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A PHENOMENOLOGY OF HESITATION, OPEN-MINDEDNESS, AND INTERGENERATIONAL HABITUS FORMATION AT OLDER AGE¹

abstract

In this article, I explore how older people can experience the tensions between ‘keeping an open mind’ at older age, intergenerational shifts in cultural norms, and social separation between generations—interpreting this phenomenologically as a rupture in the intergenerational habitus. Drawing on engaged phenomenological insights from qualitative interviews, as well as Beauvoir’s and Mannheim’s theories of intergenerationality, I explore structural factors which pose specific obstacles to intergenerational relationships and open-mindedness at older age. I phenomenologically review the conditions of possibility for being open to the perspectives of younger people. In particular, I attend to a moment of ‘hesitation’ (Al-Saji, 2014) experienced by participants during which they felt aware of intergenerational differences. I consider and analyse phenomenologically the different affective responses that are possible when moments of generational difference manifest in a tangible intergenerational encounter.

keywords

critical phenomenology, ageing, older age, habitus, intergenerationality

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1. Older age, habits, and the notion of the habitus

Theories of habit have garnered significant attention among phenomenologists seeking to understand experiences of older age (Stoller, 2014), who often draw on Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* (1996/1972) in their analysis. Beauvoir there understands habits as undergirding a relationship with the past, not as recollected memory but instead through "the shape of attitudes and forms of behaviour"—"acquired reactions and automatic reflexes" that "help in the establishment of a routine" (p. 466). Beauvoir's contention is that the role of habits increases at older age, sparing older people "the effort of difficult adaptation" that, she maintains, can become increasingly challenging at older age (p. 466).

While Beauvoir acknowledges how habits play a vital role across the life course in facilitating meaningful engagement with the world, she expresses particular concern for situations in which older people acquire "the habit of having habits" (p. 468; p. 540). For Beauvoir, habits like this constitute a kind of stagnation in the lifeworld of the older person, preventing them from being open to present and future possibilities, as well as intersubjective connections. She understands this kind of habit as affording older people a kind of "ontological security" (p. 469) in the repetition of the past (e.g., through rigid routine or hardened opinion)—sustaining a sense of self that has become difficult to renew through adaptation (Laing, 1962, p. 42).¹ Much of the phenomenological commentary on older age takes up these concerns with the habitual (Stanier, 2025a; Stanier, 2024; Behrendt, 2022; Bergoffen, 2014; Fielding, 2014; Rodier, 2014; Cuffari, 2011). As Pedwell (2021) notes, there is significant theoretical potential in linking together concepts of "habit, consciousness, agency, and transformation" (p. 5), since there are manifold ways in which habits scaffold worldly interactions with both capabilities and limitations in shared social contexts. Philosophical engagement with the notion of habit more generally has a long history, linking the cultivation of habits with ethical duty (e.g., Aristotle, 1985), bridging problematic mind-body dualisms (e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 2012/1945), exploring the potential of educational reform (e.g., Dewey, 1925), and considering how power structures are embodied and iterated (e.g., Fanon, 1970/1952; Ngo, 2016; Weiss, 2015; Al-Saji, 2014). The concept of the habitus, as an extension of

1 Overall, however, Beauvoir emphasises how disruption to "the habit of having habits" can cause significant distress and existential bewilderment for older people—particularly on occasions such as sudden relocation or illness. She ultimately, therefore, advocates "pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning" to prevent the habitual from producing "an absurd parody of our former life" (Beauvoir, 1996, p. 540); at the same time, she acknowledges this is only a possibility for "a handful of privileged people" (p. 541).

the notion of habit, has also had significant uptake across the humanities and social sciences (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990; Foucault, 1995/1975; Butler, 1990; Dewey 1925). In particular, Bourdieu's influential definition of the habitus (1990) highlights how habits, as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions," arise from particular "conditions of existence" to produce what he calls "structuring structures" (p. 53). In other words, he says, habits are structured by the situation in which they arise but are not exhaustively determined or regulated by external circumstances. Neither do these habits, emerging in situation, prescriptively operate as patterns that prefigure future action. Instead, individuals inherit, creatively adapt to, and influence the shared contexts giving rise to their habits.

Habits therefore importantly capture aspects of cultural transmission and resistance, and the dynamic interplay between individuals and the broader context can be understood overall as the habitus. Bourdieu's definition also remarkably parallels Beauvoir's contentions about how older age functions (1996): "each [factor] reacts upon all the others and is at the same time affected by them, and it is in the undefined flow of this circular process that old age must be understood" (p. 9). The dimension of *intergenerationality* implicit in this understanding of the habitus, however, is something that can be cashed out further through a phenomenological lens, and that is what I seek to undertake in this article.

This overall article is led by a contextually specific, engaged phenomenological approach (Stanier, 2022), in that its "operative concepts and concerns" (p. 234) have been developed by "attending to [older] people's lived experiences in their specificity and relationality" (p. 237).² This approach included semi-structured qualitative interviews with ten participants aged 68-83 (based in the South West of the UK) and a process of iterative feedback with them, such that participants co-determined which themes were important to centre in the philosophical research (Stanier, 2024). Section 2, building on the foregoing discussion of habits and habitus, therefore sketches out a related understanding of 'open-mindedness' that was foregrounded by participants as important to ageing well. Moreover, Section 2 contextualises how recognition of intergenerational differences was a significant way in which participants felt their age was put into relief and why this is of phenomenological interest. While these insights and observations can only be illustrative and not representative of any particular demographic of older people, this section presents an experiential predicament which, I argue, poses important philosophical questions to which I respond in this article.

