

Generational Bridge

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A generational bridge is a connection between individuals of different age groups that facilitates the negotiation of norms, roles, and practices across generations. In the family literature, a generational bridge is based on an intergenerational or cross-generational relationship (e.g., a parent serving as a bridge between grandchildren and grandparents, or a relationship between grandchildren and grandparents). However, the sense of bridging in the concept underlines a state of mediation – that is, a generation facilitating connection between other generations and not merely crossing generations. Research on adoption of new technology by older adults shows, for instance, the importance of these bridges. In the research, adult children would offer mobile phones or computers with Internet access to their parents, aiming to provide a closer form of communication, but grandchildren were the main tutors of their grandparents on the use of these technologies in terms of fostering their digital literacy and diminishing anxiety with the technology (Neves, Amaro, and Fonseca 2013). Generational bridges, particularly those standing on intergenerational solidarity, are considered of central importance in the early twenty-first century due to the trend of population aging (which means that people will share more years of life, because of greater longevity) and the rising significance of grandparents and other kin in terms of family functions (Bengtson 2001).

The concept of generation is founded on two different meanings: on a birth cohort, which is a group of individuals who were born and lived around the same time (a social generation), or on a kinship basis, which implies a group of individuals who form a single step in the line of descent from a progenitor (a familial generation). The notion of familial generations predates the notion of social generations. The sociologist Karl Mannheim was the first to systematically explore social generations, in his essay “The Sociological Problem of Generations” ([1927–28] 1952). In this essay he describes the difficulties of delimiting social generations, even when reduced to chronological time frames. Besides the quantitative problem of measuring social generations (based on a biological context), Mannheim also sees a problem with the qualitative approach (based on the idea of the “spirit of the age”). The problem is that both approaches neglect social processes in the formation of generations. According to Mannheim, social generations are not “concrete social groups” in the same way as family is; they are a social category in the same way as is social class, because they depend on the *location* of the individuals in social structures. Therefore, social generations comprise a form of “identity of location,” which does not mean that people are simply born around the same time or coexist but that they are in a position to experience similar circumstances – which will give them a “similarly stratified consciousness” (Mannheim [1927–28] 1952, 297). The family is not a type of social generation because, besides being based on different levels of kinship and not on birth cohorts, it represents what Mannheim defines as concrete social groups, where it is assumed that members acknowledge each other and share specific goals. In fact, in

family studies, the concept of generation draws primarily on familial generations and not on social generations. The generational bridge is, thus, mainly conceptualized within the familial sphere and an intergenerational family structure.

The idea of the generational bridge seems to have first been used in the family literature by Knipscheer (1988) in analyzing the western multigenerational family. This type of family has resulted from demographic changes that have mostly occurred since the second half of the twentieth century related to higher life expectancy, which means that often at least three generations coexist in the same family. In the multigenerational family, Knipscheer (1988) notes that parents have an intermediary role in the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren; they become a bridge between different generations (George and Gold 1991). Generational bridges provide a link to generational, symbolic, and practical functions within the family: adult children bridge the relationship between their children and their parents, negotiating family roles and practices. In light of global demographic and social changes (declines in fertility and mortality, and increases in life expectancy, divorces, and remarriages), the timing and duration of family transitions and roles, such as parenthood and grandparenthood, have changed. The expected longevity of parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents also affects meanings and expectations of intergenerational relationships. For instance, the process of becoming and being a grandparent involves a reconstruction of the relationship with the offspring who is becoming a parent, with the grandparent's parents, and with the grandchildren.

These demographic trends, particularly the gains in longevity, have altered the structure of living generations, affecting family life. It is expected that family life will continue

to be altered, since according to population projections by the United Nations (2001) by 2025–2030 the world's population over 60 years of age will be growing 3.5 times as rapidly as the total population. Subsequently, we now encounter family structures with a higher number of living generations, yet with fewer members of each generation – characteristics of the “beanpole” or the “top-heavy” family (Lowenstein 2005). Similarly, there has been an increase in generational age differences, especially in what is known as the “age-gapped family”: a type of family structure that results from delayed childbearing (where the first child is born at age 30 or later) and co-residence with parents and other relatives (George and Gold 1991). Although women who delay childbirth are less likely than other mothers to live with their parents or relatives, those who co-reside will be crammed between their own young children and aging parents or other relatives (Caputo 1999). In the context of an aging global population, an increased number of living generations might result in myriad generational bridges and overlapping roles that transform family relations but also the timing of transfers – that is, the flows of social support between generations (Fernandes, Veiga, and Henriques 2008). A multigenerational family is in a complex exchange network that involves both giving and receiving of support by different generations. In European countries, for example, intergenerational transfers are strongly influenced by the position of the individuals in the life course: younger generations are usually recipients of financial transfers, while time-related transfers go both upward and downward toward the older and the younger generations (Attias-Donfut, Ogg, and Wolff 2005). Concurrently, the rising diversity of family types, such as blended families, might affect intergenerational relationships and family transfers, especially caregiving. But, because people

are living longer and age alters roles and responsibilities, generational bridges based on family support across generations (i.e., intergenerational solidarity) are now more important than ever (Bengtson 2001).

The concept of intergenerational solidarity usually focuses on shared values, normative obligations of care, and bonds between generations, and has been considered central in family relations, family cohesion, and even social integration in old age (Lowenstein 2005). Generational bridges can be forms of intergenerational solidarity when they involve co-operation, affection, resource-sharing (such as financial help and care), integration of family norms, and a better understanding of coexistence among generations. But families also experience conflicts and ambivalence related to, for example, divergent norms and caregiving obligations (Bengtson et al. 2002). These conflicts might be even more visible in multigenerational families, where roles, norms, and dependencies have to be arranged with younger and older generations. In particular, caregiving in aging families can be a main cause of intergenerational conflict. Generational bridges can also be a source of conflict when built on gatekeeping or when the norms, roles, or expectations being bridged are not consensual or are perceived as unfair or inappropriate by one generation. But generational bridges are potential ways of solving intergenerational conflicts and ambivalence, providing a setting for mediation, renegotiation, and bonding.

SEE ALSO: Aging of the World's Population; Blended Families; Intergenerational Households; Intergenerational Relationships; Life Course Perspective; Life Expectancy

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