

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SEMINAR SERIES



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Same as it ever was?

Intergenerational relationships: A local case study.

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The life-course, age and intergenerational relations

Our planet's changing age demographic has sparked economic debates relating to intergenerational equity and exchanges. This seminar focuses on the social aspects of intergenerational relationships and will present findings from a local neighbourhood. At the local level, issues which impact on intergenerational relationships are presented around three themes: social exclusion, age discrimination and the legacy of the conflict.

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Definition:

'Intergenerational relationships' refers to relationships and connections between people of different age groups. Within families, it generally means relationships between parents, children and grand-children, great grand-children etc. This research is within a neighbourhood so that the phrase within this context refers to relationships and connections between people of all different ages, whether related or not. The age range of participants in this study is 8 to 89.

1. Background

It is widely known that the proportion of older people and younger people in society has changed dramatically in the last hundred years. Decreasing fertility and infant mortality have had the most profound effect, but combined with our increased longevity, the impacts are remarkable and unique in global history. Up to the end of the 20th century, the world had large numbers of children and relatively small numbers of older adults. The 2001 census was the first in history to record that there were fewer younger people than older in the population.

Table 1 below projects that by 2021 the majority of the population in Northern Ireland will be over 60, in comparison to those under 25. It is notable from Table 1 that the change in numbers of young people is 16,000 less, whilst the change in numbers of older people is 174,000 more.

Table 1 : Estimated Population Projection for Northern Ireland

Year	Number of people aged under 25	Number of people aged over 50
2006	612,000	525,000
2021	596,000	699,000

Source: www.nisra.gov.uk (accessed 2011)

The increased life expectancy occurring in Western societies is a tribute to technological and medicine advances and as such it should be regarded as one of the most impressive achievements of modern society. But it is consistently discussed as problematic, particularly in economic terms but also within social relations. The WHO, United Nations, European Union and national governments recognise that the trend brings unknown and unquantifiable challenges for societies. It is theorised that this rapidly changing age demographic provides opportunity for differences to expand and tensions to build between generations that may represent a 'new pressure on positive relations between the oldest and youngest generations in society.' (Lloyd, 2008:15). It is speculated that these tensions will spill over into communities and neighbourhood level intergenerational relationships.

2. Description of the research project

This research seeks to provide a better understanding of the range of social factors that influence intergenerational relationships in a local neighbourhood. Older people are often thought of as being in need and a drain on public resources. Younger people are often connected with negative images of 'anti-social' behaviour in neighbourhoods and viewed as out of control. As well as this negative stereotyping, young and old are often viewed as being in conflict, both at neighbourhood level and at the societal level, with doom and gloom forecasts of an ageing population that the young cannot support.

This research aims to identify what, if any, conflict exists between young and old at neighbourhood level and illuminate the wider social mechanisms that influence those relationships. In doing so, it is anticipated that this research can inform the policy debate about how we address the social challenges of an ageing population.

This research is a PhD project which started in 2008. The research site is public built housing estate outside Belfast. According to the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM) statistic, the estate moved several percentage points closer to being within the top 10% of the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland between 2005 and 2010: A move towards further deprivation, at least in statistical terms. Within some indicators of the NIMDM 2010, the estate falls well within the

most deprived 5%. As a community development worker and an adult education tutor, I believe that social research should be focussed on addressing disadvantage and inequality and that is why I choose to research this neighbourhood.

There are around 800 households with around 1500 residents in the estate. In order to conduct my research, I sought permission from the local community group and I worked voluntarily for them for one day a week for over a year. This enabled me to connect with residents of all ages and other stakeholders, particularly employees of statutory organisations who worked closely with residents in the estate. The findings I am presenting are based on my analysis of data which has been collected from November 2009 to the present day. The findings are based on information gathered from focus groups, interviews, my research journal, a community survey, attendance at community meetings, children's drawings, casual conversations and time spent observing estate life.

3. What did the research find?

Firstly, research participants' perceptions of young and old: Participants were very reluctant to put an age on when one becomes old or stops being young. In fact, the most common response from adult participants was that one never stopped being young. But contrary to this inability to assign a number to an age group, participants were willing and able to provide descriptions of older and younger people as distinct social groups. Older people were frequently viewed as having declining abilities, less likely to go out and more likely to complain. Young people described their grandparents with sentiment and love as central to the relationship but when children were asked to describe older people in the community, the description was often more negative. Children and young people were viewed negatively although there was a sense that they 'weren't all bad' and that parenting today was a challenge for a variety of reasons.