Section 3 addresses this understanding of 'open-mindedness' by analysing generational difference. In Section 4, I establish a conceptual distinction between a generational habitus and an intergenerational habitus. This differentiation can, I argue, support nuanced understanding of adaptation and scope for open-mindedness. I address a range of examples to illustrate this in Section 4, exploring whether and how intergenerational encounters can produce enduring connections in contexts of widespread generational separation. Finally, in Section 5, I attend to a moment of 'hesitation' (Al-Saji, 2014) experienced by participants during which they felt aware of intergenerational differences. I consider and analyse phenomenologically the different affective responses that are possible when moments of generational difference manifest as challenging, drawing on the conceptual framework of

² This article focuses specifically on the experiences of the research participants—who were white, middle-class, based in the South West of the UK, and interviewed during the COVID-19 pandemic—and so my conclusions chiefly illustrate dynamics at work in this context; experiences among older people from other communities within the UK and elsewhere will differ. Nonetheless, this study may offer broader indicative insights concerning the role of affective hesitation as a condition of possibility for shared intergenerational understanding. This article does not present the full qualitative findings and data from this study as such (which are available elsewhere as Stanier [2024] and Stanier [2025b]).

the habitus in order to do so.³ The analysis presented in this article then culminates in an evaluation of the conditions of possibility afforded by abiding intergenerational connections through shared time, curiosity, and care.

2. Adaptation, continuity, and open-mindedness at older age

As identified in the Beauvoir scholarship mentioned above, the notions of habit and habitus importantly draw together several key concepts within phenomenology relating to the broader process of becoming older—including embodiment, affect, temporality, historicity, intersubjectivity, self-awareness, and empathy. Bodily, cognitive, and affective habits make it possible to *recognise* meanings in the world, to gain a reliable sense of what it is possible to do, and to learn, adapt, and act within this world.⁴ These habits, as Merleau-Ponty (2012/ 1945) observes, are generated within the scope of an individual’s personal past and a shared cultural world:

Consciousness projects itself into a physical world and has a body, just as it projects itself into a cultural world and has a habitus. This is given because it can only be consciousness by playing upon significations given in the absolute past of nature or its personal past [...]. (p. 139)⁵

This is especially interesting for a phenomenology of older age, since becoming older is defined by the lengthening of this “personal past”—a past in which many habits have been developed, undergone adaptation, or faded away into obscurity. To become an older person, after all, involves living a long time (relative to other people), and to have adapted to a variety of social and historical contexts in the process.

Phenomenology of habit thus offers an important means by which to capture aspects of both continuity and personal change experienced across the life course, culminating at older age: “the continual process of becoming in time, a ‘unity of life’ that has a habitual, or again, [...] sedimented heritage of the past and projection into the future” (Steinbock, 2017, p. 7). This dynamic is addressed elsewhere in critical age studies, often from the perspective of life history narration (Gullette, 2004, p. 151; Segal, 2013, p. 4). At older age, it is possible to recall and relate to past versions of the habituated self, and yet also feel substantial differences that have accrued through habit formation and adaptation over time. This view of ageing and older age resonates with broader cultural associations between later life, wisdom, and maturity (Edmondson, 2009).

That said, by no means does older age *necessarily* result in temperance and harmonious adaptation of habits, as has sometimes been implied by phenomenologists (e.g., Husserl, 1989, p. 95). In addition to personal changes, older age can also reveal habitual aspects of a personality that have, in fact, become more entrenched. Moreover, where an environment changes and habit adaptation does not occur, challenges can emerge that—while not straightforwardly determined by chronological age—can be characterised by ageing and

3 In this way, I also seek to contribute to recent work on generative phenomenology of intergenerationality (e.g., Steinbock, 2017; Fritsch, 2018).

4 The notions of habit and habitus also offer a response to critics who accuse phenomenology of neglecting that which exceeds conscious experience—elusive but nonetheless operative elements such as unconscious desires, bodily memories, and cultural imaginaries, etc. Phenomenology of habit and habitus accounts for a lived past that is beyond conscious recollection, which is embodied and affectively awakened (Husserl, 1989, p. 234).

5 Merleau-Ponty here also refers to the inherited *biological* past—the “past of nature”—that informs the constitution of the body and its physical capacities. The notion of the habitus is closely linked to his account of the “body schema” (2012 [1945], p. 101) but a thorough-going comparison of these concepts exceeds the scope of this article.

generational shifts. While individuals may chalk up their frustration with learning new habits and skills to their own idiosyncrasies, the difficulty of adapting oneself to new circumstances—especially external demands like new technologies, or changes to health and ability—testifies to something with which many older people struggle. An analysis of an individual’s habits alone—as opposed to an account of a social habitus—may fail to capture these dynamics, where broader norms and environments have a bearing.

The ability to cultivate or adapt habits was something highlighted participants, in the interviews that have guided this study, as key to ageing well (Stanier, 2024); indeed, almost all participants remarked during our conversations together on the importance of being ‘open-minded’ at older age. For them, being open-minded broadly meant engaging with other people, especially those with different social perspectives—whether through speaking with others, reading, watching TV, trying new activities, or otherwise learning about current affairs in the world. This sense of open-mindedness did not necessarily require a change in habits or judgements in every case, but the *potential* to be moved or to learn needed to be genuinely there. One participant, for example, described “the essence of being young” as being able “to remain curious” and “be open and new to [...] experience” (p. 113). Participants regarded a curiosity about, and engagement with, other perspectives as important, as opposed to dismissiveness on the basis of a “habit of having habits” (following Beauvoir). Their descriptions of open-mindedness therefore in many ways echoed Rowe and Kahn’s conception of ‘successful ageing’ (1997), as involving “high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life” (p. 433). Indeed, some scholars have framed successful ageing as specifically entailing “a process of continuous adaptation” that involves “the dynamic interchange of gains and losses throughout life, and [...] age-related and self-produced changes in oneself” (Lupien and Wan, 2004, p. 1421). We might, in other words, understand participants’ notion of open-mindedness through the lens of habit formation as an openness to adaptation.

