

ACHIEVING ‘SOCIAL COHESION’ THROUGH INTERGENERATIONAL PRACTICE

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“Intergenerational practice aims to bring people together in purposeful, mutually beneficial activities which promote greater understanding and respect between generations and contributes to building more cohesive communities. Intergenerational practice is inclusive, building on the positive resources that the young and old have to offer each other and those around them.”

(The Centre for Intergenerational Practice, UK, emphasis added)

As suggested in the above definition, the debate about intergenerational practice is often seen against the background of a broader social aim, i.e. its contribution to achieving greater ‘community’ and ‘social cohesion’. The endorsement by influential international organisations such as the European Commission and the World Health Organisation of *developing and reinforcing existing links between different generations* has further stimulated this discussion. This is reflected, for example, in the branding of 2012 as the European year of ‘Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations’, embracing a wide range of actions and campaigns that promote older and younger people’s participation in practice and policy. Against this background, this article briefly outlines some of the key aspects of the debate about social cohesion and further looks at the nature and potential of intergenerational practice in this context.

Social cohesion

Social cohesion is a multi-faceted concept used to describe the *bonds or “glue” that bring people together* in a given society. It refers to the institutions, norms and relationships that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions. The literature on social cohesion broadly emphasises two principal elements to the concept: first, the reduction of disparities, inequalities, poverty and social exclusion; and second, the strengthening of social relations, interactions and ties (Hatton-Yeo and Batty, 2011). In much of the literature the second element dominates and is closely tied to the concept of ‘social capital’. Social capital is considered to be one, albeit central element of social cohesion, and is commonly defined as the ‘information, trust and norms of reciprocity inhering in one’s social networks’ (Woolcock, 1998, p. 153). Attempts to define the concept have generally focused on the degree to which social cohesion as a resource can be used both for *public goods* as well as for the benefit of *individuals*.



On the first of these, social cohesion is considered to have a number of benefits for contemporary societies (Putnam, 1993, 2000). According to Robert Putnam, the best-known author on this topic, social cohesion facilitates *mutually supportive relations and cooperation*, and would therefore be a valuable means of improving social and economic development in modern societies. Social cohesion, thus, is seen to improve the efficiency and development of society by facilitating coordinated actions. Communities with high levels of social cohesion and cooperative networks, so called ‘civic communities’ are considered to be beneficial to society as a whole.

Second, social capital, defined as ‘networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness’ (Putnam, 2000), is commonly associated with a number of positive outcomes for *individuals*. People who are embedded in social networks are found to report higher levels of quality of life, better self-rated health and mental and physical wellbeing than those who are less socially involved (Pollack and von dem Knesebeck, 2004; Young et al., 2004; Sirven and Debrand, 2008). Social networks clearly have important value for both individuals and societies.

In order to promote social cohesion, it is commonly recognised that it is important to facilitate three complementary forms of social capital: *bonding*, *bridging* and *linking social capital* (Narayan and Cassidy, 2001; Putnam, 2000; 2007; Szreter and Woolcock, 2004; Woolcock, 2001).

Bonding social capital is generally defined as the relationships between close network members or *equals* in similar situations. It is the social cohesion that takes place between individuals of *similar* age groups, *similar* ethnic backgrounds or *similar* social status. Some examples of this type of social capital include the relationships between ‘homogenous’ (at least in some respect) groups of people, such as those between family members and close friends. Such relationships often act as an important social safety net, providing the network members with reciprocity and trust.

Bridging social capital refers to the social networks and ties that *cross* social groupings. These are established between people or groups that are removed, or different, from each other in some way. Bridging social ties, in other words, concerns the links with people who are not like you, such as people from different cultural backgrounds, different age groups or social status. Putnam (2000) suggests that this type of social capital is more ‘outward-looking’ than bonding social capital because it encompasses people across different social divides.

Linking social capital concerns the networks of individuals or groups with institutions or agencies in higher influential positions. Through linking social capital, people are able to access support, resources and information from organisations and networks. An example of linking social capital is the interactions that citizens have with their local government.

