

Generations and Intergenerational Learning¹

We all have experienced intergenerational ties. Literally all of us, because without them, we would not have survived. It is obvious that generations depend on each other, and our communities, an indeed society as whole, are dependent on the ties between generations. Speaking about communities, there is at least one characteristic they share. Communities and their supporting ties are rarely a matter of a public or professional debate, or a matter of innovative policies as long as they do not raise problems. Today we have a problem to discuss, a problem of a society that needs changing in order to remain integrative for all generations.

There are three questions to which in this lecture I will try to give tentative answers.

- (1) What has made ties, bonds, connections among generations become loose and how to consolidate them;
- (2) What does the concept of generation mean and to what extent generations common can have common characteristics?
- (3) What is intergenerational learning/ education, how can it be made possible, and why do we need it?

1. What has made ties, bonds, connections among generations become loose and how to consolidate them?

Different generations have been born into different communities and different societies. There are words and concepts qualifying the present society (risk, change, uncertainty, competitiveness, responsibility, choosing, taking decisions) Today's society wants us to function as individuals. The past society, on the other hand, was offering more safety and stability, it was putting on individuals and structures more constraints and above all it was more hierarchical. The present society is different, as we know, and the most frequently asked question in contemporary society is: "Am I able to do this and that?" In the past society the most frequently asked question was: "Am I allowed to do this and that"? Generations born into these different societies

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unavoidably differ and in order to create and consolidate ties, bonds and connections between them, these differences are to be overcome or used as a source.

Like society, family is a social unit, performing functions for the larger whole. Therefore it is important how it is structured and how it functions. Around 1960 family became less hierarchical and let its members live in a more individualised way. This caused a lot of problems and family members started searching for support outside their family in the so called “inter-communities« where they started creating different intergenerational ties, bonds and connections: ties of solidarity and co-operation. Personal issues started to be public issues supported by social movements like the one supporting the right to abortus or the women’s liberation movement.

In addition, our societies have undergone many changes producing all sorts of inequalities (economic, urban, dwelling, cultural, educational, health inequalities, etc.) and this importantly supports our topic, also inequality based on age. Huge inequalities that we are facing now in our societies should be overcome in order to have a more cohesive society and better ties among generations and other social groups and within communities.

Speaking of community. In social sciences the theory of social capital has come up replacing to some extent the concept of community, neighbourhood, etc. The central theses of the theory of social capital can be summed up as follows: relationships matter. It could be also said: intergenerational relationships matter. Or again: Let’s put people first. By making connections with one another and keeping them going over time, people are able to work together to achieve things, either they could not achieve by themselves or could only achieve with great difficulty. People connect through a series of networks and they tend to share common norms, emotions and values with other members of these networks : to the extent that these networks constitute a resource.

In the theory of social capital values can either build or dismantle communities, social capital itself can be either positive or negative. Our societies seem to be dominated by a reduced number of prevailing values (health, family, friends, work). Thus in many countries, especially Eastern European countries, work comes immediately after health. In Germany work comes third after health and family, the same in the Netherlands and in Denmark. But in societies where the prevailing value is work, there is little room for some social groups (generation is not an age, but a social group!) younger and older people are being squeezed to the edge of the society. A plurality of values would be needed. Additionally, stereotypes about ages also help dismantling cohesive society. What can be done about dismantling them?

2. What does the concept of generation mean and to what extent can generations have common characteristics

Generations were first shaped into a concept in 1952, in the post war Germany.. The first conceptualization was done by Karl Mannheim in his work “ Problem of generations” . An age related concepts are cohorts where the successive age groups are important, while generations are not an age group, on the contrary generations are a social group and should be approached as such.” Let what is social be explained by what is social” Emil Durkheim said. Thus analyses of generations are based on how we perceive its members in social context and in different fields of their life : work, culture, civic engagement, perception of community, experience with education and training, etc. Different fields can be chosen as a basis for comparison (Field, at all, 2008).

Generations are groups of people who have lived in similar cultural and social contexts and generations are marked by their experience of normative and unnormative events during their life course. How members of different generations develop, is a source of generational similarities or dissimilarities, it is a source of their typical common characteristics. But not all generations develop common characteristics. Generations are produced by social order and at the same time they create it. Also social division of work impacts on generations, making them differ.

Youth is a different generational social group having a different everyday life and a different culture of everyday life. The role of young people is to get ready to take on adult social roles . Today, the transition from youth to adulthood is different from what it used to be. It is individualized, more independent. Some activities which used to belong to adulthood are now being transferred to the time of youth.

Today also older people are different from the older people in the past. They are a product of their times and of their life course, but they live in a different social reality, so their identity is also being shaped by this reality. The social group of older people is changing as a result of it. It is no more a roles group. It is a also a numerous group and this will unavoidably change also the relationships among generations.

Generations in the middle are currently under a great deal of pressure. Their position is extremely responsible and endangered by the requirements and expectations of the other generations. Knowing that work is a central value in this society, they are not easily ready to share it with other generations, thus producing conflicts between young and older generations.

Ties and bonds, and connections between generations can be in the field of co-habitation, solidarity, co-operation. Emotions these ties produce can be extremely different, even opposing ; understanding, love, caring emotions, but they can be also ignorance, mild or overt hostility. Knowing this, consolidating ties, bonds and connec-

tions between generations seems to be crucial as to avoid much feared “the war of generations” and to construct a more cohesive society for all of us.

3. What is intergenerational learning/ education, how can it be made possible, and why do we need it?

The Slovenian Third Age University was conducted a research into generational characteristics and how they influenced programming education for people in later life and intergenerational educational programmes. It has been found that not all topics were convenient for intergenerational learning and education, but some were intergenerational par excellence: relation within families and within other communities, rural or urban environment where we live, common events generations lived together in different ways. The basic aim of an intergenerational educational programme is not so much learning about a common topic, but learning how to create intergenerational ties, or at least the are equally important. And there lies the greatest challenge for the facilitators of intergenerational learning.

It has also been found that basically intergenerational learning could be about: one generation learning about another generation, two or more generations learning about each other and what seems to be the best, generations learning together and constructing new knowledge together on the basis of reciprocal , mutual and experiential learning.

An important question that has been raised at the end of our research was that we still know very little about the way that people’s networks , not only social structures, affect their access to learning. Do these networks function as learning networks or learning communities. To put it differently, how do our social networks help us create and exchange skills, knowledge and attitudes that in turn allow us to tap in to other benefits? If we have more social capital – stronger and more extensive network ties – then are we more likely to learn new things than people with less social capital? And is our learning affected by the types of networks (generational or intergenerational, etc.) we belong to?

Intergenerational learning and cooperation draw on positive sources generations can offer each other. Intergenerational approach is an efficient approach when wanting to create relationships, community, volunteering, etc. Intergenerational imitative have a direct impact on the level of participation of generations in communities.

Conclusion

The changes family and our societies have undergone over the last decades have brought about looser ties between generations which have to be consolidated into ties of co-habitation, solidarity and co-operation. This can be done by creating more

social capital, more open social networks, as well as better access to knowledge, culture and other social sources. Intergenerational learning and educational programmes constitute a step further in creating new ties among generations and consolidating the already existing ones in need of renovation.

Literature and further reading

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