While participants conveyed a strong sense that they regarded open-mindedness as important to ageing well, many expressed uncertainty or ambivalence about the extent to which they were successfully able to maintain an open outlook. Again, there was a suggestion that it is not being older *per se*, in a chronological or biological sense, that leads to difficulties in cultivating new habits and adapting to broader social and technological shifts—social and environmental opportunities to adapt were often lacking in these instances (Dewey, 2012, p. 16). Broader environments and cultures shape and facilitate this process of habit adaptation, blurring the boundaries between individualised habits and a broader social habitus. For example, specific *circumstances* can make it more difficult to maintain an ‘open mind,’ and some participants reflected on how the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns had made it more difficult to maintain habits of curiosity, drawing more often on assumptions, prejudices, and habits of mind. “I have noticed how my prejudice, the assumptions I make, [...] have been on the increase,” said one participant, as we spoke in shortly after a lockdown in early 2021 (Stanier, 2024, p. 113). While this is something that resonates with many people’s experiences of lockdown, this outlook garnered particular significance, in light of participants’ evolving concerns about becoming older.

So how can we use phenomenology of habit and habitus to understand the significance and the challenge posed by open-mindedness at older age? Beauvoir writes provocatively in *The Coming of Age* (1996/1972) that “it is difficult for the old to be open to new ideas; but they also close themselves off deliberately – every intervention from outside amounts to a threat” (p. 471). An outrageously ageist statement at first glance, the status of Beauvoir’s claim calls for interrogation. Beauvoir elsewhere demonstrates a profound understanding of the ways in which socio-political contingencies of capitalism cut across the life course and produce specific modes

of becoming older; most famously, in the concluding chapter of *The Coming of Age*, she writes: “[i]t is the whole system that is at issue and our claim cannot be otherwise than radical – change life itself” (p. 543).⁶ In this context, Beauvoir’s provocative statement about “being open to new ideas” can be understood, if ambiguously, not so much as a universal claim about “the old” as a reified group but instead as a rhetorical acknowledgement that older people’s habits and attitudes can seem out of step with broader cultural norms. Indeed, a few pages later, Beauvoir gestures towards broader ethical and intergenerational tensions at work:

These set attitudes may be irritating. But they must be understood. The elderly man, forgotten and treated with disrespect by the new generations, is challenging his judges both now and in the future. (p. 479)

The issue of keeping an ‘open mind’ at older age accordingly calls for nuanced treatment, attending to cultural specificities and differentials of exclusion. Indeed, these “set attitudes” can be a source of frustration to older people themselves—perhaps especially where structural factors, like COVID-19 lockdowns, have impeded individuals’ habits which had previously aimed at cultivating and maintaining an open mind. In what follows, I draw on phenomenological analysis to understand how these participants’ experiences are constituted experientially, as well as some of the potential implications of their cultural significance.

3. Phenomenology of generational difference

One of the most distinctive challenges participants flagged up with respect to cultivating an open-minded outlook regarded intergenerational differences. “It can be quite exhausting actually, trying to keep abreast of the current cultural mores and what’s happening with society,” one participant told me (Stanier, 2024, p. 123); “[t]he cultural differences are so marked, really, between us older people and you younger people,” said another (p. 129). Defining what constitutes a ‘generation,’ and accordingly what intergenerational differences might be, is not a simple undertaking (Andina, 2022). As Fritsch (2018) points out, a generation can be construed variously: (1) as “all those presently living” (p. 19); (2) as familial relations between “grandparents, parents, and children” (p. 19); (3) as all those born within the “average time it takes for children to become parents and parents to become grandparents” (p. 20; Blanchard and Fischer, 1989);⁷ (4) as people who have inherited a shared culture (Fritsch, 2018, p. 21); or (5) as people whose lives have been shaped through key historical events (p. 21). Separating the notion of a generation from strictly reproductive temporalities, elements of the third, fourth, and fifth definitions above are especially important considerations. These construals capture distinctions and dynamics between living and non-living generations—significant, for example, when past events lapse out of ‘living memory’—while acknowledging generative interactions across generations during an overlap of shared time. They also emphasise that shared cultural and historical references (as per the fourth and fifth definitions listed above) are important to understanding what it means to be part of a generation (Vincent, 2003, p. 115).

Of course, as Moody (2008) notes, crude generalisations about whole chronological cohorts are generally unhelpful: “A 62-year-old African American woman may not have that much

⁶ The contingent conditions that produce lived realities of ageing can be understood phenomenologically, following Guenther (2021), as quasi-transcendental structures.

⁷ The average time it takes for children to become parents and parents to become grandparents is often taken to be around 30 years, although this varies according to class, context, culture, and more. This definition typically accommodates the idea that roughly three generations live alongside one another at any given time (Fritsch, 2018, p. 20; Blanchard and Fischer, 1989).

in common with a 44-year-old Caucasian man, for all kinds of reasons. Classifying them both as ‘Boomers’ doesn’t tell us a lot and tends to obscure important social forces” (p. 841).⁸ As participants pointed out to me, people within a generation can have radically different perspectives—with different politics and experiences. “[W]e’ve gone through similar times but how they are experienced has been quite different,” said one participant, for example (Stanier, 2024, p. 115); “I don’t identify with a lot of people my age,” observed another (p. 115). Nonetheless, the above considerations do suggest a formative context that is shared to some degree, out of which individuals’ habits emerge. “[Y]ou do have a sort of an understanding of your own generation that goes without saying,” said another participant (p. 116), adding that “there’s a sort of shorthand [...] in communication. [...] [Y]ou don’t have to explain things so much.”

