

Workshop 3 summary: Intergenerational Relationships

Wednesday 24 June 2020, via Zoom
(Report by Jan Macvarish)

The third workshop in the Generations Network series involved 23 participants in an afternoon of online discussion. Building on our previous discussions, the workshop set out to consider how relationships between the generations are mediated within the family, and in wider society; what is the social and cultural significance of intergenerational relationships, and in what ways can they be supported or weakened by policy initiatives and community projects?

Part One: Social and Cultural Questions

The first session, ‘What do we mean by intergenerational transmission, and how does it take place?’ kicked off with an introduction by MSc researcher **Cissie Buxton** (Canterbury Christ Church University). Cissie shared her thoughts on ‘Intergenerational relationships and the family in the context of young motherhood’.

Cissie has been researching young motherhood in the Thanet area of Kent, interviewing young mothers, their mothers and grandmothers about their responses to teenage pregnancy within the family. Cissie found that when asked about ‘family’, the respondents tended to refer to intergenerational relationships with each other rather than the relationship between the mother and father of the child. In her analysis and writing up, she found the distinction between ‘being’ and ‘doing’ family to be a helpful conceptual tool for working between practical questions of childcare, and the caring, sharing and loving sentiments that were spoken of by her interviewees. From the generational perspective, Cissie found it particularly interesting that the older women were both transmitting their own experience of motherhood and adjusting to the different life-course of the younger mother (for example, pursuing education).

Most of the mothers interviewed reported that the arrival of the baby had resolved many of the family tensions which had emerged in the teenage years, allowing for a further closeness in family relationships and a sense of sharing more in common across generations. Cissie pointed out, however, that the experience of resolving tensions during this transition point between adolescence and motherhood did not mean that there would be no future conflicts within the family. Given the shared care of the child that was taking place, it was possible that in the future, there could be tensions over the ‘ownership’ over the child.

The second introduction was provided by **Nigel Williams** (University of the West of England). Nigel brings a unique psychoanalytical perspective to the network which, over the course of the three sessions, has opened a number of new doors in our discussions. Nigel proposed that ‘the single self’ may be an insufficient way of understanding the individual across the lifecourse and used the case of a man born in 1920, but seeking therapy in the 1980s after experiencing a crisis post-retirement. On exploration of the man’s family history through diaries, themes of love and war emerged which, to Nigel, indicated that the man’s difficulties reflected memories and emotions transmitted across two generations of parents and children, taking in the experience of trauma and grief during the First World War. This led him to ask whether the ‘extended self’ is a more helpful way of conceiving ourselves, which can take account of the possibility that the collective psychology of several generations becomes embedded in the psyche of individuals. Nigel referred to John Bowlby’s ‘unconscious working models’ and how becoming a parent or grandparent can open up traumas and challenges which are echoes of previous generations’ experiences.

Our third speaker was **Michael Toze** (University of Lincoln) who presented on the subject of LGBTQ+ communities and intergenerationalities. Michael’s work raised some fascinating questions regarding the concept of generations in a community where biological reproduction has not been fundamental to it and where individuals have been relatively cut off from kinship structures. He also raised a theme which has been raised in previous workshops – the generational or cohort experience of a particular political struggle, in this case the resistance to the UK anti-homosexuality legislation, Section 28. Additional points of interest worth reflecting on were that, in the case of the LGBTQ+ community, individuals might join the community at different life stages (illustrated by the stories of the singer Boy George and television presenter Phillip Schofield who, while the same age, ‘came out’ 30 years apart). This raised questions of splits and tensions within communities, including frustrations and responsibilities between different generations. Michael referred to [Ruth Pearce’s](#) argument that in the LGBTQ+ community, aging may be non-linear.

The ensuing discussion raised further questions concerning public/private, internal/external distinctions in intergenerational relations: between internal family relationships and the broader societal context or between the particular configurations which might occur when the ‘personal becomes political’. The highly ‘textured’ character of generational distinctions was raised and the power of shared experiences, such as political activism, with their capacity to create feelings of great closeness within a generation. This brought us to consideration of Mannheim’s argument that generation is a force like social class.

The concept of the ‘extended self’ was thought by some participants to be helpful, as was the Mannheimian idea of past experiences being picked up by subsequent generations and ‘shooting forward’ into the present. The Black Lives Matter phenomenon was raised here, where past waves of activism have been drawn upon, responded to and reinterpreted by present activists. Here, Mannheim’s emphasis on the significance of *action*, taken as a result of ideas, in the formation of generational consciousness was considered.

References to other work mentioned in the discussion included:

- [Kirsty Lohman’s](#) (Surrey) oral history research project on LGBTQ community centres.
- [“Post-memory”](#) literature in psychoanalysis and cultural studies, dealing with instances where one generation’s experiences overshadow another.

Part Two: Intergenerational Policy Approaches

The key question for this session was, ‘What is the value of intergenerational relationships beyond the family, and what role should policy take in facilitating those relationships?’

Carys Banks, Research Fellow from the University of Surrey School of Health Sciences, presented a paper titled ‘Exploring effective models of social care support in addressing loneliness and social isolation’. Carys is currently devising an ethnographic study to explore social care settings for people with learning difficulties and older people. She has previously investigated the unintended consequences, such as loneliness and emotional deprivation, arising from safeguarding protocols in social care which determine, for example, that staff should avoid befriending and physical contact with the people with learning difficulties in their care. She is considering the relevance of intergenerational frameworks to her work.

Kate Howson (University of Swansea) is also undertaking research in care homes, evaluating the impact of projects which bring together children (5 to 18 years) and elderly residents. Kate is interested in the responses of the children, the residents, their family members and staff to such projects. Some of the evaluation measures include loneliness and quality of life. Early findings suggest the presence of children increases the willingness of older people to participate in activities and that children’s attitudes towards, and beliefs about, older people change during the course of the project, for example, moving from noticing the physical characteristics of the older residents to responding to them in more affectionate ways.

Kate prefers to use the term ‘multigenerational’ rather than ‘intergenerational’ because the latter tends to focus attention on the extremes – the very young and the very old. Thinking of the projects as multigenerational enabled the role of staff to be better reflected in the research. It was noted that multigenerational projects such as the co-location of nurseries and care homes are better established in the US and Japan.

Points were made in the discussion about resonances between the unintended consequences of safeguarding protocols for children and those for adults in social care settings. References were made to work around risk and safeguarding in early years and school settings, for example that of Verity Campbell-Barr, Furedi and Bristow, and Heather Piper. The ‘training-in’ to professionals of physical distancing through safeguarding protocols and the extent to which this has become part of a narrower, less humanistic process of professionalisation was raised. With regard to care homes for older people, the distinction between the intimacy which might arise between staff and patients through the acts of care-giving and the relationships between more physically distant relatives and the older person was also raised. It was suggested that this can be understood as an intimate relationship rather than simply a professional relationship.

A key question for the network (with a view to producing recommendations at a later date) is what role policy should play in facilitating relationships between generations. Participants considered the advantages and disadvantages of these, for example, while policies to facilitate the care of children by transferring parental leave to grandparents might have merits, they also risk reinforcing women’s role as carers. Another potential problem is the functionalisation of caring relationships, justifying ‘big society’ style cuts in public spending.