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Abstract

This article avails the concept of social generation to explore how intergenerational differences contribute to the diversity in the appropriation of mobile telephony in rural India. Rural India has experienced numerous social changes such as the decline of agriculture, changes in caste and gender relationships, and rising levels of education which have influenced different age groups in distinct ways during recent decades. The article is based on interviews, observation, and survey data on the use of mobile phones in a village in rural West Bengal during 2005, 2007–2008, 2010, and 2012–2013.

Mobile Phone Use and Social Generations in Rural India

Mannheim (1952) introduced the concept of social generation—people who were born during the same date range and share similar cultural experiences—and it has since been developed to better take human agency and social divisions, such as gender, class, and race into account (Aboim and Vasconcelos 2014; Woodman and Wyn 2015). In its sense of kinship descent, the concept of generation has a long tradition in social anthropology (Kertzner 1983). However, the notion of social generation has mostly been applied to Western countries, whereas particularly anthropological scholarship of India has examined social relationships mainly through the concepts of gender, kinship, and caste. My earlier research has revealed how positions in the kinship system influence mobile phone use patterns in rural India and, in turn, how phone use has mediated changes in family and kinship (Tenhunen 2014). Nevertheless, rural India has experienced numerous social changes which have influenced

different generations in distinct ways. In this article I explore these generational differences in the appropriation of mobile phones in rural India.

Such broad changes as the decline of agriculture, changes in caste and gender relationships, and rising levels of education which have influenced rural West Bengal where I have carried out research are prevalent in other parts of rural India, too. (Otten and Simpson 2016; Kumar 2016). In fact, much of my motivation to carry out long-term ethnographic fieldwork in rural West Bengal has been based on my interest in these changes. Every visit has revealed new and interesting developments—mobile telephony was just one of the many changes I witnessed during my fieldwork.

Demographic changes contribute crucially to the formation of social generations; consequently, I start by briefly exploring demographic trends in India and more specifically in rural West Bengal. Next, I describe the ongoing social changes in the region—the decline of agriculture, changes in caste and gender relationships, and rising levels of education—to examine how different age groups have been influenced by these changes resulting in the formation of social generations. Thereafter, I analyze how social generations use phones in distinct ways as part of local hierarchies. My identification of different mobile phone user groups reveals that it is especially the groups whose structural position has undergone changes that use mobile phones to negotiate their positions in local hierarchies: youth, high caste women, and the low caste people. I also demonstrate how social generations do not evolve or use new media in isolation from each other; instead the younger generation plays an important role in helping the elder generation to use the calling functions of mobile phones as well as to access the internet.

My fieldwork site, Janta, is a multi-caste village in the eastern state of West Bengal with 2,441 inhabitants (Census of India 2011a), the majority of whom earn their livelihood from paddy cultivation and vegetable farming. This article is based on interviews, observation and survey data on the use of mobile phones in 2005, 2007–2008, 2010 and 2012–2013. I also draw from my earlier work in Janta in 1999–2000 and 2003–2004[1].

Age groups formed an important context for both the diffusion and appropriation of mobile phones in Janta. When I searched for phone owners in Janta, I was usually introduced to young men. However, the very first phone in the village was acquired by an elderly woman's sons for her. Her sons had emigrated to work outside the village and the phone helped them stay in touch with their mother. The first group of mobile phone buyers were adult men: micro entrepreneurs as well as car and tractor drivers who found phones useful for staying in touch with customers and calling for help if they experienced problems on the road. As mobile phones became associated with communicating with kin, it became common for women to receive mobile phones as gifts from their fathers, brothers, or husbands.

When inexpensive smart phones became available around 2011, it was again time for the young men to express their technological agency by pioneering the use of smart phones—if their older models were still working, they were kept in the house and used by the rest of the family, particularly by women, who usually stay at home more than men do. At the same time, women who move outside the home for work or study started to acquire personal

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[1] My earlier research in Janta has focused on gender, politics, and exchange relationships (Tenhunen 2003; 2008; 2011).

phones. Young women also preferred smart phones expressing their technological agency and aspirations for change by readily discussing the multiple functions of these phones and demonstrating their ability to use them. I will start by describing the demographic trends in the village before moving to explore the social changes which contribute to the abovementioned generational differences in mobile phone use.

