



Intergenerational Relationships: Learning from the Past

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ABSTRACT

In a rapidly transforming world, intergenerational relationships offer critical insights into the continuity of values, knowledge, and culture. This paper examines how connections between individuals of different age groups serve as a dynamic foundation for social development, cultural preservation, and mutual learning. Drawing on historical examples, theoretical frameworks, and contemporary case studies, the study examines the evolution of intergenerational bonds from early societal structures to modern challenges shaped by technological, cultural, and demographic changes. It delves into the mechanisms of knowledge and cultural transmission, the benefits of intergenerational learning, and the emotional, cognitive, and civic advantages that arise from cross-generational engagement. Challenges such as generational divides, miscommunication, and power dynamics are critically examined, along with strategies to overcome them. By analyzing formal and informal programs that foster intergenerational interaction, the study highlights how mutual understanding and shared experiences across age groups can lead to more cohesive, empathetic, and resilient communities.

Keywords: Intergenerational relationships, Knowledge transfer, Cultural continuity, Social development, Intergenerational learning, Generational conflict.

INTRODUCTION

We are in a society of fast registration of changes in which the past is unpublished, the present is misunderstood, and the future is uncertain. Three overlapping and interconnected categories of change are particularly relevant for the notion of generating development. The first involves social change on a larger scale, which affects everyone. Such change is dense, and it is typically inscribed in, or can be indexed against, historical time. The second category of change consists of individual and family biographical processes, as people constantly have to adapt to the ongoing social change. As age proceeds, these interweave with more general processes of aging, and the life course takes on a different character. The third and final category of change encompasses people's subjective experiences and their engagement, or lack of it, with both forms of change just mentioned. As such, it transcends individual experience and implicates society more broadly. It is crucially linked to the temporal domain but does not, or at least does not exclusively, unfold in stories about the past, present, and future. Given this broad understanding of change, the social and theoretical implications of age and the study of intergenerational relations in the context of transformation are explored. Rather than pointing to the future as the next regime of value and practice, it is proposed that the focus on generating might provide an alternative perspective on development. This perspective allows for upending established categorizations and exploring the creative frictions caused by the interplay of different, yet at the same time similar, schemes of time reckoning. The task is then to provide a brief overview of some of the key points of intersection between the social and the theoretical in the hope that it can stimulate further debate [1, 2].

The Concept of Intergenerational Relationships

There is growing international research interest in the nature and quality of relationships between persons in different age groups during different periods of their lives. An intergenerational relationship is defined here as any form of interaction, engagement, association, or bonding between persons in different age groups. This definition therefore spans a wide range of relationships which can be situated in familial,

social, community, and professional settings and through life-span development. It includes parental relationships with children; grandparental relationships with grandchildren; relationships between siblings; relationships between a child and an adult not related to him/her; relationships between two individuals who come from the same community, town or milieu but who are of different age groups; relationships between employees and their bosses; relationships between children and their teachers; relationships between professionals and citizens; relationships between the young and the old, the young and the middle-aged, the old and the middle-aged. An exchange between a philosopher and an adolescent would constitute an intergenerational relationship. The argument here is that the important thing is not so much the relationship in itself but the dynamics that a relationship generates between persons in different age groups through contact, interaction, cooperation, understanding, respect learning, admiration, and, in some situations, conflict, opposition, rejection, distrust, and misunderstandings. Therefore, a hierarchical relationship is not considered *per se*, but rather how the two individuals interpret the age difference and how it impacts their relationship. It is to say that the concept is not explored solely in terms of power relations but more in terms of voluntary acts, attitudes, feelings, and implications that people invest in to create a relationship. Among a wide range of relationships, an intergenerational relationship exists either sporadically, by accident, or, more or less intentionally, as a habit, as a social need, or as a cultural norm. For most people, it will be an everyday event that gives rise to questions of habitus, expectations, and stereotypes. There is much evidence that people build a set of representations and expectations from persons of different ages, which help to shape, guide, and regulate their approaches to relations with them. A theoretical overview of the literature emphasizes how intergenerational bonds have been conceived, structured, and categorized by many scholars in various fields, such as animal behavior, biology, demography, education, family studies, linguistics, multi-cultural studies, politics, population policy studies, psychology, social gerontology, sociology, women studies. This is a useful support to identify the large and complex ways in which intergenerational bonds can be perceived, researched, established, rethought, and reassessed. Broad and mainstream conceptions of such bonds are first examined [3, 4].