A phenomenological understanding of the habitus can be useful here in interpreting this somewhat ambivalent sense of being part of a generation, attending to the diversity of outlooks within shared social contexts, the underlying dynamics of disparate perspectives, and the embodied capacity for adaptation and change among different groups. This will, in turn, make possible an analysis of the intergenerational differences referenced by participants as challenging their ability to keep an ‘open mind.’ Accordingly, Karl Mannheim observes, in his influential essay “The Problem of Generations” (1952/1928), that

[o]ne is old primarily in so far as he comes to live within a specific, individually acquired, framework of useable past experience, so that every new experience has its form and its place largely marked out for it in advance. In youth, on the other hand, where life is new, formative forces are just coming into being, and basic attitudes in the process of development can take advantage of the moulding power of new situations. (p. 296)⁹

It is interesting to note here that Mannheim does not *define* ‘being old’ as finding it difficult to adapt and acquire new habits. Instead, he suggests that older people have acquired a functional habitus that enables them to draw upon past experiences in order to interpret and respond to new situations.

Phenomenologists, following Husserl (e.g., 1989), have been specifically concerned with this process by which consciousness constitutes itself as an enduring nexus of beliefs, convictions, dispositions, and embodied capacities.¹⁰ Rather than having to ‘start from scratch,’ as in early childhood, in interpreting and responding to new experiences, bodily and intellectual habits begin to scaffold responses across the life course, in spite of the fact that the original experiences which generated these habits took place in the distant past beyond recollection.¹¹ (Indeed, these habits come to constitute the natural attitude). The process

8 Moody (2008) here uses the term ‘Caucasian’ to refer to someone racialised as white. For a history of this term and its role in frameworks of, and amnesia around, racial ideology in the USA and beyond, see Lewis (2024).

9 This notion is very similar to one of Husserl’s few references to older age (1989): “Old age (having learned through many experiences) is wont to hold back, to ponder consequences. The life tempo of youth is a quicker one, the phantasy more mobile, while on the other hand experience is slight. Youth has not come to know evil consequences, is not acquainted with danger, still takes fresh original joy in the new, in impressions, lived experiences, and adventures that have not yet been tasted.” (p. 279).

10 It is worth noting, as does Cuffari (2011), that “habits of meaning-and-value-making, cognitive and linguistic habits of reflection and deliberation [...] are no less embodied and no less integral” to a habitus than motor capacities and sensory recognition (p. 549).

11 As Husserl (1989) notes, the original impetus for a habit or attitude to have been incorporated can become obscured: “I return to [...] a familiar conviction of mine; a memory arises, clearly or unclearly, the motives, the reasons

of new habit formation can occur at any age, and not always out of necessity—as might be required medically, for example—but also out of desire; consider, for instance, older people who take up new hobbies, skills, and roles, or learn a language or new technology later in life. These new habits can, however, be understood as nested within a mature overall habitus, as described by Mannheim, that has endured and adapted over time.

It is therefore worth exploring how this process of duration and change is constituted phenomenologically. Husserl (1989) discusses how habits *motivate* action within the present, by drawing upon “‘sediments’ of earlier acts and accomplishments of reason,” as well as more “‘deeply buried’ and sometimes ‘a-rational’ drives and inclinations (p. 234; Cavallaro, 2013).¹² Habits can accordingly be founded on a variety of prior experiences, ranging from passive perceptions to bodily-motor activities to conceptual judgements. These experiences sediment into habits that are retained passively—that is to say, they are not ‘present to mind’ at all times, and conscious effort is not required for them to endure. Consider, for example, how a typist (trained prior to the 1980s) might use a keyboard fluidly, without thinking about the individual movements required to push the right keys.¹³

Habits are awakened when new situations bear sufficient resemblance to the past experiences that gave rise to them; in Husserlian terminology, this is known as ‘association,’ which consciousness undergoes passively—that is to say, it is not a *conscious* process of evaluative comparison (Carr, 1974, p. 78).¹⁴ We might consider how our typist could sit down at a computer keyboard just as well as a type-writer and execute similar habitual movements without thinking too hard. Habits “motivate, without fully determining, certain forms of perception, certain meaning-making schemas” (Al-Saji, 2014, p. 138). They therefore characterise one’s mode of being in the world on a personal level, but “habituation [also] arises within a social horizon that motivates particular habits” (p. 151)—such that broader normative structures influence the habit-formation of individuals (e.g., gendered norms; Young, 2005). The culmination of these habits can be said to manifest as a ‘personal style’ or ‘character’ in one’s orientation to conscious life—a ‘habitus’ that constitutes what someone is like.

This habitus, understood phenomenologically, continually informs the present and future of activity, while itself remaining open to change. A second passive process of experiential constitution, in addition to association, is crucial here. While habits may predispose consciousness to respond in particular ways, *affectivity* is the dimension of experience that calls consciousness to attention. Husserl (1989) describes how the affective draw of objects within experience is undergone passively by consciousness, but also that consciousness can then actively respond:

Objects in the surrounding world [...] “arouse” an interest and, in virtue of this interest,

for the judgement, perhaps completely obscure; my old conviction, established I no longer know when, has its reasons, and perhaps I am seeking them, which is not the same as seeking new reasons for it” (p. 123).

¹² The genesis of habits is made possible by the deposit or sediment [*Niederschlag*] of the “no-longer given but retained” in time-consciousness (Carr, 1974, p. 71). A full discussion of all aspects of Husserl’s phenomenology exceeds the parameters of this article, but this process is made possible by a temporal flow, with primal impressions sinking back as retentions, and then retentions of retentions, some of which are reconstituted in this sedimentary process of habituation (Husserl, 1991).

¹³ This ongoing example is a nod to Merleau-Ponty’s more complex example of the “experienced organist [who] is capable of playing an organ with which he is unfamiliar” (2012 [1945], p. 146).

