Rethinking theoretical and methodological issues in intergenerational family relations research

ARIELA LOWENSTEIN*, RUTH KATZ† and SIMON BIGGS‡

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces some key theoretical and methodological developments in the study of intergenerational family relations. It draws on observations that a number of social issues are emerging that have an intergenerational dimension, that there is growing recognition that to study adult ageing one has also to study intergenerational relationships, and that a new architecture for social relations is beginning to take shape in the wake of demographic change. How individuals, families and societies cope with such changes provokes the question of how gerontologically-informed research, theorisation and policy will also adapt. Seven positions are summarised which attempt two things. First, to map out some new conceptual directions for intergenerational research through a critical use of concepts such as transition, generational self-awareness and empathy, metaphors of cultural translation, and the deployment of social and moral capital. Second, to examine changing gender roles, the balance between family and welfare-state support frameworks, ethnicity and immigration as important elements of this process. A critical review of approaches to intergenerational relationships hopefully emerges.

KEY WORDS – theory, methodology, intergenerational relationships, social change.

Introduction

It is perhaps a trusim of gerontology that demographic change raises a challenge to relationships between generations and to repeat the observation that the discipline of gerontology is often data rich but theory poor (Birren and Bengtson 1988: 9). This set of papers seeks to address the core

* Center for Research and Study of Aging and Department of Gerontology, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel.
† Center for Research and Study of Aging and Department of Human Services, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel.
‡ School of Social and Political Science, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia.

issues of socio-demographic trends, global ageing and intergenerational family relations by bringing a number of authors together who have an established track record in the study of these issues, and by bringing together cutting-edge theoretical scholarship and research expertise in this special issue. All authors are leaders and pioneers in the fields of gerontology, psychology, sociology and family research. Among other aims, we wished to foster a critical dialogue between different disciplines and different countries and cultures – Europe, North America and Israel – to enhance our understanding of the various issues at stake, and to make a contribution to expanding the scientific knowledge base from which to enhance our ability to advance theory and research in this area. The hope is that by drawing on existing data and conceptual developments, we can begin to map out some future directions and key challenges that intergenerational relations will present.

During recent decades there has been unprecedented growth in the absolute and relative number and proportion of older people in most countries around the world, a trend which is expected to continue, reflecting the 'globalisation' of population ageing (Bengston *et al.* 2003; Kinsella and Velkoff 2001). Global ageing is diversifying individual lifecourses as well as family forms (Lowenstein 2005). Longer lifespans and fewer births are transforming the graphic representation of the age structure of developed societies from a triangle, with a few older adults at the top and progressively larger numbers of younger people in the age groups below, into a rectangle with roughly equal numbers of people in each age group until the very oldest ages. The change has important impacts for intergenerational ties (Bengtson and Lowenstein 2003). Socio-demographic shifts also alter people's expectations and the duration of specific roles, including those within the family (Izuhara 2010). Similarities and consistencies over time and place in the ageing process imply the need for a global approach that emphasises the sharing of knowledge cross-nationally and cross-culturally.

Parallel to population ageing, marked changes have been evident in family structures. There has been a collapse in fertility in several world regions, changing the patterns of family formation and dissolution, the timing of family transitions, and bringing about greater diversity in family and households forms or compositions and more complex and 'atypical' household structures. This diversity of family types creates uncertainty in intergenerational relations and expectations and has specific effects on life-course role transitions. Furthermore, globalisation is encouraging increased geographic mobility of families and other changes in intergenerational family relations. The implications, however, are not simply the need to understand changing demographic and family processes and structures

but also the need to re-examine the cultural and intellectual tools we have available to respond positively to these changes. This special issue is intended as such a contribution.

There are at least three reasons why this special issue is timely. First, a number of social issues are emerging that have an intergenerational dimension, including negative attitudes to old age, elder abuse, and questions of generational equity around pensions and forms of care. Such issues were recognised by the United Nations Organisation's (UNO) Second World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid in 2002, which noted, 'the need to strengthen solidarity between generations and intergenerational partnerships, keeping in mind the particular needs of both older and younger ones, and encourage mutually responsive relationships between generations' (UNO 2002: 4). Second, there is a growing recognition that to study adult ageing, one has also to study intergenerational relationships (Antonucci, Jackson and Biggs 2007). Intergenerational relations provide the context within which individuals age, the way that they mark their own ageing and the relative value that is attached to that process. Third, an implication of this transformation is that a new architecture for social relations may begin to emerge (Katz *et al.* 2005). How then would an individual, a family and a society cope with the above changes in their demographic maps and in changing norms and patterns of intergenerational relations, and how will gerontologically-informed research and policy engage with changing inter-generational relations?