Historical Perspectives on Intergenerational Relationships

In 1493, shortly after Columbus's return from the New World, the Spanish scholastic and Capuchin theologian Ortun de las Casas published his work, in which he criticizes the un-Christian behavior of the Spanish conquerors and calls for the respect of human rights. A year later, on June 1, 1494, the Dominican order was able to persuade the Spanish King to give up the repartimiento, the forced labor system that had been instituted on the island of Hispaniola. This text and event are remarkable, because this is the first written plea for the respect of elder people in Europe. Most cultures all over the world, and especially all societies in Europe at the end of the 15th century and during the 16th century, did not see another way of dealing with elderly people than to neglect, even exclude them, from everyday life. According to Greek mythology, an old man loses his sight after a quarrel with Hera. Frau Holle, the quasi deity of the MGM in central Germany, was said to dwell deep in the earth. There she guards a hoard of silver objects, and in long, cold winters, she shakes her featherbeds and causes snowfall. At that time, the MGM were powerful creatures that were stronger than humans and walked the earth at night. They could interact with characters, help them, or stop them from their enterprise. But the most important fact is that they were a resourceful species. They were the objects. These few excerpts summarize this section on the changing perception of the elderly in Western Europe during the Renaissance, and pave the way to analyze schooling, the relationship between generations, and especially adult education, from this new start. The present document first traces the evolution of those relationships over time, from the first decisions to recent works in elder studies. Then, the reading of a few historical or anthropological texts sheds interesting light on those relations in a given society, revealing aspects that are not observed by writing laws or taking surveys [5, 6].

The Importance of Intergenerational Learning

Today, people of all ages engage in intergenerational learning, exchanging knowledge and experiences. This learning occurs informally through family, friends, or co-workers sharing insights on relationships and techniques. For instance, older individuals may teach teenagers to dance, while younger pupils assist seniors with shopping. Additionally, formal programs connect the elderly and youth in projects that aim to enhance knowledge and skills. Both groups benefit from this exchange, as it nurtures understanding, skills, and creativity throughout life. Research on intergenerational learning indicates positive impacts on cognitive performance. Young children often grasp concepts better when discussing them with older individuals, while older learners experience cognitive improvements through such interactions. Socially and emotionally, older participants tend to flourish in intergenerational settings compared to those with

only one or two generations. One primary outcome of intergenerational learning is the preservation of knowledge, values, traditions, and competencies within communities. For cultures to thrive, it is crucial to pass down knowledge across generations. Young immigrants, for example, have played a key role in maintaining traditional skills and crafts through engagement with their elders. Initiatives aimed at teaching the younger generation traditional skills serve to foster both learning and the conservation of cultural heritage. Ultimately, the “rich mix of ideas, skills, and learning expectations” can only emerge in environments where the young and the old learn together [7, 8].