¹⁴ In *Ideas II*, Husserl (1989) attributes the development of these habits, opinions, and inclinations to “repeated acts” (p. 120), “repetition, reinforcement” (p. 123), wherein various independent acts of judgement contribute to a unified and enduring judgement which can be “re-assumed and re-grasped” or “taken up” by the judging subject at a later point (p. 124).

a tendency to turn towards them. [...] I am occupied with [a given perceptual object], it stimulates me to occupy myself with it [...]. In each case, we have an “*undergoing of something*,” and an *active reaction to it*, a transition into action. (pp. 227-229)

Affect is therefore that which *interrupts* prior habits and prompts consciousness to attend closely to the sensations and perceptions at hand; it is “an effort in which the body works on itself in response to the world” (Al-Saji, 2014, p. 145), such that the body can “stave off habitual reaction [...] and affectively [work] through, instead of enacting, a reaction” (p. 146).

Affect does more than simply suspend habit, however. In addition to prompting a break with prior habits, affect is *also* that which re-establishes and re-orientes prior habits; new situations can affectively prompt the revision of perceptions, inclinations, and judgements. By the same process of repetition and retention, new experiences can sediment into new or adapted habits: skills can be honed, judgements can be refined, and responses can be altered in light of new environments and relationships.¹⁵ This is particularly the case where the habitual response is inadequate for responding to the situation at hand. Our typist may need to learn, over her lifetime, to use a computer, a tablet, a mobile phone, and other emerging technologies through successful adaptations of prior habits.¹⁶ These adaptations can then become part of one’s personal character and pre-reflective outlook on future events.¹⁷ The ability to revise one’s habits through affective responsiveness to new situations, environments, and information is thus perhaps at the phenomenological root of participants’ notion of open-mindedness, as discussed above.

What is perhaps especially interesting about Mannheim’s remarks above is that, unlike most phenomenologists, Mannheim explicitly observes how the “framework of useable past experience” (1952, p. 296) that underpins the habitus of older people is drawn from a specific historical period that is distinct from that of other generations. In this way, it perhaps makes sense to think about the notion of a ‘generational habitus’—shared social and temporal structures that have influenced the sedimentation of affective and habitual inclinations among those born within a similar culture and period of time. As per the definitional clarification offer by Fritsch (2018) discussed above, this could include experiences of historical events (e.g., WWII or the COVID-19 pandemic), norms instituted by policy (e.g., educational curricula, awareness of new civil rights etc.), and broader cultural references (e.g., music, fashion etc.). Generational differences can therefore be understood existentially as arising from fact that people occupy different, but intersecting, spans of lived time across history (Mannheim, 1952, p. 292)—their generational habitus originating from a different situational context.¹⁸ The notion of the generational habitus also leaves plenty of scope for individual older people to have incorporated or resisted normative forces differently.

15 In his *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis* (2001), Husserl refers to this process as a “transformation [that] radiates back in the form of a retroactive crossing out” (p. 69), modifying the pre-reflective meaning associated with a given situation, while the original understanding is “painted over” (p. 69).

16 Merleau-Ponty’s organist rehearses on a new instrument through “gestures of consecration” that “put forth affective vectors, [...] discover emotional sources, and [...] create an expressive space” (2012 [1945], p. 147). His account develops a notion of the body-schema as flexible and malleable, which, while highly relevant to the present discussion, exceeds the scope of this article.

17 In a broader sense, Husserl (1989) states that “everything that consciousness undergoes through changes and transformations, even after the transformations, remains sedimented in it as its ‘history,’ and this is, so to speak, the destiny of consciousness” (p. 77).

18 Generational difference can also be understood with respect to generative phenomenology (Steinbock, 1995; 2017), such that traditions, norms, and customs are transmitted across generations beyond the limit-phenomena of birth and death in individual lifespans.

As we shall see in the next section, however, the notion of a generational habitus alone may not sufficiently describe the dynamics and tensions that can arise between or across generations. For that, we will need to address what an intergenerational habitus might entail.

4. Inter-generationally open to the other

This notion of a generational habitus is key to understanding some of the participants' concerns about keeping an 'open mind.' While many participants expressed a desire to remain open-minded by engaging with contemporary discourses and current affairs, they also expressed an awareness that some of their attitudes might be perceived as outdated or 'politically incorrect' by younger people. One of my participants, Frances (aged 71, pseudonym), for example, felt that it was really important to engage with people of all ages in this respect, as well as "being more open to experiences" (Stanier 2024, p. 120). Nevertheless, she expressed a wariness about being judged by younger people for not being on the same page:

I don't think in my head I've changed that much. In my mind, I hope I'm still flexible. My son said the other day something about older people. He said, "You know how they sometimes say things without thinking?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well they just say things that you shouldn't say". I said, "I'm not so sure whether it's just older people; I think it's everyone". But he didn't really elaborate. But I think he meant... I'm wondering actually whether he meant, thinking about it, that young people... Because the world nowadays is so PC that you've got to be politically correct when you say things, but older people are more used, particularly among their own friends, of not being quite so careful, and we weren't brought up... Because I can remember it with my own parents, thinking... and I do remember thinking that they sometimes said things that they shouldn't have said. So I suppose that my son, [son's name], must have noticed that older people did that, but I couldn't quite identify with it. But that's probably what he meant. And I do know that in conversations with people of my own generation I'm less careful about... I'm more open to discussion about things than I would be with my own children. I'm more careful with the children. Yes. [...] About topics that people would consider sensitive. (p. 121)

Frances understood that her son observed an attitudinal difference between their respective generations—something that she had once observed between herself and her parents. Nevertheless, the fact that she "couldn't quite identify with it" suggests that it was not obvious to her that she was saying things "that you shouldn't say." Self-aware enough to recognise a disconnect, but uncertain as to how to identify and address these differences, Frances admitted to being able to express herself more freely with peers and friends of her generation. While this might not have necessarily pointed towards an age-related difference—one might expect to share a sense of humour and self-censor less around friends of any age—Frances explicitly linked her hesitation to a generational divergence.

