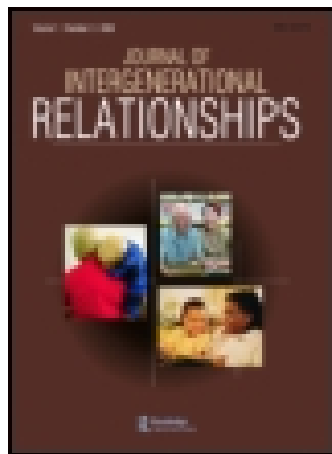


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Intergenerational Relations in Aging Societies: Emerging Topics in Europe

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BACKGROUND

Continued increase in longevity and continuing low birth rates will challenge the European community in a way that is unprecedented in its history. According to extrapolations of the European Commission (2005), society will experience drastic structural changes in an increasingly globalized world; there will be fewer children, young people, and adults of working age on one side and more elderly workers (55–64 years), old (65–79 years), and very old people (80+ years) on the other side. The impacts of social change on the individual and on society will be manifold and they will concern several levels of the socioecological context. Most notably, the gross national product in Europe will drop significantly, from 2–2.25% today to 1.25% in 2040. In general, financial and social resources of the society will be dramatically challenged. Migration and integration, intergenerational relations—especially solidarity between generations, social exclusion, and social inequalities will therefore be areas of concern.

SOLIDARITY BETWEEN GENERATIONS AND “JUSTICE”

According to the EC (2005), the contribution of all citizens, societal players, and partners will be demanded to cope with the multiple effects of demographical change on society (2005). Constitutive elements of such a “new solidarity” between generations should be the reciprocal exchange of support as well as the transfer of knowledge and experiences between generations. The growth potential offered by junior and senior citizens that is based on such solidarity should then foster economic and social development in a

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sustainable way. The plea for solidarity also comprises the notion of generational justice as well as the notion of resource fairness. Justice between generations describes the evaluation of exchange processes between generations with respect to specific criteria. Depending on the chosen criterion differing evaluations may result. Without making a claim to be complete, one may name the achievement principle, the need principle, or the “equity” principle that may result in different evaluations of “generational justice.” Depending on the views of differing generations, justice does/may not necessarily and directly imply fairness.

Despite its importance and its underlying consensus, the politically and economically motivated appeal for solidarity between generations contains some risks. The most prominent one may be seen in polarizing society into two groups, namely “the old,” and “the young.” The essence of such polarization being the differing access to resources offered within the context of public expenditures by the welfare state (e.g., social security, health, education). Public discourse within the media has already taken up the notion of justice underlying access to public resources, and by confronting “the elderly person” and “the young generation” it sometimes even depicts the scenario as a “war between generations” or “generational warfare.”¹ Such a description denies that exchange processes underlying the relation between generations certainly comprise more than financial transfers; different kinds of material and immaterial “goods” are exchanged here and different models of reciprocity exist. A differentiation of these processes will, thus, help to put into perspective simplifying views of a “war between generations.”

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Discourses on generational warfare also miss a necessary differentiation of the term *generation* itself. Several aspects of this concept may be differentiated here (Hoepflinger, 2008). On the historical-societal level, the term is used to describe a group of persons with common historical background, allowing for a differentiation of different birth cohorts. The genealogical notion of the term allows for a description of familial lineage and, thus, a differentiation between children, parents, grandparents, and grandchildren. Finally, the pedagogical or educational notion of the term is defined by the transfer of knowledge between two generations. Hereby, chronological age does not necessarily play an essential role since the direction of knowledge transfer defines the generation. Educational generations may not correspond with genealogical and historical ones; a grandchild explaining the use of a computer to his or her grandparents constitutes in this sense the “elder generation,” whereas the grandparent stands as the “younger” generation in this process. Kohli and Szydlik (2000) pick up the difference between the genealogical generation on the micro level and the historical-societal generation

at the macro level and distinguish family generation from societal generation. At the societal level, generation may be differentiated with respect to the political, cultural, and economic sphere. The first being defined by common political goals, values, and attitudes, the second by adherence to certain lifestyles and underlying values and the third with respect to economic risks and chances at a given historical time. Using this differentiation, one may hold with Kohli (2006) that the conflict between generations at the societal level has experienced a shift from the cultural to the economic level. Given the pluralism of values, a discourse about the prominence of cultural values is no longer at stake on the societal level, while the distribution of financial resources and services in the public domains clearly is at stake.

POLICY AND RESEARCH ISSUES—SOME CONCLUSIONS

Solidarity between generations has been outlined as a possible protective factor when it comes to dealing with the changes associated with demographic changes in Europe. Based on findings on intergenerational support within families, one may hold that this gives no indication of a “war between generations” (see Lang & Perrig-Chiello, 2005), even though differences may be expected at the societal level when it comes to the distribution of public resources. Concerning policy issues, a polarization of society into the young and the old should be prevented, and it should be a guideline that society always implies togetherness of several generations without giving priority to one specific group. Solutions will need to be constructed in a participative dialogue between all involved parties within social policy, though this dialogue is certainly more easily said than realized.

Second, one may mention here that European societies will need structures able to promote and foster intergenerational encounters given that the latter are no longer a reality within contemporary societies. This need also leads to research issues that will be important in the future beyond the desiderate of research based on clear conceptual background. The pursuit of open questions in a changing society within a globalized world will be the evident direction. These questions concern the changed role of grandparents, the situation of generations within patchwork families, questions of social inclusion, the perceived responsibility for dependent persons, the issue of generational relations within multicultural societies, etc., for example. A last point mentioned here concerns the need of a European approach. In order to achieve a common view of intergenerational relations in our ageing societies, research activities should be linked across Europe. Therefore, promoting European networking regarding research represents a final desiderate and recommendation here.

NOTE

1. Although perhaps not the most reliable diagnostic, a Google search of the term “war between generations” ends up with 2,940 hits in the Web, and “generational warfare,” with a wide range of different meanings, arrives at 18,600 hits.

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