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The changing lives and relationships of young children and older adults

Implications for intergenerational learning

Carmel Gallagher

Introduction

Generational bonds of affection, socialisation, support, cooperation and the transmission of values across time are the hallmarks of family and kinship systems in all societies. Generational interdependence emphasises what different generations have to offer one another as well as values based on kinship, community and civic obligations. However, intergenerational relationships are dynamic and changing, and generational conflict and misunderstanding are also evident both in familial and non-familial generational interactions.

In this chapter, we examine the changing lives and relationships of children and older adults with a focus on generational relationships. We ask: what is the nature of the bonds between young and old in contemporary European societies? What interdependencies, reciprocities and divisions define intergenerational (IG) relationships? What social forces shape the lives of children and older people and how do these impact on the type and quality of relationships between them? While we focus primarily on intergenerational relationships in the family, we also consider cross generational relationships in wider neighbourhood and community contexts. We examine changing conceptions of ageing
and evidence on changing grandparent-grandchild relationships. While research evidence points to continuity in attachment between older people and their close relatives over time, the role that grandparents play in contemporary societies differs in many important respects from that of past generations of grandparents. The role of the ‘social grandparent’ is also highlighted in the context of changing perspectives on the older years as well as civic responsibility. In the final section of the chapter, we consider how planned IG initiatives can be part of responses of both civil society and governments to combat age and social segregation and promote solidaristic values in societies.

Many of the examples given are drawn from Irish society. However, we make broad comparisons with other European societies and refer to international literature to understand changing patterns of intergenerational relationships.

**Key demographic, social and economic changes**

The most significant demographic changes that have impacted family and kinship relationships in Europe have been falling birth rates and increasing longevity. In 2017 almost one-fifth (19 per cent) of the European Union (EU) population was aged 65 or older. The proportionate increase in the older population is attributed to consistently low birth rates and higher life expectancy. Ireland had the lowest percentage of people over 65 (13.5 per cent) while Italy had the highest (22.3 per cent) (Eurostat, 2018a).

Population ageing is a global phenomenon. Japan has the highest percentage of older citizens with 27 per cent of its population being 65 years of age or older. Although the process of population ageing is most advanced in Europe, Japan and in North America, the populations of other regions are growing older as well. In the developing regions, which have higher birth rates than higher income regions, the growth of the population aged 60 years or over is accelerating. In 2050, older persons are expected to account for 35 per cent of the population in Europe, 28 per cent in North America, 25 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean, 24 per cent in Asia, 23 per cent in Oceania and 9 per cent in Africa (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2017).
Globally, the number of people aged 80 years or over, the ‘oldest-old’, is growing even faster than the number of older persons overall (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015).

Lower fertility rates and women giving birth to fewer children at a later age in life, have led to a corresponding reduction in Europe in the share of children and young people in the total population. By 2005, there were, for the first time, more elderly people (81.9 million) than children (80.4 million) in the EU-28 population. Worldwide, there was also a general decline in the relative share of children in the global population between 1995 and 2015 (Eurostat, 2018b).

Both fertility and marriage rates are falling in much of the world, especially in higher income regions. Furthermore, the percentage of children living in two-parent families is falling, particularly in Europe, the Americas and Oceania. Equality between the sexes is on the rise while family-centred values and adherence to traditional gender roles are declining in many regions (Scott et al., 2013).

Changes in marriage and family formation patterns have resulted in more diverse family forms. Separation, divorce and the formation of new relationships common in Western societies have led to new family forms including blended families, single parent families, cohabiting couples with children, same sex couples with or without children – all of whom have increasingly been recognised in public policy.

These trends have resulted in fewer children and greater numbers of older people in the population as well as more generations being alive at the same time. Children will have fewer siblings and cousins than children of previous generations, but they are more likely to have living grandparents and even great-grandparents. Furthermore, grandparenting now takes place over much longer periods of time than in the past (Arber & Timonen, 2012). The term ‘the beanpole family’ refers to the fact that families are extended vertically more so than horizontally.