Secondly, the isolation of the estate: The estate was one of many of the Northern Ireland Housing Trust's (now the NIHE) developments outside Belfast in the late 60s and early 70s. Residents were moved from Belfast to what seemed 'like an alien country' (research participant, female, 60s). Adjustment to a new life out of the city

was not easy, especially with a complete lack of facilities in the estate for those early settlers. This created a tight bond between the originally resident families which still exists. Coupled with this, residents face a stigma from those who make negative judgements about the estate and its inhabitants. This sense of shame that is projected onto residents by outsiders creates a defensive pride which participants expressed in a variety of ways. One result of this is mistrust of outsiders. Another is that residents prefer it if minor problems within the estate are resolved within the estate and this extends to low level conflicts between younger and older people.

Thirdly, the legacy of the conflict: The population is almost entirely Protestant and post conflict social control continues to be exercised in the neighbourhood by what could be described as a 'paramilitary' group. The community accountability structures in the neighbourhood are delicate and complex. One voluntary community worker has ran a youth club and been an activist in the area for over 15 years. His work extends to intervening in low level disputes to avoid 'paramilitary' involvement to lobbying the NIHE on behalf of local residents. His time commitment is on a 24 hour basis and every participant I spoke to knew his role, his name and how to contact him. At another level, the 'paramilitary' group are called on by residents to address community disputes and most frequently the subjects of their punishment are young men under the age of 25. When I asked residents about relationships between young and old, many assumed that I was asking about the actions of this group. They act overwhelmingly on behalf of adults and 'vulnerable' older people to discipline the 'anti-social' youth. Whilst residents recognise the value of the local discipline they provide, they also want to move on from 'the troubles'.

4. Conclusion

It is argued that each of these three strands represent social ambivalences within the neighbourhood which impact on intergenerational relationships. The concept of sociological ambivalence was first formulated by Merton and Barber in 1963. Until then, it had been used to describe a psychological process where one holds two opposite views of the same issue simultaneously. Merton and Barber (1963) suggest that the social world is also full of ambivalences, some of which originate from within the person, but many of which can be traced to other social issues, such as (in this study) commonly held ageist stereotypical views, discrimination on the basis of where a person lives and historical events such as 'the troubles'.

Views of old people are ambivalent as they are perceived by participants in this research as they are viewed as both 'grumpy' and 'happy'. Young people are viewed as both 'nasty' and 'nice'. Residents are also judged and stereotyped negatively because of the stigma associated with living in the estate. This creates ambivalent feelings of both shame and intense pride in the neighbourhood. Lastly the local 'paramilitary' group represent a useful local service but at the same time research participants want to move on.

5. Implications for Policy

The presentation argues that the range of ambivalences exposed within the study represent a reinvigorated perspective from which to view social policy. This research suggests that it is important for policy discussions to take into account the evidence presented here that social ambivalences create tense spaces where inequitable and discriminatory practices are trapped and can flourish.

There are three levels of recommendation for policy. Firstly, the overall approach: Policy must recognise the need for relationships and trust to be rebuilt between neighbourhood residents and 'outsiders', particularly the statutory agencies. Focus should therefore be placed on providing highly contextualised policy responses to neighbourhood issues which place relationships centrally and necessarily must engage with and take genuine guidance from neighbourhood residents.

Secondly, in order to address ageism and to improve intergenerational relationships at the local level, contact between older and younger people should be supported, in the form of intergenerational projects which fulfil optimum conditions for personal relations to grow. But the interconnections of social issues must be recognised: Social contact between young and old will not address the other key issues this research has highlighted which contribute to intergenerational and other tensions in the locality. Of most urgency, policy must tackle the social legacies of the conflict which exist in the estate as these have a disproportionate negative effect on young men. This might include tackling negative stereotyping and scapegoating of young people through the use of intergenerational practice. It could also include better support services locally situated and tailored for young men in the neighbourhood, more support for statutory workers as to how they cope with the 'dog on the street' information they have about criminal behaviours and a general recognition that Protestant estates need context-specific, sensitive and tactical support for the long haul.

In taking genuine account of the realities of everyday living for residents of our public housing estates, the potential prize is wider economic and social participation, less summary physical punishment of young people, improved well-being including physical and mental health and better connections between a range of groups, including young and old. The creation of opportunities for people to feel confident that their unique contribution to society is valued no matter where they live or what age they are can help us to tackle the challenges of our ageing society.

References:

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