Social changes

The population in Janta is predominantly young (see Figure 1.). Another striking demographic aspect of the village is the skewed male-female ratio. Both these trends are in line with the broader demographic trends in India. India has the largest youth population—356 million 10–24 year-olds—as well as one of the world's most skewed gender ratios (The UNFPA report 2014). According to the 2011 census, the ratio of female children in the age group 0–6 years had decreased from 945 to 914 per 1000 male children, being at—the lowest level since the Independence of India. The imbalance is explained by girls receiving poorer nutrition and health care than boys, as well as the higher rate of abortion of female fetuses. In particular, wealthy urban Indians influence the sex ratio by determining the sex of their unborn child with ultra sound tests and aborting female fetuses, even though this is illegal in India. There are also significantly fewer girls than boys in Janta, which may indicate the neglect of female children, as I did not find any evidence of villagers determining the sex of unborn children with ultrasound.

Chart 1. Age groups according to gender in Janta (N= 2328, Source: author's survey 2004)

The quintessential Janta village scene—cows and goats, a clustering of small brick and mud houses connected by dirt roads and paths—hides the fact that the village has experienced diverse social upheavals. Land reforms and the increase in agricultural productivity due to the introduction of new farming technologies improved especially small farmers' and landless labourers' living conditions after India gained independence in 1948 and during the communist party (CPI(M)) rule of the state of West Bengal (1977–2011). Extreme poverty, which manifested itself as occasional food scarcity, disappeared from Janta in the 1990s, reflecting the decrease in poverty[2] in the entire state from 73 percent to 32 percent during 1977–2000 (Banerjee et al. 2002) . In Janta, affluent houses have acquired television sets, motor cycles, tractors, jeeps and, from 2003 onwards, mobile phones. However, for most of the villagers, the rise in living standards has meant small but important improvements in their quality of life. Daily labourers have prospered in that they can now afford a more balanced diet, better quality clothing, soap and oil. The villagers' understanding of the essentials of the standard of living is summed up by the Bengali expression *khaua–makha–pora*, which literally means eating, anointing the skin with oil, and clothing.

Since the economic liberalization in the 1990s, small farms have, however, become less profitable due to the increases in the farming costs and decreases in the prices of agricultural products. Only large-scale farmers have continued to make profits thanks to the greater volume of their production and investments in side businesses. Smaller farmers' main coping strategy has been to send young men to work as paid labourers mainly in the southern and western parts of India.

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[2] The official poverty line in India was calculated based on the minimum energy requirements until 2011 when a new poverty line based on a cost of living was introduced.

Class crucially overlaps with caste in Janta, and the village is divided into caste neighborhoods. The dominant caste, both numerically and in terms of land ownership in Janta, is the Tilis (50%). Other major caste groups are the Bagdis (15%) and Casas (16%). Most Tilis and Casas own land, while most Bagdis, who are classified as a scheduled caste, earn their livelihood by means of daily labor, mainly agricultural work or work in the brick factories. In Janta, 87 percent of Bagdis are landless, whereas 59 percent of Tilis are landowners. Villagers know one another's caste identity, while strangers' caste identity is assessed on the basis of their dialect and behavior, or directly inquired, unlike in the cities, where it is no longer such an appropriate topic for conversation with strangers.

Caste is a social institution that evolved from Hindu religious thinking during the Veda epoch (1000–600 BC), which defines the cosmic order into four hierarchically organized categories, or varnas, based on purity: the Brahmins, the highest group, are in charge of religious rules, speech, and prayers; the Kshatriyas, the warrior caste, maintain and conserve the sacred order (dharma); and the Vaishyas, as merchant caste, create prosperity. The Shudras, the lowest caste, serve the upper castes with their manual labor. (Stern 1993, 55) The varna classification of the religious texts does not, however, reflect how caste is classified in everyday life in India, as only the Brahmins are labelled by their varna title. Other castes are called by their local jati names—jati is a wide-spread local term for caste. Hierarchical standing of numerous jati groups is locally determined, but in relation to the varna hierarchy and its principles. The higher the caste, the purer it is held to be. The concepts of purity are not associated with hygiene, but with the distance from biological processes like birth, death, and refuse. For example, the skinning of animals, fishing, cleaning, cremation, and

laundering are examples of impure professions. The impurity is transmitted when a person touches one who is purer, or when the purer one enjoys food or drink prepared by someone who is considered ritually less pure.