Indeed, Frances was very honest about her misgivings and uncertainties. She made it clear that she was interested overall in learning about changes in cultural norms and emerging issues, though indicated that she felt this interest was not always taken into account. Reflecting further on her adult children's outlooks, Frances observed that

[t]hey think probably that they understand the world as it is and as my parents did and as I do and then something challenges you again and you have to adapt and change the way you speak about it. I think that's part of the fun of the world really. But it does have challenges. [...] Yes, there are things that have changed and we adapt with them if

we can. But I think sometimes out of curiosity we maybe ask questions just to find out more and maybe the younger generation find that odd that we have to ask. [Laughs]. So what does happen, what's this, what's it all about? We are just trying to understand the world. (p. 122)

I argue that a distinction between a generational habitus and an intergenerational habitus may be instructive here. I suggested earlier that a generational habitus might be understood as pertaining to the shared social and temporal structures that have influenced the habits of those born within a similar culture and period of time. The intergenerational habitus, by contrast, would concern the shared social and temporal structures which enable habit-formation within a given culture in ways that *span generations*.

While a generational habitus tends to be constituted organically as new generations are born and habituated into the world, the latter—an intergenerational habitus—is even less defined or determined in its form. The emergence of an intergenerational habitus is not an existential inevitability. People of different generations can and do, of course, influence one another's perspectives. Isolated intergenerational relationships and encounters, however, do not in themselves satisfy the definition of the intergenerational habitus as pertaining to shared social and temporal structures. Areas of structural intergenerational influence might include workplaces, educational institutions, environmental and political movements, and—perhaps especially—family structures, including chosen family (Kaplan, Sanchez, and Hoffman, 2017). It is important to reiterate, following Bourdieu (1990, p. 53) and Husserl (1970; Luft, 2011, p. 24), that individuals participate in and shape the habitus (and lifeworld) which gives rise to their habits. In these examples, to name just a few, there is some degree of intergenerational transmission and shaping of habits—as ways of being in the world—which span generations through broader social patterns and structures, thereby satisfying the notion of an intergenerational habitus. People of different generations are here learning from, and responding to, each other in various ways. Different cultural and historical contexts may foster this to a greater or lesser extent.

To return to Frances and her peers, their outlooks are underpinned by dispositions that were normalised and embodied decades ago—through a generational habitus—sometimes but not always evolving and responding to changing times. Questions will present themselves by virtue of differences of generational habitus, through the phenomenological process outlined above. Again, however, the upshot of how intergenerationality is existentially structured is not predetermined. Frances identifies that the process of adaptation and change—of learning about the world in light of challenges to one's worldview—is contingent on a degree of intergenerational patience. The way that generations are able to relate—entertaining, respecting, or rejecting the intergenerational questions and issues that emerge—is a cultural contingency. Frances' wariness about expressing her questions frankly with the younger people in her life can perhaps be explained by a lack of trust that she will be taken in good faith (though the extent to which this had been put to the test was admittedly unclear). It is not clear that an intergenerational habitus is here facilitating a process of mutual influence in habit-formation. Moreover, her shift to the first-person plural 'we' in the quote from our interview above seems to indicate a view that this is a wider issue.

There was a general tendency when participants spoke about intergenerational differences for them to be referenced through cultural narratives rather than something encountered first-hand. This was when the narrative of intergenerational conflict tended to rear its head—when participants were drawing on conversations had with peers or from reading the newspaper, rather than interacting with actual younger people (Stanier, 2024; Stanier, 2025a). The social separation of different generations here figures as relevant, forestalling

intergenerational encounters that might facilitate the mutual influence of younger and older people's perspectives on one another. Non-familial intergenerational relationships were rare among participants, often having reduced after retiring. In the absence of contact that might inform an intergenerational habitus, it is perhaps not surprising that cultural narratives and stereotypes can inadvertently fill the gap, since "[s]eparation and lack of contact alongside preexisting negative stereotypes" can lead to "a focus on generational differences and competition" (Wagner and Luger, 2020, p. 2; Lundgren, 2010). What it means to cultivate open-mindedness at older age, in this context, therefore remains a complex question.

Beauvoir (1996) describes the significance of intergenerational relationships to older people as pertaining to an involvement in a present that contributes to a future:

The friendship of the young is very valuable to old people, quite apart from any family tie: it gives them the feeling that these times in which they are living are still their times; it revives their own youth; it carries them along the infinity of the future: and it is the best defence against the gloom that threatens old age. Unhappily, relationships of this kind are rare, for the young and the old belong to two worlds between which there is little communication. (p. 475)

In other words, intergenerational relationships have the potential to affirm the relevance and value of older people as part of a shared temporal present—participants in an intergenerational habitus. The entrenched separation between older and younger people—specifically in contexts like the UK (Centre for Ageing Better, 2021)—is a significant reason that there is "little communication" between these "two worlds" (Beauvoir, 1996, p. 475). Quite apart from generational difference as an existential fact, this generational divergence can be at least partially attributed to a *social* separation of older and younger people—one that can foreshadow the terminal spatial separation of residential care (Kribernegg, 2018, p. 48).

It is relatively recent that societies, especially in the global North, have entrenched "age differentiation and segregation" (Vanderbeck, 2007, p. 207), with globalisation also generating geographical distance between generations in some families (Mayasari, Pedell, and Barnes, 2016). Newman (2008) summarises some of these recent intergenerational losses like so:

The young experience limited contact with their elder family members who, historically, have been present to support their growth and learning, introduce values and offer wisdom, skills and unqualified love and understanding. Older adults experience limited contact with younger family members who provide contemporary social insights, vitality, unqualified love, support, and new technological skills. (p. 31)

While Newman paints an idealised picture of intergenerational relationships—not everyone, after all, experiences their familial relationships like this—these developments do gesture towards a fragmentation of the intergenerational habitus and a challenge to intergenerational understanding.¹⁹

Intergenerational contexts can afford important opportunities for challenging habitual attitudes (or, in other words, keeping an 'open mind') (Vandervan, 2011; Vanderbeck, 2007).