While living longer is a bonus – referred to as the longevity dividend – it is important to consider the quality of those added years in terms of health and social supports. The challenges that longevity entails in making those added years meaningful and in supporting older people through advanced old age will make demands on all generations and call for creativity in policy responses. One implication identified in the literature is the increased burden of caring falling on middle aged women in particular, the so-called ‘sandwich generation’, who must
combine the demands of caring for their own families with advanced aged parents and work responsibilities (Neal & Hammer, 2007).

Another significant sociodemographic trend is the increase in the proportion of people who live alone. Almost one-third of people live alone in Europe (Eurostat, 2016). In Ireland approximately 27 per cent of those aged 65 and older live alone while the proportion is almost 45 per cent for those aged 85 and older (CSO, 2017). Living alone can be seen to reflect increasing autonomy for individuals across the life course supported by social citizenship measures such as pensions. However, while living alone by no means implies being lonely, for older people living alone can mean being socially isolated and feeling lonely which are associated with reduced quality of life (Klinenberg, 2016; Treacy et al., 2004; Victor et al., 2002).

**Continuity and change in family life**

Many of these changes have been seen as reflecting an increase in individualisation, which can be understood as the processes in which the needs, interests, pleasures and desires of the individual are emphasised over collective and social groupings to which they belong such as religion and community (Bauman, 1995; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Castells, 1997). Some sociologists (for example, Stacey, 1996) have defined a post-modern family with Beck-Gernsheim (1998) referring to the post-familial family and the deinstitutionalisation of marriage.

More complex family structures mean that children may experience more transitions and disruptions in their lives and relationships than their own parents or grandparents experienced. The experience of separation and living in reconstituted families requires them to adapt to reduced or shared parenting between different households or losing contact with a parent or grandparents, as well as negotiation of new relationships with a step-parent, step-siblings and step-grandparents. Furthermore, while children are less likely to grow up in multigenerational households and families tend to be more geographically dispersed, this does not mean that their relationships with older family members are less significant to them than for previous generations of children.

While family life in the twenty-first century is likely to continue to be highly variable, it is far from clear that traditional family and kinship
norms and values will subside. Based on qualitative interviews around the country, Inglis examined how the family operates in Irish society and culture and how it provides a way of understanding and living life. Acknowledging that Irish people have become more individualised, that family life is characterised by increasing varieties of relationships and family life, and that family has been influenced by increased mobility as well as media and market penetration, nonetheless, he concludes that people as active agents in families ‘rely on a vast, strong culture of beliefs and practices that have been embodied over generations’ (Inglis, 2014, p. 83). This chimes with research by Smart and Shipman (2004) who examined kinship among communities in Yorkshire in the United Kingdom (UK) who had diverse ethnic origins and concluded that tradition continued to be the basis for family life while also being subject to renegotiation and realignment from one generation to another (cited in Gray et al., 2016).

However, perceptions of the possibilities and limitations of the older years are also changing and we now examine ideas about being an older person in the twenty-first century.

**Changing conceptions of ageing and old age**

Ageing is not a uniform process. Longitudinal studies in particular have confirmed that ageing is highly specific to each individual and that the pathway of old age is not predetermined (TILDA, 2018). While growing older inevitably entails losses, how individuals deal with transitions including bereavement and retirement is highly variable. Retirement can lead to loss of social networks and meaningful routine; however, retirement can also bring freedom and personal fulfilment. Societal expectations change too, for example the accepted time to retire and opportunities for social participation for retirees. While retirement can be seen as a liberating experience, many countries including Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK have increased the age at which state pensions are paid. In developing countries where there are few pension schemes and the labour of everyone is important, most people work until they are physically incapable of doing so. Furthermore, economic pressures on welfare systems suggest that the age of retirement in the future will become increasingly flexible.
A contributory factor to the changing social construction of old age was the emergence of the Third Age as conceptualised by Laslett (1996). This referred to a new phase of life available to the ‘young–old’ characterised by comparative good health, financial security and freedom from front-line work and parenting responsibilities. The Third Age preceded a period of physical decline associated with the Fourth Age and provided new opportunities for self-fulfilment and contribution to family, community and society. The possibilities for a fulfilling and autonomous life in the Third Age depend of course on social citizenship rights, adequate income and reasonable health as well as opportunities for community and civic participation.