Whereas it was the small farmers who experienced a sharper rise in their standards of living in the 1990s, it is the landless and scheduled caste laborers who have prospered since 2000—in contrast to the small farmers, whose position has become increasingly precarious. Bagdis, the lowest caste groups of the village, benefit from their caste status in that they have traditionally worked at the tile factories in the region. As work at the brick kilns is not available during the rainy season, Bagdis also work as agricultural laborers. The Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (NREGA), which officially guarantees at least 100 days of paid unskilled manual work annually, has increased job opportunities for casual work. Although people obtain less work in practice than guaranteed, the NREGA has diversified their sources of income. Moreover, government quotas have given scheduled castes real possibilities for class mobility, as almost half of the jobs in India's central government and seats of education have been reserved for scheduled castes and tribals (Varshney 2000). Even if quotas have only helped few Bagdis in the village to obtain salaried jobs, these exceptional career paths are important tangible examples of the emerging new opportunities

There are signs of the lessening of caste discrimination as low castes are no longer dependent on the few large landowners of the dominant caste. Opportunities for inter-caste socializing, which starts at the primary schools where children of all castes have their midday meal (sponsored by the central government) together, have increased. Yet, caste groups still live and interact in their own neighbourhoods, and inter-caste marriages are rare. Higher castes

seldom visit lower caste neighborhoods. Lower castes enter the higher caste neighborhood as day laborers, to sell fish and vegetable, or just to chat. When lower castes visit the higher castes, they usually stand or sit in the yard—they do not enter the house. Lower caste laborers have their meals on the veranda as part of their payment, but they never enter the higher caste house. Higher castes do not eat food prepared in lower caste houses.

Despite the continuity of caste discrimination, Bagdis are not particularly motivated to organize themselves in order to change their position as a caste group, nor have the Scheduled Castes in the entire state of West Bengal joined the Dalit movement through which Scheduled Castes have organized particularly in the Western parts of India. The lower castes in Janta talk about imitating the upper strata of village society in terms of consumption, of being able to eat and dress so well that they can no longer be recognized as low—thereby circumventing the purity criteria for social ascent by striving for a new identity through consumption.

Another major change in India—and Janta—is the increase in the level of education. Literacy rates have improved in India during the last decade by 9 percentage points, and the improvement among women has been more pronounced than among men. Primary school enrolment at the age of six has become nearly universal, although the dropout rate remains high (Rustagi 2009). In 2011, 74 per cent of the men and 58 per cent of the women in Janta were literate (Census of India 2011a)—the same figures for India are 82 per cent for men and 65 per cent for women (Census of India 2011b). As chart 2. shows, in Janta the decline in illiteracy has been most dramatic among the higher caste women: The age group 11–15 is fully literate. This is the highest rate in any age group, and is also higher than the literacy of

high caste boys in the same age group. High caste women have caught up with men in terms of literacy and the younger age groups in the low castes are catching up with the high castes, but the gap between the literacy levels of low and high castes is still wide. Both upper and low caste women have experienced significant improvements in education in comparison to upper caste men. As a result, upper caste men have been losing their relative education advantage.

Chart 2. Illiteracy in Janta (Source: author's survey 2004)

Women were allocated quotas in the local governing organs, *panchayats*, in 1993. During the CPI(M) rule of West Bengal (1977–2011) women of all castes, joined *mahila samiti*s (women's committees) and regularly attended the meetings. The women's committees focused on raising women's consciousness about their rights motivating women to participate in *panchayat* (local governing organ) led programs. The first female panchayat representative from Janta, Tapati Kundu, arranged income earning opportunities and a literacy program for women. According to her (Kundu 2000), women should identify and protest against cultural practices which are harmful to women. She advocated the protection of the kinship-related morality by protesting against women's mistreatment and demanding that men should fulfill their duties as breadwinners. But she also demanded changes in such central cultural institution as the marriage system by advocating women's right to divorce and earn an income and the eradication of the dowry system.