19 These losses can sometimes be exacerbated by other harms, where social institutions have been exported in the context of colonialism. For example, Rowe et al. (2019) describe the "exceedingly harmful intergenerational impact of residential schools on the health of Indigenous peoples" in Canada (p. 157), and how this has disrupted "deeply interrelational and land-based knowledge" (p. 157) as well as the role and recognition of Elders among older people as "knowledge keepers and knowledge transmitters" (p. 158; Whyte, 2020).

Dow et al. (2016) found that “most intergenerational relationships are respectful and occur within the family” and that it was intergenerational separation which led to “a reliance on assumptions and recognized stereotypes” (p. 104), and many others have indicated the potential, especially through face-to-face encounters, for mutual intergenerational connection and learning (Kwong and Yan, 2023; Wagner and Luger, 2021, p. 1; Cadieux, Chasteen, and Packer, 2019). That said, tokenistic efforts to foster intergenerational connection can be “counterproductive” and inadvertently reinforce stereotypes (Vanderbeck, 2007, p. 213). As Hagestad and Uhlenberg (2005) discuss, “[a]ll too often, efforts aimed at cross-age interaction create ephemeral and quite superficial interactions” which will “not do the job of forging personal knowledge and viable ties” (p. 357)—citing examples such as children carol singing at a residential home or older people talking about WWII in local schools. Not all intergenerational encounters offer equal opportunities for re-attuning the intergenerational habitus. The complexities of facilitating projects among younger and older people who are strangers should not be underestimated (Jespersen, 2022; CoRe, n.d.)—and the notion of an intergenerational habitus, in which shared social and temporal structures can enable intergenerational habit-formation, can be instructive here. In the next section, therefore, I attempt to understand this potential phenomenologically.

So how might we explore phenomenologically the difference between more superficial intergenerational encounters and those that affect the intergenerational habitus? Having reflected on the lack of opportunities for habitus-adaptation—or ‘keeping an open mind’—through intergenerational relationships, in this last section I analyse phenomenologically the conditions of possibility for various affective responses to intergenerational differences. I suggested above that older people—like Frances—can sometimes supplement their experiences with cultural narratives in the absence of actual intergenerational relationships. I think it is also important to attend to the fact that participants were voicing a certain *hesitation* over their views and habits; in addition to the trepidation over being judged, they were expressing a willingness to engage in dialogue, a curiosity about the world as it changes, and an interest in learning about other perspectives—including those of younger people. I contend that it is not simply the case that participants were presenting this as a narrative or discursive depiction of themselves as open-minded. Instead, I argue that the participants’ hesitation may represent a genuine openness to affective re-orientation (to draw from the phenomenological concepts introduced above). That said, I further argue that the structural separation of different generations overall somewhat forecloses this generative potential for habitus-formation and reciprocal learning.

I draw the notion of hesitation from Alia Al-Saji’s work (2014) on interrupting racialising habits of seeing. Al-Saji explores phenomenologically how the affective register of hesitation can present an opportunity for challenging and revising habitual attitudes.²⁰ As discussed above, affectivity is the dimension of experience that calls consciousness to attention. Affect establishes an embodied response to a given situation in the world—a response which, on repetition, can sediment into habit. Affect can both awaken habituated responses (through association; see above) but crucially it can also *interrupt* habits when the affective presentation of a situation calls for a new response (recalling our typist grappling with new technologies). Al-Saji draws on the latter potential of affect in her understanding of hesitation; she describes

5. Hesitation and intergenerational habitus-adaptation

20 In this work, Al-Saji (2014) analyses how “[a] primary way in which racialization takes hold in lived experience, while remaining unconscious and invisible, is by means of perception” (p. 137), drawing on Fanon, Merleau-Ponty, and others to explore how racist perception is scaffolded by “sedimented habits of seeing” (p. 138).

hesitation as “a deceleration that opens up the affective infrastructure of perception, in order both to make it responsive to what it has been unable to see and to make aware its contextual and constructed features” (p. 147). We might consider, for example, the hesitation of a young child faced with an unfamiliar task, the hesitation of a student in grappling with a new concept or idea, and—on an intergenerational level—the hesitation expressed by participants with regard to their generational perspective (highlighted even by the half-finished elliptical expressions in Frances’ contemplations given above). In all these cases, habitual schemas—of perception, cognition, and interpretation—that might ordinarily operate in the background of experience are unsettled, called to the foreground by an affective situational challenge and a renegotiation of assumed meaning.

The moment of hesitation thus depends upon a kind of open-mindedness, not so dissimilar to the notion highlighted by participants, in which experience is open to multiple perspectives and responses. While typically “we see *through* our habits, we do not see them” (p. 138), the moment of hesitation demonstrates

the ability to be affected, to be touched, by that which lies beyond or beneath its habitual objectifying schemas. It is the openness to the unanticipated (and not immediately cognizable) difference—an affective openness that usually grounds the dynamic and improvisatory character of perceptual habits [...]. (p. 140)

Again, this openness, curiosity, and engagement does not *necessarily* mean that an individual will change their attitude in light of what they encounter—new perceptions, different views, testimonies from others, etc. Younger judgements, for example, may differ from older perspectives, and are not necessarily progressive or ‘right’; an older experienced perspective may hold relevance and insight in new situations without especially adapting or taking younger approaches into account. Openness is, however, a *condition of possibility* for change and attunement in a given environment or habitus; without it, the stultifying “habit of having habits” presents as a risk (Beauvoir, 1996, p. 468).

