the graves.

Contemporary aspects of age viewing youth include the following:

1. The decline of culture, habits, morals, and education (*Bildung*) is always supposed to be caused by the younger generation's abandonment and betrayal of traditions and by its neglect of the old virtues, education, and social responsibility. The liberalization of sex and pornography seemed to seal the decline of ancient Rome and the Christian occident (Spengler). Across the globe, youth became coarse and more brutal.
2. Even "technical education" cannot keep up with technological development. The contemporary "user" is unable to understand his technological "service provider." If the buttons do not respond, we are helpless and dependent on the few specialists.
3. From my point of view and distance, it is very difficult to analyze the confluences in the stream of our time that are influencing the development of the younger generation. We have no wide-angle lens that captures enough partial aspects. Hence, I can only ask questions: Is it a Dionysian factor that is rising in the last decades? Would it be correct to understand the multiple destructive phenomena as Dionysian self-destruction and self-dissolving tendencies and longings? Are the excessive demands on our mental and intellectual capacities in a scientific civilization the *cause* of increasing illiteracy, esoteric inflation, primitive and archaic congregations of faith, and the intoxication with thundering rhythms that produce half a generation of nearly deaf people? Do not the agents of modern cultural and scientific development actually drift further away from the general willingness to understand and comprehend? Is the hiatus that much deeper today than it was in the times of the great humanists? I am not sure.

What about the Self-Image and Confidence of the Younger Generation?

In my position today, I must remember, that, as members of a generation that as adolescents had just experienced

the end of the war, we had a great deal of mistrust toward the surviving “war heroes.” From this attitude, we deduced a certain illusive superiority and the confidence that we could do everything better. And we thought that many of the old mental structures deserved to perish. We were embarrassed by our ancestors’ reports and memories, and we believed them to be unbelievable. We had no empathy with our ancestors’ existential needs and fears, and we suffered much less under the post-war conditions.

I cannot, of course, describe today’s younger generation’s self-image, but I can relate my impression of it. On the surface, it seems much more willing to accept authority, and it does not have the confrontational energy of postwar youth and the Sixties generation. I feel today’s generation is going about its business matter-of-factly. Young people seem less irritated by the differences between generations. I suppose that tolerance really has increased among today’s younger generation, although there remains the shadow of neo-Nazism.

For the teaching situation and professional discussions in Jungian circles, these attitudes reduce the potential for controversial debates.

Nevertheless, we still have to ask ourselves whether we, as members of today’s older generation, present a similar picture for the younger generation, which in turn unconsciously provokes similar attitudes to those that we had toward the wartime generation. Most certainly so! Ugliness is always mutually projected.

Only a self-critical understanding of the deficiencies on both sides can ease, but never avoid, conflict and misunderstanding. We must ask ourselves whether we are willing to concede the younger generation their grandiosity without envying them, and whether we can bear the painful restrictions of our own life perspectives without too much bitterness. Only then is it possible to enjoy the relative fitness and to work together with young people.

The Difficulties of Communication

I can understand that young people have difficulties in understanding old ones. “Old” is a relative perspective: for

children it may mean someone five or ten years older, for adolescents someone ten years older (remember the slogan “Don’t trust anyone over thirty”), for adults a person twenty to thirty years older, and for people my age “old” returns again to meaning plus five or ten years.

The older person is equipped with experiences, abilities, and insights that are not available to me. I know of suicides of children who were curious to experience death or to meet the dead.

The usual defense mechanism for conflict between age groups is that of devaluation—or, as in the famous animal fable, the “sour-grapes reaction”: the hungry fox who could not reach the grapes consoled himself with the thought that they were surely sour and tasteless.

Unknown experiences have something strange, uncanny, and dangerous, yet, at the same time, fascinating about them. If the relationship to the elder is good, the difference is excluded, denied, or discretely glossed over. Usually, young people do not ask how elders in leading positions feel, equipped with power and responsibility and an enormous amount of work. The younger ones have prejudices about ambition, lust for power, officiousness, and compensatory mechanisms in the psyche of authorities.