Even if female representatives have taken active political roles, the scope of the panchayats' power is limited, and state policies towards women have been ambiguous. While involving women in its activities and state administration, the ruling CPI(M) party carried out land reform without considering women as land owners until most of the land had been distributed

(Basu 1992). Land mainly gets passed through the male line through inheritance, and ideas of the home as the women's place prevent women from participating in market activities such as running small scale businesses. Only few middle class women have benefitted from women's rights economically, as these discourses have encouraged them to obtain a college education which qualifies for public sector jobs. The first upper caste girls (Tilis and Brahmins) of Janta graduated from college in the 1990s, and two of them found white-collar jobs (one as a teacher and the other in public administration) soon after. Few women have followed in their occupational footsteps in the subsequent decades.

Mobile phone user generations

Based on the abovementioned changes, I delineate three age groups in relation to mobile phone use. These groups also form social generations due to having experienced different social changes. Those in the age group 40+ are illiterate or have a low level of education. Consequently, they are unable to browse the internet. I frequently witnessed how many cannot even make a phone call without help. Most people in this age group know numbers as written in Bengali script. Mobile telephones with Bengali script were initially available, but in 2012 I no longer saw these around; most people had switched to using Chinese phones, which use the English alphabet. Therefore, most people in this age group could answer a phone, but are unable to read and type numbers written in the English script. The reason for this age group's inability to learn English is that the state's former ruling Marxist

government banned the study of English in school up to class 5 in 1981; however, English was re-introduced from class 2 in 1999[3].

A technical ability to use a phone matters; nevertheless, the inability to read English numbers and text does not exclude anyone from calling, because phones are shared and people are helped to use a phone. I witnessed both young men and women acting as phone use experts in their families. Consequently, intergenerational relationships give the elder generation an access to digital media similarly to rural China, where Oreglia (2014) discovered unlikely ICT users—older women who maintained relationships and accessed online entertainment after receiving training from their children. Similar kind of assistance relationships have been observed in many locations, both in developing and developed countries. Bakardjieva (2005) developed the concept of a 'warm expert' to refer to the local technical expert who is sympathetic to those who need help and support with ICTs and who also has knowledge about the people they are helping based on her research on internet users in North America. Many people worldwide are also involved in proxy internet use defined as using the internet for somebody else's behalf or relying on others when accessing the internet (Selwyn et al. 2016).

The importance of education for mobile phone use was highlighted when I observed a 12-year old girl effortlessly learning to browse English language information from the internet by means of a smart phone while the older, less educated generation in the same family needed help to just type in a number. Since mobile phones are not considered private,

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[3] Primary education from class 1 to 10 is given in India to children aged 6 to 14 years old.

children play an important role in enabling the elder generation's phone use by helping them to manage the phone's functions. A wealth of studies (Kasesniemi and Rautiainen 2002; Fortunati 2001; Ito et al. 2006; Yoon 2006a–b; Höflich and Hartmann 2006; Wilska 2003) has demonstrated that teens and children use digital media to construct identity and fine-tune social relationships, especially in Western countries. In Janta, the generational divide differs from that in most Western countries, since children and teens in rural India still rarely have a chance to independently use digital media. Most people simply cannot afford to allow their children make regular phone calls. Children are not perceived as consumers with a certain degree of autonomy, as in Western countries. Children, both girls and boys, are nevertheless skilled at operating phones, even smartphones, which they use to play games and listen to music.

Like children, the age group 25–40 is better educated than the elder generation, and most of the first college-educated people in the village belong to this cohort. Consequently, this generation has the ability to use phones independently. They are the first generation to grow up while experiencing the decrease in farming's importance. Young men in the age group 25–40 are considered the main operators and owners of household phones, and they are more motivated to use their phones to build networks outside the village than the older generations. The majority of phone owners mentioned calling relatives as the main reason for obtaining their phone. However, in practice men call their friends more than their relatives.