Knowledge Transfer

Intergenerational relationships concerning the transfer of knowledge between generations are further connected and highlighted. The subsection know-how transfers explores the processes, mechanisms, and effects of transferring knowledge about the past from older to younger generations. Moreover, the reciprocal value of these eccentric communication and change activities is a matter of concern. Knowledge transfer has intergenerational aspects as it generally involves the sharing of information, skills, know-how, or experience held by one or more people with others who may not have access to them yet. When speaking of intergenerational know-how transfers, the knowledge is shared between two or more people from different generations. It can include any form of learning, such as where and how to store stocks to keep them for longer, how to prepare traditional food, or how to complete everyday tasks such as taking care of a house or garden. Know-how transfers can take place in private spaces, such as the family environment, where they foster or enrich relationship quality. To help transmission mechanisms, the organization of more formal or public know-how transfer activities in public spaces such as community centers or schools is conceivable. Widely applied strategies include storytelling, demonstration, conversation, question and answer games, reading, and hands-on the pitch. In effect, they draw on the communication with no or low-level knowledge of technical devices and are easily comprehensible or accessible solutions in virtually every cultural context. There are numerous examples of know-how transfer activities all over the world which, in different ways or on different levels, approach these envisaged recommendations. The transfer of knowledge about local fauna, flora, or cultural history to children becomes possible, fostering biological or cultural diversity as well as children’s understanding of nature. Grandparents could teach their grandchildren traditional methods of cultivation, weaving, forging, or similar activities, helping to revive traditional crafts; encourage them to take part in household shopping; or share with them stories, songs, or tales from the past. However, the success and fruits of know-how transfers heavily depend on a variety of factors, such as the setting in which they take place, the quality of the relationship between the individuals involved, the context in which they stand, the cost of the learning, how complex the knowledge to be transmitted is, how it can be easily adapted to the generation’s situation or contemporary issues, and individuals’ freedom to ask questions or enter into discussion [9, 10].

Cultural Continuity

Maintaining cultural continuity in diverse communities relies on intergenerational transmission. Teaching, learning, and remembering customary values and practices are crucial for preserving cultural traditions. Stories serve to connect the past, present, and future, while ancestral rituals realign individuals with their moral order. Such cultural continuations foster communal experiences vital for thriving within specific environments, providing a sense of belonging through articulated cultural connections. A culture’s land ethic nurtures wonder, mystery, and humility, establishing moral codes and a bond with the land. This maintenance often arises from relationships formed with places and authorities. In northern Australia, the regime of kin obligations helps preserve cultural knowledge, with kin groups responsible for specific songlines, dances, and rituals. Similar to the Ghost Dance, performing ritual acts as spiritual resistance against colonizers, reinforcing cultural traditions. However, when ancestors are no longer perceived to support traditions, rituals lose authority, becoming metaphorical. Still, the institutional status of these practices persists, and kin groups feel obliged to carry out the necessary gestures as best as they can [11, 12].

Challenges In Intergenerational Relationships

Conflict is just one aspect of complex intergenerational relationships, necessitating a deeper examination of several challenging elements within these relationships. A significant yet often overlooked issue involves unaddressed incompatibilities among generations sharing a society, especially regarding differing norms, values, and understandings shaped by ageism-inspired stereotyping. Such incompatibilities can create communication gaps and misunderstandings. Furthermore, rapid societal changes can rigidify generational conceptions, imposing cognitive and emotional gaps among age groups, while cultural variations may exacerbate discrepancies in communication practices. In family contexts,

caregiving practices can differ significantly across generations, particularly in multigenerational or grandparent-headed families. Additionally, as individuals mature, their perception of events evolves, leading to more rational interpretations that influence conflict management behaviors and stress responses. Older adults often cope with conflicts more effectively due to this mature perspective. 2. Technology This examination aims to decompartmentalize intergenerational transport communication, a significant yet under-researched field interlinked with various societal functions. By exploring modernity and generational dichotomies, this work addresses conflicting communication practices and highlights the evolution of intergenerational communicative bonds in transport within cities like London, Paris, and Budapest since the mid-19th century. It focuses on public discourse and individual attitudes towards transportation modes, such as buses, bikes, and cars, drawing broader conclusions about the social impacts of communicative norms and transport behaviors. The historical context reveals that urban transport changes paralleled generational disputes and social transformations. While modernity aimed to enhance intergenerational communication, the progression differed across regions, sometimes creating barriers rather than facilitating integration. Additionally, issues surrounding transportation innovations highlighted intergenerational disparities, reinforced by moral, aesthetic, and sanitary judgments regarding diverse commuting habits and behaviors. There was notable criticism from older generations about urban decorum and changing travel standards, reflecting a desire to maintain a higher standard of conduct amid evolving transport landscapes [13, 14].