Laslett’s positive depiction of the Third Age contrasts with his more negative portrayal of the Fourth Age which he associated with inactivity, exclusion and diminished status (Laslett, 1996). However, it can be argued that his aim to promote a positive image of the Third Age led him to stereotype the oldest-old and to fail to look for life-affirming possibilities in late old age when physical decline is inevitable (Gallagher, 2008).

Erikson displayed a more optimistic view of the older-old: ‘The ultimate capacities of the aging person are not yet determined. The future may well bring surprises’ (Erikson et al., 1986, cited in Moody, 2007, p. 43). After he had experienced old age himself, Erikson, in collaboration with Joan Erikson, came to believe that generativity had a much greater role to play in later life than he had initially thought. They proposed the idea of grand-generativity to reflect this and advanced the idea of a ninth stage of human development (Erikson & Erikson, 1997), which extended the eight-stage model originally conceptualised by Erikson (1980 [1963]). The role of older people as repositories of history and transmitters of shared and collective identity had already been highlighted by Erikson et al. (1986):

As collectors of time and preservers of memory, those healthy elders who have survived into a reasonable fit old age have time on their side – time that is to be dispensed wisely and creatively, usually in the form of stories, to those younger ones who will one day follow in their footsteps.

(cited in Moody, 2007 p. 43)
However, older people must also adapt to contemporary culture and as Arber and Timonen argue (2012) their role may not be confined to looking backwards. We consider this argument later in the context of the possibilities provided by intergenerational learning (IGL) for reciprocal learning relationships.

The importance of social participation in later life is increasingly recognised as contributing to better quality of life and lower levels of depression. Characteristics associated with loneliness among older people include increased age, being a single or widowed female, being educated to primary level only, poor self-rated health, poor transport and life events/transitions (Klinenberg, 2016; Treacy et al., 2004; Victor et al., 2002). Research in Ireland on the community lives of older adults found that ‘satisfaction with life and understandings of what constitutes a good life in old age are strongly associated with meaningful engagement with others in one’s locality’ (Gallagher, 2008, p. 321). Gallagher described a relational landscape in which older adults contributed to their families, neighbourhoods and community and at the same time enriched their own lives.

It has been found that actively participating in your community for more than two hours a week can help alleviate loneliness both for volunteers and the people they support (Carr et al., 2018). The authors also argued that while opportunities for older people to have meaningful interactions are often undertaken by faith-based and civil society groups, governments play an important role in community activation measures. The contribution of older people as a ‘strong social model’ for other generations reflects the idea of the ‘social grandparent’ (Boström, 2003) where older people, when given the opportunity, can contribute their skills and life wisdom to younger generations including very young children (Gallagher & Fitzpatrick, 2018). A research study on intergenerational learning in Ireland suggested that this ‘valuable social role’ was manifested in both direct and indirect transmission of knowledge and also in modelling behaviour, for example, through conversation (Gallagher & Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 23).

**Changing grandparent–grandchild relations**

One of the five goals of intergenerational practice and learning identified in the TOY project was recognising the roles of grandparents in
the lives of young children (TOY Project Consortium, 2013a). While grandchildren are less likely to live with their grandparents than in previous decades in Europe, and as we have observed both the lives of children and older adults have changed significantly, the influence of grandparents on their grandchildren remains highly salient. We will examine in particular the educational and childcare roles of grandparents in contemporary societies.