Women in this age group are the ones influenced by the women's movement. The most important function of the phones for young married women is that thanks to phones, women are better connected with their natal families—for most women, natal families are a major

source of support in times of difficulties. Women appreciated how mobile phones offer them the possibility to move away so that fewer people are within hearing distance although it is seldom possible to make a call in complete privacy. For instance, young daughter-in-laws told me that they usually call their natal homes when the in-laws were not at home. Another example is a mother whom I observed advising her daughter over the phone to disobey the mother-in-law. Her daughter had married to a well-to-do household where the daughter was expected to take the responsibility of all housework while the mother-in-law did very little. Although the daughter was considered happily married by the villagers in that she was married to a wealthy family, the division of work between the women of the household was not considered fair. Mother saw that the only solution was that her daughter would express her view and refuse the excess work in her in-law's house. Without the phone, the chances for this conversation would have been limited because the mother would have usually only met her daughter surrounded by the daughter's in-laws. As Lim (2016) argues, based on studies of diasporic families in Asia, families are actively 'done', shaped and reshaped, through mobile communication.

Whereas in many parts of India women's mobile phone use has been experienced as a threat to the marriage system (Grodzins Gold 2009; Doron 2012; Jouhki 2013; Kärki 2013), in rural West Bengal the marriage system and the ensuing hierarchical relationships between kin groups have encouraged and legitimated women's mobile phone use. Old practice of maintaining relationships with the in-laws has continued with new emphasis on women as the initiator of the contacts. It is a tangible proof of the change, that it has become a common practice for newlywed wives to stay in touch with their parents over the phone right after their marriage, whereas just a decade ago I observed that contact between kin groups was avoided for a year after the marriage. Mobile phones help women to cultivate the matrilineal

tendencies in the kinship system and thereby challenge the male dominance. Women's increasing access to a mobile phone influences the kinship code of conduct and kinship hierarchies within families and between kin groups. Motivated by women's rights discourses and political activism, women use phones to realize their goals of widening the domestic sphere.

Mobile phones are a double-edged sword in that they undermine the authority structure of joint families, which could contribute to conflicts and make young women vulnerable. However, since women who call their parents often receive the money for their calls from their husbands, women's calling does not lead to conflicts with husbands, which long visits to women's natal families could do. A husband who provides money for his wife's calls strengthens his relationship with his wife and loosens the grip of the joint family on the couple's relationship. Moreover, women calling their natal families serves to reduce the distance between the kin groups, which can have unintended consequences for the meaning of all kin relationships.

Generations within local hierarchies

The concept of social generation has appealed to market researchers in their quest to understand generational differences in consumption through such notions as Generation Y which has mostly been used to refer to young and adventurous consumers mainly in Western countries but also in India. For example, Jain and Pant (2015) have identified the Generation Y, those born between 1980 and 2000, from three Indian metropolises. Nevertheless, their

description focuses clearly on upper class youth since they are the ones who can afford to access multiple media simultaneously. Also in rural West Bengal, class and caste crucially influence the above discussed age groups' experiences and phone use. The biggest barrier for both men's and women's phone use is the cost of calling. Low-income families share the understanding that phones need to be used sparingly, thus reflecting their financial means, whereas the upper classes can spend generously on phone calls. I will next discuss how local hierarchies influence the meaning of new media within generations.

Considering the difficulties many villagers face in using even basic phones for calling, I was surprised to discover in 2012 that most households had a Chinese-made smartphone. I was especially told that nowadays Bagdis (the lowest caste) have acquired fancy phones. These inexpensive Chinese smartphones cost around INR 700 (9,5 €)[4], which equals approximately daily laborers' one week's salary, and are, as mentioned, internet ready. Most people in the scheduled caste neighborhood of the village did not own a television when they purchased a Chinese smart phone. When I told my upper caste friends in the town of Vishnupur about the popularity of smartphones among the Bagdis, they commented that common people's use of phones as entertainment centers entails the misuse of phones, which should be used for making calls. The low castes and classes' use of mobile phones for entertainment stirred controversy, because their new ability to possess such advanced technological gadgets was experienced as disruptive of local hierarchies—Bagdi caste person owning a smartphone challenges the upper caste views of lower castes as backward. Although the Bagdis did not buy branded phones, their smartphones were a similar identity statement, confirming their position's relative improvement in relation to the upper land owning, castes in the village.

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[4] In 2013, the minimum payment for daily workers according to the standards set by the government work scheme NREGA in India was INR 174.

Smartphones represent Bagdis services and consumer products from which they had been excluded. This exclusion, in turn, had contributed to their social standing in neo-liberal India where media images have delineated the urban middle classes as the consumers of not just the newly available commodities but also of the new India produced through the meanings of these commodities (Fernandes 2000).