Benefits of Intergenerational Engagement

Research illustrates the benefits of intergenerational engagement for individuals and society. Positive interactions enhance emotional well-being, fostering feelings of usefulness, purpose, and reassurance. Seniors visited by younger people report decreased isolation, increased meaning, and lower depression rates, leading to lasting cognitive effects. This emotional reciprocity provides compassion, respect, and attentiveness to older adults' narratives. Younger generations can develop empathy, compassion, and social responsibility through these relationships, preserving collective knowledge and local memory. Promoting youth civic engagement and intergenerational support should remain a policy priority for community resilience. Intergenerational programs with multigenerational activities have shown positive impacts on community and civic engagement. Community art initiatives in schools illustrate this potential; similar programs merging art with environmental studies could enhance understanding and preservation of the Yarra River. Engaging with collective memory strengthens community ties, but connections with the past should not be static. Exchanges allow students to recognize their impact on others' self-worth. For instance, in Attawapiskat, interactions between indigenous elders and youth have profoundly changed lives, saving teenagers from despair through a connection to their lost languages and heritage. However, cross-generational respect is often lacking, with younger people expressing frustration over perceived ignorance in older generations. Appreciating shared knowledge can mitigate regrets surrounding past mistakes and foster a deeper understanding, creating stronger connections between often-criticized generations and their histories [15, 16].

Case Studies in Intergenerational Programs

Intergenerational programs can be developed for a wide range of stakeholders, from school orchestras, through retirement villages, to multigenerational choirs. Intensive intergenerational programs are those which have been designed, often through a series of activities, to break down boundaries with far greater intensity than is possible through engineered or chance passive contacts. Many men also find it hard to talk and become defensive in situations where they're not in control. This outcome appears to confirm men's greater difficulty with less structured and more emotionally based interaction, suggested in the literature. Power relations within a pairing can also act as a barrier, with the 'boundary partner' (the one whose territory is invaded) strongly affecting the success or failure of the programme. Whilst resource location choice of natural features can be more inclusive for some activities, it is suggested that practitioners consider potential imbalance in so-called less balanced pairings. It's easy to be blindsided by the older child, often easier to engage with. This can result in make-do engagement modes for the younger child that may benefit neither child. It was shown in structured non-residential intergenerational programmes that a substantial amount of time was spent in activities not involving both generations. Multiple targeting is difficult within one event alone, but a change to an activity from which all benefit should be realistic. The success of a duo in working towards formalised future contact is not by chance, but rather a thoughtful process planned over a reasonable period. The inequity of position of agency staff means that they must drive (or at least prime) the other organisation into action. Refinement suggests the importance of briefing both staff and less powerful partners. Better application procedures must be put in place to improve the chances of success during the next round. Now that these programs have been

piloted and improvements made, the possibility of concentrating on this more intense end of the spectrum is being considered. Such a move is mainly dependent on additional resources and cooperating consortia [17, 18].

Strategies for Enhancing Intergenerational Relationships

Practical strategies for enhancing intergenerational relationships can be implemented in various community settings, including residential areas, schools, workplaces, and public spaces. Key approaches include: creating structured opportunities for interaction through community events and cross-generational projects, which can foster understanding and appreciation between age groups; developing spaces that encourage dialogue, shared experiences, and discussions to dismantle stereotypes about aging and youth; exploring digital platforms to improve communication between generations and facilitate collaborative learning; promoting supportive environments through policies that guide spatial designs and offer government incentives for cross-generational initiatives such as cultural grants and mixed-age housing; providing training for educators and community leaders on the value of cross-generational relationships, alongside strategies to nurture them effectively; and regularly assessing programs and initiatives to ensure they meet their objectives while employing data collection methods to evaluate their impact [19, 20].