Retrospective life history narratives and qualitative interviews with different birth cohorts in Ireland illuminate both changing patterns of contact between grandparents and grandchildren as well as enduring bonds of affection (Geraghty et al., 2015). An important role played by grandparents and evidenced in the accounts of childhood from those interviewed in the cohorts born pre-1960s was that of acting as a bridge to the wider world. The research gives accounts of how grandparents provided access to and immersion in wider networks of neighbourhood, community and work in both rural and urban settings, for example visiting neighbouring households, households of other relatives and workshops, and thus enabling children to ‘acquire essential social and cultural skills in unstructured, everyday forms of interaction’ (Geraghty et al., 2015, p. 135). The authors explain that this role was not evident in accounts given by the two youngest age cohorts, reflecting the changing rhythms of everyday life. The authors attribute shifting patterns and textures in the grandparent-grandchild relationship to transformation in family and household composition and changing conceptions of childhood. It was suggested that an emphasis on childhood as a special time of life with distinctive needs and requirements resulting in the notion of ‘child-centred’ spaces may have led to the segregation of children from wider community and cross-generational family ties (Gray et al., 2016, p. 87).

Research has also highlighted the influence of grandparents on grandchildren’s moral and religious development (King, 2003; Copen & Silverstein, 2007). Research in Italy highlighted the importance that grandparents attach to their role as educator and support through shared activities with their grandchildren. The authors found that grandmothers devoted more time to activities like reading and story-telling while grandfathers spent more time with sport and physical activities. The authors argue that narration involving co-creating of meaning between grandparents and grandchildren contributes to development of identity
and growth of maturity (Smorti et al., 2012). Arber and Timonen (2012) argue that grandparents do not just bring learning from the past but point out that contemporary grandparenting has forward looking functions that are responsive to present day needs and challenges.

While children are spending more time in formal settings such as preschool and school, the role of grandparents in providing childcare is increasingly recognised and acknowledged. There is considerable variation among countries in the role that grandparents play and feel they should play in childcare. For example, in Italy 68 per cent of grandparents say caring for a grandchild is a responsibility. This compares with 54 per cent of grandparents in Germany and 40 per cent of grandparents in the US. The percentage of grandparents who said they provided regular childcare in the previous 12 months was 71 per cent in Italy, 58 per cent in Germany and 48 per cent in the US (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Findings from the TILDA study on ageing in Ireland confirmed that significant proportions of older people in pre-retirement and post-retirement ages are active in caring for their grandchildren: 47 per cent of adults aged 54 to 64 years and 51 per cent aged 65 to 74 years provide regular childcare for their grandchildren for an average of 36 hours per month (Ward & McGarrigle, 2017). Quality of life was found to be higher in those who care regularly for their grandchildren. However, grandparents in lower income groups are less likely to be able to exercise choice over their caring commitments and may experience higher levels of stress in this role than middle class grandparents.

The role of grandparents in divorced and separated families is highly significant. Research in Ireland found that in many cases it was the grandparents who were the key to the younger generation’s ability to deal with the emotional and practical consequences of relationship breakdown (Timonen et al., 2009). Research on grandparenting in Germany highlighted how emotional bonds between grandparents and older grandchildren appear to counteract the negative effects of an adult child’s union dissolution (Mayne & Huxhold, 2012). Grandparents play a particularly important role for children who experience trauma and loss of their parent’s company, whether through divorce, neglect or migration. This role is strongly influenced by the cultural and economic context. In the US there are also a growing number of grandfamilies where children reside with and are raised by grandparents, other extended family members or close family-like friends (Generations United, 2017).
Grandparents who provide extensive care for grandchildren have been classified as ‘child savers’ (typically where parents are unable to care) or ‘mother savers’ (to facilitate mothers’ participation in the labour force). However, Baker and Silverstein (2012) identified a pattern of grandparenting in the developing world, what they termed ‘family savers’, where grandparents act in the interests of both grandchildren and mother/parents and may personally benefit as a result of their care-giving from remittances sent back by the migrant parents. This phenomenon was observed in China in the 1990s when migration from rural to urban areas reached its peak. While public concern was expressed about the demands placed on frail grandparents, Baker and Silverstein (2012) point out that the expectation of care was compatible with the culture of family obligation and status of grandparents. The phenomenon of custodial grandparenting in rural China is a pattern found in many countries where migration is common, including in European countries. Children may be left with grandparents or they may be taken with their parents to a new country and grandparents are left behind. Either way, the impact on grandparents appears to receive little recognition in public awareness or social policy.