Indeed, we might contrast the phenomenology of hesitation with a different affective response—one which “does not open onto other affective responses or modes of response” (Al-Saji, 2014, p. 142). In the context of Al-Saji’s project, she is, of course, specifically interested in analysing “the logic of racialization [that] dictates its own forgetting” (p. 139) as a particular kind of foreclosure to hesitation. I certainly do not mean to suggest here that there is direct equivalence between the structure of racist perception and habitual older perspectives *per se*.²¹ Indeed, Al-Saji carefully explores the particular interplay between the past of racist habits and longer historical durations of racism, which contributes to a specific kind of ‘closed-mindedness.’ That said, her description of what happens affectively to habits in the absence of an open outlook, I argue, can contribute to a broader understanding of habitus-formation.

Harkening back to instances in which participants lapsed into cultural stereotypes, we might think about how such habituated narratives serve to uncritically supplement lived experiences. Affectively, a response like this can present as “not only frozen in its response but repetitive in its form. [...] [T]he past is here congealed as schema and is, as

21 Some older people do indeed harbor an older generational habitus that propagates harmful views, including racialising habits of seeing as described by Al-Saji (2014). While it is absolutely crucial not to shy away from the legacies and present consequences of racism among older people, it is also important not to crudely regard attitudes among older people as homogenous nor regard racism as an issue attributable primarily to older people. The historical inheritance of racist ideology also entails participation and appropriation by new generations, adapting, for example, to contemporary issues like immigration (Phillips and Webster, 2013).

such, overdetermined and fixed in its sense” (p. 141). Rather than attending affectively to the particulars of a given situation, habitual explanations and responses are “mapped out in advance based on the ossified schemas of the past” (p. 141) and the “creative and critical potential of affect to hesitate [...] is blocked” (p. 142; Cuffari, 2011, p. 542). We may recall here Beauvoir’s provocative description of how “it is difficult for the old to be open to new ideas; but they also close themselves off deliberately – every intervention from outside amounts to a threat” (1996, p. 471). This would particularly be the case where the subject does not voice an equivocal openness or hesitation over their conclusions.

It would be reductionistic, however, to frame this deferral to habitual response exclusively as a personal ‘failing’ or to problematically lapse into the ageist assumption that nostalgia and closed-mindedness are somehow linked to chronological age (Stanier 2025a). Instead, I contend that a lack of intergenerational contact is highly relevant here, as at least part of the picture. Stressing only the responsibility incumbent upon *individuals* to reflect on the habits that structure their being risks deflecting away from the structural conditions affecting habitus-formation; as Cuffari (2011) puts it, “we need to be supported when we undertake practices whose self-transformative ends are unforeseen. *We cannot control flexible habit formation on our own*” (p. 548). A consideration of older age would be seriously deficient if it failed to consider the conditions of possibility for the cultivation of habits across the life course. I would argue that widespread social separation between generations, as discussed above, is an obstacle to adaptation since it does not afford people of different generations the space and time of affective hesitation in which they might become attuned to other generational perspectives.

As discussed in the section above, it matters how intergenerational encounters are structured; they are not inherently meaningful or engaging, and infrequent or sporadic meetings do not typically afford opportunities for habitus-adaptation. Even when differences of perspective might come to light, any hesitant potential does not necessarily lead to affective re-orientation. We might recall, for instance, Frances’ uncertainty over how to make sense of her son’s judgement of older people. Al-Saji (2014) emphasises that affective hesitation “by itself is not a sufficient response” (p. 136) to cultivate openness and adaptation to habitual attitudes. She stresses that enduring and close-knit relationships—such as those between cohabiting friends or family members—“bring subjects together in bodily and affective intimacy, creating attachments that are not necessarily willed nor consciously formed” (p. 159).²² It is within the context of this slower affective attunement with others that affective hesitation is most likely to tip over into enduring change and habitual reorientation, whereas in “isolated events and punctual efforts [...] hesitation can be difficult to sustain and may revert to a defensive reaction once the event has passed” (p. 160).²³ As in Husserl’s account of habit explored above, repetition enables sedimentation and affective integration in

22 Al-Saji (2014) notes that, in many of her own examples of affective hesitation and transformation, “the space for relearning ways of seeing and for transformative affect was the intimate space of the home or the extended family” (p. 161). She is careful to note that this is not the only context in which these encounters and relationships might take place, but that “a present where experiences of coexistence already take place” would be the necessary condition of such transformations (p. 162).

23 Further, Al-Saji (2014) remarks that “it is not merely environmental change that is needed, but an environmental change that sustains hesitation and allows critical memory. For affective hesitation is the opening that permits attachments and events to register, to be retained and sedimented, shifting the level according to which we perceive. [...] To see with others is hence to find one’s perceptual and affective map to be redrawn through the force of attachments to others. Such a shift not only reorients the present but is accompanied by a working-through of the past” (pp. 160-161).

the long term. This also chimes with the social science literature cited above, distinguishing between more superficial and more effective forms of intergenerational contact.

The related findings from this paper can perhaps be summarised, therefore, as follows. The older people with whom I spoke for this study understood that keeping an open mind was key to ageing well and being able to engage with the contemporary world. They largely understood that encountering a variety of social perspectives is an important way of cultivating an open outlook and adaptation. Many expressed a kind of affective hesitation with regard to younger perspectives, indicating potential for engagement and openness. Nevertheless, opportunities for encountering different *intergenerational* perspectives were rare in the lifeworlds of these older people. I have argued that the *conditions of possibility* for habitus-adaptation and attunement with younger people are not fulfilled here. In the relational context described to me by participants, it is somewhat challenging to keep an open mind to intergenerational shifts—and yet they felt the onus on them to be open to other generational perspectives. Opportunities are overall lacking for “a more thoroughgoing shift [...] and a more binding reconfiguration of the network of attachments” (Al-Saji, 2014, p. 159). These findings invite us to consider how, without an abiding connection through shared time, curiosity and care are not in themselves sufficient to sustain more sensitive shifts within the intergenerational habitus.

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