The Role of Education in Intergenerational Relationships

The cultural and social changes of recent decades unveil a tapestry of both the remarkable benefits and daunting challenges that prominently pervade our contemporary global society. Yet, accompanying these profound shifts are equally pervasive psychological, emotional, and spiritual transformations that individuals experience. As humans increasingly rely on the lessons of the past to envision and effectively sketch possible futures, the intricacies of human experience come into sharper focus. Policy makers, community organizers, and local leaders—who are often constrained by the limitations of their era and the specific theaters of action in which they operate—may inadvertently neglect these vital human dimensions in their planning and decision-making processes. This oversight can lead to unintended consequences that further exacerbate existing disparities within society. In order to construct a more comprehensive analytical framework, this paper employs a global historical perspective that intricately links the diverse experiences of Indigenous peoples with the actions undertaken by colonial powers and the myriad complexities faced by various post-colonial regimes throughout history. By diligently examining different forms of intergenerational exchange alongside the maintenance of memories that are both individual and collective, political, cultural, intellectual, and spiritual leaders can work towards more effectively meeting the diverse and evolving needs of the human population, the Earth, and their rich and intricate heritage. This inclusive approach not only encourages a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of these numerous factors but also emphasizes the importance of integrating human experiences into future planning endeavors. By doing so, we can aspire to create a more equitable and profound societal framework that honors the past while paving the way for a brighter, more inclusive future [21, 22].

Policy Implications for Supporting Intergenerational Relationships

The article on intergenerational relationships spans the last 200 years, noting that in the late 19th century, inventions were made that remain in use today. By the late 1960s, computers emerged that resemble modern counterparts, yet the internet was still decades away. Throughout this time, generations have continuously been born, lived, and died. Intergenerational relationships have existed, making it important to consider contemporary perspectives. Advocates for LGBT youth should recognize the context of rejection they may face from family and friends, alongside potential involvement with the criminal justice system that can lead to homelessness. Supportive familial relationships, especially with grandparents, can significantly impact the lives of LGBT youth who often feel isolated. Organizations need to create innovative opportunities for older individuals to offer their insights and support to younger generations and facilitate intergenerational exchange. In the workplace, relationships between younger and older colleagues are often affected by negative stereotypes. Older employees are viewed as loyal and wise but also less innovative and adaptable, while younger ones may be seen as overly confident and overly reliant on technology. To improve intergenerational dynamics, both groups must actively work together to overcome these stereotypes and foster positive relationships [23, 24].

Future Directions in Intergenerational Research

Intergenerational research has explored a wide range of familial and non-familial relationships among individuals of different generations, not only in North America, but also across continents within a wide variety of cultures and socio-political contexts. In order to unpack current trends and take stock of existing knowledge, this review has drawn upon literature on intergenerational relationships in East and

Southeast Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa as well as in North America. Although significant challenges remain in understanding the cultural variations of intergenerational relationships, it is important to broaden the current knowledge base to people in traditional or non-Westernized non-familial relationships of more complex power gradients and less direct communication. There are a number of emergent themes that may shape the future of intergenerational research. For example, the existing knowledge on intergenerational relationships focuses on family ties in WEIRD cultures. Non-familial intergenerational research to date has been mostly conceptual and focused on professional mentoring programs. While these investigations have raised very important empirical and methodological questions, this narrow perspective might not capture the real-world diversity of intergenerational relationships that currently exist. Intergenerational research on more familiar family relationships may benefit from the rapid social changes resulting from the use of social media technologies and the sharing economy. However, methods used to study intergenerational family relationships, such as surveys and ethnography, might present challenges for non-familial relationships of dissimilar or unknown partners, especially those that differ in cultural context and normative behavior. The significance of intergenerational research goes beyond traditionally-aged interactions among people in non-family contexts, and a more encompassing modal research environment could provide a source for mutual knowledge accumulation as well as enriching cultural and interpersonal diversity of the dynamics of intergenerational relationships [25, 26].

CONCLUSION

Intergenerational relationships are more than familial or social connections—they are the living threads that weave together the past, present, and future of human experience. As this paper has demonstrated, these relationships provide crucial channels for the transmission of knowledge, traditions, and values, while also promoting empathy, understanding, and social cohesion. From historical shifts in the treatment of elders to modern intergenerational learning initiatives, the dynamics of age-diverse interactions reveal both enduring challenges and profound opportunities. In an era marked by rapid technological and cultural transformation, fostering strong intergenerational bonds becomes not only a cultural imperative but also a developmental necessity. Whether through informal family interactions or formal programs, empowering individuals across age groups to engage, learn, and collaborate can serve as a vital strategy for nurturing resilient and inclusive communities. By learning from the past and valuing each generation's contributions, we can create a more connected and sustainable future.

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