The role of children in migration processes is increasingly recognised through the lens of children as active social agents (Ní Laoire, 2015). Ní Laoire argues that while transnational family studies emphasise the strength of extended and multi-generational family connections in families separated by emigration, migrant children also need recognition and acceptance within peer networks and local communities. Children experience great disruptions when their parents migrate; they may accompany their parents to a new country or remain with a grandparent until such time as the parents are settled and they can join them. However, they then have to deal with the loss of their grandparents’ company (Ní Laoire, 2015). Intergenerational programmes that include migrant children provide the possibility of older people befriending migrant children through school or community-based programmes and acting as a ‘social grandparent’.

Is there a danger that grandparents may be seen as indispensable child minders but their value in educating their grandchildren might be unappreciated? While the participation of older people in lifelong learning and volunteering is increasingly recognised (Gallagher, 2008), learning in later life is mostly undertaken informally and often is not
acknowledged as learning (Withnall, 2006; Dench & Regan, 2000). Whether older people are volunteering their time in a school or community setting or indeed minding their grandchildren, their activities are often not termed intergenerational. An interesting intergenerational initiative in Poland is the Academy of Super Grandmothers and Super Grandfathers – a school where grandparents learn more about their grandparenting role and engage in volunteer work with children (TOY Project Consortium, 2013b). While the TOY project researchers found few examples of IGL in Poland, the idea of an Academy of Super Grandmothers and Super Grandfathers has the potential to both validate the role of grandparents and recognise the benefits of lifelong learning. Anecdotally, we know that it is grandparents who frequently bring children to and from pre-school and school. There are myriad possibilities to involve grandparents in their grandchildren’s education while simultaneously enriching their own learning as illustrated in Chapters 10, 12 and 13.

The role of intergenerational learning in challenging age and social segregation

The rapid pace of change engendered by computer-based technology that now permeates all aspects of society can lead to social exclusion of older adults. Children and young people are ‘digital natives’ who have been socialised in a ‘networked’ and ‘global’ society. Their experiences of childhood may be becoming more removed from childhood experiences of older generations and indeed the social reality of the older people’s current lives. Children and young people may be inclined to dismiss older people because they do not seem aware of new trends and fashions and are less visible in social media and in images of contemporary popular culture. However, research has shown that IGL can reduce stereotyped attitudes held by children towards older people (Heyman et al., 2011). The study in the US found that participating in an IGL programme had positively influenced attitudes towards older people when attitudes of preschoolers in a traditional preschool setting and a setting that had an IGL programme were compared. Children in the intergenerational programme rated older adults as healthier compared to children in the traditional programme who viewed them as sicker.
However, the authors suggest that further research is required to investigate how attitudes are influenced over time.

The invisibility of children and older people, especially those spending time in age-segregated settings, prevents them from contributing their resources and learning to each other. Even frail older people have something to offer children; accumulated knowledge and wisdom of life experience which they can dispense through stories, patient and calm attention, tolerance and humour (see Chapters 9 and 13). More active older people can volunteer their time and knowledge to children through a variety of IGL programmes including help with reading, creative activities and environmental/nature awareness (see Chapters 8 and 12). For their part, children help older adults to keep in touch with popular culture and values. They help them to tune in to current approaches in education, use of technology and social media, and in some cases give older people a focus beyond their own routines, which may be limited by disability and contracting networks. Where too much technology might be a feature of the lives of some children, older adults can engage in conversation and traditional games that enable children to discover other ways of interacting with the world. Intergenerational activities help each group to understand each other’s worlds.