Using projective mechanisms, we have memories and pictures of parents and grandparents whom we experienced earlier in similar positions. These are images of individuals, however, who developed under conditions quite different from today’s. The grandfather of a patient aged fifty to sixty would have been born before 1900, and his reactions, experienced by the patient in childhood, have a much different background than mine. Hence, by projection, *false images* are offered for empathizing with me and the older generation.

I perceive a similar difficulty in the older generation’s empathy for and communication with the younger generation. The latter has been shaped by a completely different and more liberal environment, with much larger opportunities for experience and growth. Reactivating one’s own formative youth imagos furnishes *false images* that no longer pertain to contemporary youth. The more closely I observe in analysis, the more incomprehensible are the things I discover. Nevertheless,

archetypal and collective parts of psychic reactions are helpful in this context. (Being in love today is nearly the same disease as it was fifty or two thousand years ago).

The retreat to geriatric grandiosity was classically formulated yet again by Goethe when he let Mephistopheles say about the baccalaureus:

Go, my original, your glorious way!
 How truth would irk you, if you really sought it:
 For who can think of truth or trash to say,
 But someone in the ancient world has thought it?

Poor babes, I will not be your scolder:
 Reflect, the Devil, he is old,
 To understand him, best grow older.

Neurobiology informs us, however, that the devil's advice cannot succeed. Brain and mental structures develop continuously in recursive processes, which means that early mental structures remain the basis for all later achievements and transformations. Metaphorically speaking, B. B. Mandelbrot's apple man always remains an apple man in mental respect because the basic formula incorporates every new result. By this process, the basic theories I learned in psychoanalysis will structure and shape all later achievements. Convinced of the importance of archetypal structures in biological, mental, and cultural development, I will similarly recognize them in many other theories. Young colleagues who did not incorporate this concept into their own basic experience may find my descriptions interesting, but they will soon forget them. The process of growing older in itself cannot establish a sufficient basis for understanding, but instead could even further the distance to my views.

Dialogue and understanding across the generational divide must be learned, trained, and constantly revised and corrected. The dialogue needs to be protected against ubiquitous prejudice and against defense mechanisms; above all, it requires uncompromising openness, which repeatedly runs the risk of touching upon painful experiences. Only then can the natural hiatus between the generations be temporarily bridged.

Those who had the experience of life in the countryside will know what the poor sitting hen feels when the farmer gives her duck eggs to breed. Anxiously flapping, she runs around the pond into which the little ducklings joyously dive. I believe that people often have similar experiences with their own children. Very early on, the next generation displays reactions and abilities that slightly panic the parents. They frequently fill their children with anxieties in order to keep them on a leash or in the playpen for life.

In analytical training, we have examinations, case studies, and literature reports as media for disciplining the thinking and working of our candidates. I have heard that, during analytical training, candidates' creativity, originality, and fantasy are supposed to be diminishing, and that they may turn into faithful followers. That would be—and so far it is a correct observation—a symptom of a denial of the generation gap.

If we finally try to understand the function of this gap, however, I assume that it is an important evolutionary factor that provokes, from generation to generation, an evolutionary crawl.

Some Final Reflections

Re-reflecting on my ideas raises some questions:

1. I don't know to what extent my views are individual ones, conditioned by my own biography.
2. The question remains of how far my views are specific to my generation.
3. I don't know, but I suppose that, in many European countries, my generation has had similar experiences.
4. I also wonder whether the acceleration of technological and social developments worldwide will produce similar experiences and similar feelings among generations.

Margaret Mead (1970), who described developments in multicultural societies in *Culture and Commitment*, precisely analyzed different models of the mutual influences on and the tensions between generations. I believe that developments in psychoanalysis are shaped by the generation gap and by tensions between the generations. This is a subject that would warrant a

much broader and more thorough analysis. In this respect, for example, we could also try to understand the conflict between Freud and Jung—with its rich and accessible source material—as a very productive and creative generation gap.

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