Intergenerational practice

There are different ways of defining Intergenerational Practice (further abbreviated as IP). However, three aspects are found as the common denominators of intergenerational programmes (Newman and Sanchez, 2007, p. 34-35):

- People from different generations participate in an IP;
- Participation in an IP involves activities aimed at goals which are beneficial for all those people (and hence to the community in which they live);
- Thanks to IPs, participants maintain relations based on sharing.

Newman and Sanchez (2007, p. 38) suggest that to refer to 'intergenerationality', *being together* is not enough; rather, it is important to *do things and grow together*. Hence, *intergenerational relations* are based on consensus, cooperation or conflict, involving two or more generations or generational groups.

Initiatives aimed at promoting intergenerational relations are often characterised by small-scale and intensive projects, such as older volunteers mentoring 'vulnerable' children in need of support; intergenerational cookery groups involving having healthy lunches together; and projects which bring different generations together to explore their locality and the neighbourhood's past, present and future (Springate et al., 2008).

Children growing up in the information age could also play a role in educating older people about using computer and communication technology. One benefit of such IPs involves the potential for children to meet the needs of older persons. Equally important would be the gains to children of being involved in meeting the needs of others. As suggested by Uhlenberg (2000, p. 277), 'service to older persons could be one of the most meaningful ways of teaching children that they can be productive and useful members of the community'.

Other examples may involve programmes that enable people of different generations to participate in environmental service projects and become stewards of their environments. The European project *Nature for Care, Care for Nature*, for example, aims to develop activities that involve young and older people together in a variety of contexts by using *nature* and the *environment* as connecting themes. Such initiatives have the potential to bring generations together to learn about, but also to improve the environment. Environmental education typically does not only take place in schools, but across different settings and across the life span. Themes such as 'nature' and 'environment' therefore provide an important yet under-utilised direction for programmes concerned with IP. At the same time, IP provides a promising, but under-explored prospect for programmes concerned with environmental issues.

IPs may involve different forms of social capital. This can be illustrated through community action programmes bringing together older and young residents to identify issues of concern in their community, and to influence decision-

makers to make changes (NCICDP, 2005). Promoting *bonding social capital*, in this instance, may reflect attempts to raise *older residents'* (i.e. one particular age group's) readiness and ability to change their situation and living conditions according to their own wishes and needs to maintain independence. *Bridging social capital* may take place when different groups of residents, old as well as young, are involved in planning, taking action and creating opportunities for social change in their neighbourhood. This may result in a range of interventions, such as improving access to high quality public space. Transforming single purpose places (e.g. schools) into multiple-purpose places where generations can come together and participate in their community, to take one example, represents an essential element of public life. In order to achieve such community goals, the availability of *linking social capital* often represents an essential success factor. Promoting *links* and *partnerships* with neighbourhood-based organisations, local action groups, policy makers and other community stakeholders may be especially important in realising the potential benefits of IPs.

What kinds of outcomes can be achieved through IP and for whom?

A recent review of the potential benefits for participants of IPs found that for *older people*, benefits ranged from individual (ability to cope with vulnerabilities, increased motivation, increased perceptions of self worth) to relational (making friends with young people, develop social relationships) and benefits for the community (reintegration, skill sharing, volunteering). For *young people*, benefits noted included: increased sense of worth, self-esteem and confidence; enhanced sense of social responsibility; better school results; access to adults at difficult times; less involvement in offending and drug use; better health; improved school attendance and greater personal resilience (MacCallum et al., 2006; Hatton-Yeo and Batty, 2011).

The aims of IPs – whether 'promoting networking among generations', 'connecting local schools to the community' or 'strengthening cooperation between nursery schools and care homes' – all reflect a view of citizenship that involves people of all ages as active participants in local issues (Hatton-Yeo and Batty, 2011). Social cohesion works effectively at both a community and neighbourhood level, and IPs reflect this as socially inclusive approaches to building community networks. The contribution of intergenerational activities toward building a more socially cohesive and caring society is therefore difficult to question. A remaining challenge, however, is to locate these approaches alongside broader social programmes that also address other challenges to social cohesion, such as reducing poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion (Hatton-Yeo and Batty, 2011).



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