

Assist. Prof. Dr. Dusana Findeisen

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Ljubljana, Slovenian Third Age University

Generations and intergenerational learning

Summary of the paper prepared for

Intergenerations/ Connecting Generations Across Europe

25 th/27 th of February 2011

Krzyowa, Poland

In structuring this lecture I had several questions in mind to which I propose to give tentative answers:

1. What has made ties, bonds, connections among generations become loose and why our societies have become less cohesive 2. How come that the concept of social class has been replaced by the concept of generation and what is co habitation of generations, solidarity of generations and cooperation of generations. 3 What is intergenerational learning, how it can be made possible, and why do we need it.

Social transformation and its influence on the generational ties

When addressing the issues of intergenerational ties and bonds, we should know that different generations have a different frame of reference constructed in different societies. What is typical of today-s society. Frequent concepts related to todays society are risk, change, competitiveness, uncertainty, responsibility, productivity, choosing, taking decisions. Today-s society wants us to function as individuals. A typical dilemma of the today-s society is: "I am able to do this and that" On the other hand there are concepts, different ones related to the past society: interdiction, subordination, obyeance , sacrifice. In the past society a typical dilemma was "What am I allowed to do ". Todays- societies as being based on the enterprising spirit and actions. The past society was based on discipline. From this dichotomy come the differences between the generations.

The ties in our developed societies have started becoming loose when some forty years ago with the beginning of what we call *the society of personal freedom*.

Family which is a natural lifelong intergenerational community let their members became less of a burden to their members letting them develop their own style of living, more individualised and more independent. Instead of leaning upon their

family, individuals leaned on the society, on socially organised ties. The so called »inter communities«. Communities between family and the State became important regulating people's emotions (local groups, associations, etc.). At the same time family members lost their protecting psychological and material background, depression spread, the uncertain Prozac generation developed asking themselves not any more« Am I allowed to do this and that but more » Am I able to do it. What if I am not able to face up all the challenges and what if I do not achieve the ideal image I am picturing of myself? »

Further, there is a paradigm of major social changes in the today-s society. Major social disruptions lead to all sorts of inequalities (urban inequality, economic inequality, inequality based on age, level of education). It is also true as Parson says that each system tries to find equilibrium after having been disbalanced. And it has to be true. Namely, when inequalities are important, it is difficult to create and to maintain ties, not only intergenerational ties, but all sorts of social ties. Moreover, we all depend on social structures and social ties shaping our identity. We depend on them for what we are and what we want to be, for all our activities.

Next, in the new global society we travel, we are on a constant move. Do we ever stop? »The best voyage is the voyage around our chamber, our room« said a French poet. Then we belong to this room, we seek comfort and refuge there, we belong to somebody, we belong to the others and they belong to us. Nevertheless we have a tendency to forget, Victor Frankl argues, the importance of our people, of our clan and I would say the importance of intergenerational ties and bonds.

In social sciences the theory of social capital has come up. It's central theses can be summed up as follows: *relationships matter*. By making connections with one another and keeping them going over time, people are able to work together to achieve things, either they could not achieve by themselves or could only achieve with great difficulty. People connect through a series of networks and they tend to share common values with other members of these networks: to the extent that these networks constitute a resource... they can be seen as forming a kind of capital (Pierre Bourdieu introduced the concept of three capitals: human capital, social capital, economic capital, anything that is a ressource). As well as being useful in its immediate setting the stock of social capital can be also drawn on in other settings. In general the more people you know, the more you share a common outlook with them, the more you share values with them, the richer you are in social capital.

There are several important issues in our societies: demographic ageing is one of them, so it is important to discuss ageing: Not only old age but also ageing which is, remember, a lifelong process. Another important issue is that our societies seem to be dominated by some values * health, family, friends work. In many countries, especially Eastern European countries work comes immediately after health. In Germany work comes third after health and family, the same in the Netherlands. But in societies where the prevailing value is work there is little room for some generations, older people are being squeezed to the edge of the society let to their values, which can be quite different. Slowness, time, weakness against force and being aggressive, tradition against quick taking decision on the spot, understanding, etc. Solutions can be found in the past as they can be found in the present and will be found in the future. In societies where certain generations are under the burden of stereotypes it is difficult to create intergenerational ties, bonds and connections. Therefore value and stereotypes have to be scrutinized in order to change the situation.

Now, to go back to the concept of social capital is increasingly influential. It has taken up as a bushfire in social sciences, in policies, and also in the media. The social capital makes a difference to people's lives, positive or negative. It is not that you know that counts but who you know. Societies are governed by rules bureaucratic procedures but when people have a problem they would rather turn to sb. we know, a trustful friend... and we also have to turn to different generations. We have to have open social networks, comprising older and younger people, people of all generations.

What does the concept of generation mean and to what extent generations can have common characteristics

Generations were first addressed as a concept replacing the old categories of social class, in 1952 and the interest in generational studies in Germany, later in France by Mannheim. Why in those days? There were post war generations especially younger generations who were burdened with guilt for something they had not done, or they had not omitted to do, that had been done by other generations. It soon became understood that generations might have common similarities or dissimilarities, created under the influence of common historic, social, political events under the influence of culture they were born into. Thus generations before and after Atari seem to be much different... technology and the way of production do make a difference. Generations are not cohorts, all who were born in the same year« generations are much more complicated concept uniting those who were born at the same time but also those who experienced in some way different influences.

Generational characteristics can be researched and taken into account when devising an intergenerational educational programme

At Slovenian Third Age University we conducted a research into generational characteristics and how they influence programming education for people in later life and intergenerational learning. We have found out that intergenerational learning cannot be just anything. Basically it could be one generation learning about another generation, two or more generations learning about each other and what seems to be best generations learning together and constructing new knowledge together on the basis of reciprocal learning and mutual learning. Not all topics are convenient but some are intergenerational par excellence: relation within families and within other communities, rural or urban environment where we live, common events generations lived together in different ways. But there are some topics which by no means are intergenerational. Learning about old age, for instance. The basic aim of an intergenerational programme is not so much learning about the common topic, but learning how to create intergenerational ties. Without tighter generational ties active ageing is a mere illusion. Without tighter generational ties we cannot draw on the treasure of the experience of generations. The longevity has no sense if five different generations what a treasure of experience and what a source of intergenerational learning can not enrich themselves from their own source... culture, learning and even the venerated production and profit are in danger. It is no more a question whether to support intergenerational ties in society or not, but more how to support them. And this is the question, I hope we will start answering at this important conference.