Even though most households now owned smartphones, only few people used their personal phones to browse the internet in the village. Those who had availed the internet with their personal phones all had a college education, and therefore belong to a minority. In 2012–13, I found 33 villagers (1,4 per cent of the population of the village the total population of which was 2,441 in 2011) who either had a college degree or were studying in college. Two sisters had used a service provider's free trial period to access the internet via their mobile phone, but had not continued after this period expired. Two young men, both of whom had service jobs, occasionally used search engines to browse the internet after the free trial period. They also accessed Facebook through their mobile phones. Others used the internet to download music and films, find out about prices, products, jobs and exam results, as well as to send e-mail, and access study sources. Since the screens of low-cost smartphones are small, browsing the internet with a phone is difficult; consequently, even people who are able to use search engines to browse the internet with their phones often prefer to use internet shops to, for example, access exam questions and results.

Smartphone owners who did not have college education found that the phone's most interesting feature was that it could be used for leisure activities. They preferred to use their internet-ready phones for listening to music, taking and storing photos, and watching movies.

Instead of browsing the internet directly through their smart phones, most people use the internet indirectly on their phones. They buy music, videos and pictures, which are downloaded on the phone's memory chip. The usual package sold in the downloading shop in Janta includes popular Hindi and Bengali songs and films, devotional music, pictures of scenery, women, film stars, gods, and goddesses.

The availability of internet-ready phones in Janta has not—regardless of class and education – caused people to become internet users. Grasping the textual content of the internet, requires more than the average level of education in the village; only those with a college education can use search engines to browse the internet. Like mobile calls, internet use is considered expensive: The lowest monthly fee was INR 98 (1,3 €) in 2013, which only offers a limited amount of gigabytes and a slow connection. Most people preferred to spend this amount for the cable television instead of internet connection—it is possible to get more than 100 television channels for INR 100 per month.

As Donner (2015, 153) argues, practitioners, theoreticians, and policymakers should be wary of proclaiming that the digital divide between the developed and developing countries has been bridged thanks to smartphones. Access to the internet by means of smartphones does not provide the same affordances as a broadband connection by means of a desktop or laptop computer. In addition to the difficulties of reading on a small screen, it is hard to use smartphones to author internet contents, which is one of the key internet affordances compared to printed text. Moreover, when every click on the internet costs money, users are likely to conserve airtime and their data bundles' balance carefully.

Conclusions

My exploration of social generations in rural India, highlights how people's positions in hierarchical social structures shape the formation of social generations as well as how the generations use new media. Moreover, in Janta village the generational divide in mobile phone use is different from most Western countries since children and teens in rural India still rarely have a chance to use digital media autonomously. Most children and youth do not possess their own personal phones and therefore cannot use mobile phones to strengthen their ties with their peers over mobile phones and social media as youth in many parts of the world does. Nevertheless, they play an important role in making mobile telephony accessible for the elder generation: in rural West Bengal, the ´soft expert´ is usually the younger family member rather than a peer or friend. Situation in Janta also differs from many other locations (for instance Oreglia 2014, Bakardjieva 2004) in that people do not mainly rely on others for using the internet but also for using the calling functions of the phones. By taking an expert role with regard to the mundane use of mobile phones, children and young are able to introduce subtle changes in family hierarchies which have been mainly based on seniority in age. The younger generation understood broadly as people who are in a junior positions in their families use mobile phones to contest the family hierarchies and build networks outside the family more than the elder generation who is able to use mobile phones only with the help of an intermediary.

Much of the anthropological research on the use of mobile phones has an emphasis on the way technologies tend to reinforce existing structures and, especially, adherence to kinship patterns, in common (Horst and Miller 2006; Barendregt 2008; Archambault 2011; Doron 2012; Jouhki 2013; Lipset 2013). Applying the concept of generation helps to move the attention to how phones are used as part of social changes. The identification of different mobile phone user groups reveals that it is especially the groups whose structural position has undergone changes that use mobile phones to negotiate local hierarchies: youth, high caste women, and the low caste people. Social generations therefore not only reflect objective social changes but provide opportunities for agency which, in turn, crucially shape generational experiences.

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