At the level of community engagement, planned IGL programmes have the potential to create social capital that generates connections and trust among age and social groups who typically might not have opportunities to interact in their normal environments (Kuehne & Melville, 2014; Gallagher & Fitzpatrick, 2018). The following benefits were identified by practitioners in early years and elder care settings in Ireland who had experience of implementing IGL initiatives:

Opening up the environments typically inhabited by young or old; the enjoyment and, in some cases, the joy that older people got from interacting with young children; promoting positive views of difference; learning as an enterprise for life for children, older people and staff; expanding social networks of older adults and providing opportunity for social participation; and recognising the valuable social role that older people and children can play in their communities.

(Gallagher & Fitzpatrick, 2018, pp. 13–19)
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The nature of the active and relational learning involved were also identified as benefits (see Chapter 3).

Linking the idea of the social grandparent with the role of older adults as volunteers underpins the Intergenerational Sustainable Community Café in Liverpool, UK, otherwise known as the Legacy Café. Elderly residents who live close to a Children and Family Centre in a socio-economically deprived area of Liverpool are encouraged to come and demonstrate traditional skills to young children and their families. The project is built on the idea that early childhood is a transformative period when young children start to develop attitudes and skills that can last a lifetime. Furthermore, older members of any community are happy to share cultural traditions in an informal manner with the youngest members (see Chapter 12 for an account of the Legacy Café).

The TOY project documented examples of IGL projects in seven European countries that demonstrate the reciprocal benefits and social capital gains of planned IGL work. The 21 case studies document the learning that children acquired, the satisfaction of the older adults in passing on their knowledge and the positive values and attitudes engendered. Commenting on an IGL project in Portugal ‘From 8 to 80 years’ where social gatherings and leisure activities are organised between children in a kindergarten and a neighbouring care setting for older people, a Portuguese mother of a four-year-old stated: ‘It is all about the learning of the values of sharing, solidarity, respect and acceptance of the other’ (TOY Project Consortium, 2013b, p. 11). In Ireland a school principal reported that the intergenerational ‘Trauma Teddies’ project ‘was really great for them [migrant children] to connect with older people on a regular basis’ (TOY Project Consortium, 2013b, p. 14).

Further examples of inclusivity and connections created through innovative IGL initiatives involving young children and older adults can be seen in Chapters 8 and 10.

Conclusion

Interest in IGL has emerged in response to changes in relationships among age groups. In the past the family or the local community typically provided informal opportunities for contact across age groups, especially between the very old and the very young (Moody & Sasser, 2015). Specialisation of
education and care settings has removed young children and many of the oldest-old citizens to segregated and institutionalised settings, thus hindering the possibility of everyday interactions and potentially creating more cultural distance. Yet, societal trends towards greater autonomy and agency for young and old do not necessarily imply weaker intergenerational bonds. While the role of grandparents as providers of childcare and as an essential support in situations of family stress and relationship breakdown is increasingly recognised, their role as educators is not always acknowledged or supported. The idea of the social grandparent harnesses volunteering resources of older adults with benefits for children and social capital gains. It is important that public policies recognise the value of generations learning from each other and the necessity to create opportunity for communication and positive reciprocal relationships.

Recognising the dynamic nature of intergenerational relationships and the fast pace of change impacting all age groups, planned IGL initiatives built on organic relationships within extended families and communities. By adopting socially inclusive practices IGL initiatives also have an important role to play in maintaining age and social solidarity in contemporary societies. Where young and old compete for limited public resources and where dependency ratios can fluctuate, it is essential that societies strive to maintain a balance between the values of the generations and a sense of intergenerational interdependence.

References


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