'Theory is an invaluable tool that social and behavioral scientists use to assemble data into meaningful patterns that make sense of the infinite complexities of human behavior' (Silverstein 2005: 410). 'Theory may also provide conceptual tools to interpret complex events and critically evaluate the current state of a phenomenon such as aging' (Biggs, Lowenstein and Hendricks 2003: 7). These two definitions of theory point to their important role in scientific endeavour as well as the challenges of developing conceptual frameworks, in our case in the study of intergenerational family relations. This is especially so in light of the multidisciplinarity of the field that combines gerontology and family studies. Further, there are several theories in each of these disciplines and the challenge for scholars is to select the most appropriate theories from each field and to combine them creatively (Silverstein 2005).

Rich theoretical frameworks for intergenerational family relations are available from psychology, sociology, social work, gerontology and economics, but work that critically examines their intersections and to produce theoretical syntheses is sparse. The topic of intergenerational family relations in later life is related especially to both the discipline of gerontology as well as family studies and thus has both theoretical and

practical aspects. Accordingly, the development of theories in this field has encountered difficulties. It was therefore our belief that it is timely to look critically at what is known, and to attempt to fashion a 'state of the art' from theoretical, empirical and methodological perspectives. This basis would provide an opportunity to point to future directions regarding gaps in the field, the data we need, the questions that have not been addressed, and to devise new agenda for research and theory development. The complex and diverse intergenerational family relationships that impact on family expectations, family transfers and family support pave the way for exploring new conceptual and theoretical perspectives regarding how these relations operate in different cultures. Do existing theories need to be adjusted to fit new realities, as being created by migration and immigration or by new motivations for intergenerational transfers? Do existing theories need to be adjusted to fit new realities like understanding different and new family types and lifestyles.

The seven papers in this issue tackle many of the above issues. In the first four, the authors have mapped out new conceptual directions for intergenerational research and provide, among other things: a critical review of intergenerational family support using the concept of transition; a development of a phenomenological approach to generational self-awareness and empathy; and examination of intergenerational misunderstanding through the metaphor of translation from one culture to another; and a critical analysis of social and moral capital in intergenerational care. In the following three papers, several key topic areas were critically examined. The authors examine changing gender roles and caring associated with the 'baby boomer generation', the effects of a changing balance between family and welfare-state support on intergenerational care and, finally, theoretical frameworks for explaining ageing, ethnicity and immigration are identified and discussed. Taken together, the papers present a critical review of paradigms of the lifecourse, of intergenerational family solidarity, conflict and ambivalence, analyse their meaning in different contexts, and suggest novel conceptual frameworks that may help to take forward the understanding of generational relations. This is the rationale and background that sets the context for this special issue.

The first article by Antonucci and her colleagues from the University of Michigan uses the convoy model to describe changes in the intergenerational family which influence supportive relations within families. Beginning with a description of the changing structure of the intergenerational family, they then outline support exchanges. They detail how personal characteristics, especially gender, race, age and socio-economic status, and situational characteristics, particularly family structure and intergenerational context, influence such support, especially in care-giving

situations. Variations in support quality, *e.g.* positive, negative and ambivalent quality, and its influence on wellbeing are discussed. Finally, the implications are considered and recommendations for how best to recognise and plan for the future of intergenerational family support are outlined.

In the second article, Biggs from the University of Melbourne, Australia, Haapala from the University of Eastern Finland, and Lowenstein from the University of Haifa, Israel, present a new conceptual paradigm of 'generational intelligence' which takes as its starting point the role of empathic understanding between generations. The paper explores an experiential approach which draws on sociological thinking on 'generational consciousness', and a debate within family gerontology on the relationship between conflict, solidarity and ambivalence. The paper concludes with a consideration of how sustainable generational relations might be encouraged, with implications for future research into intergenerational relationships.

Hazan from Tel Aviv University, Israel, discusses the parallels between deep old age and why this has been called a state of 'cultural autism'. By this he means that the gap in perspective between this and other age groups is so different that it can lead to the very old losing their status as being connected to humanity. Drawing on an anthropological perspective, he discusses some of the methodological and conceptual implications of this dilemma.

The fourth article by Guberman, Lavoie and Olazabal from the University of Montreal, Quebec, Canada, presents and analyses data on babyboomers and family care in Quebec. Some say that babyboomers have challenged traditional gender roles and that for them care-giving is not a dominant source of identity, but that rather they are actively trying to maintain multiple identities, leading to what the authors call a 'denaturalisation' of care-giving. These care-givers set limits to their caring commitments and have high expectations as to services and public support, while adhering to norms of family responsibility for care-giving. The implications for intergenerational family relations in a changing cultural context are discussed.

Daatland, Herlofson and Lima from Norwegian Social Research (NOVA) in Oslo use the concept of 'balancing generations' with regard to family-based obligations, to explore the strength and character of responsibility norms between adult family members of different generations. They draw on data from the European Generations and Gender Survey that allowed comparison between the northwest and southeast of Europe. Their findings are in line with a family culture hypothesis, inasmuch as family norms were found to be strongest towards the east and south of

the continent. It is suggested that the welfare state has moderated the demanding character of family obligations where it exists in a more developed form, and has allowed a more independent relationship between the generations to take place.

The final article, by McDonald from the University of Toronto, Canada, offers a critical review of theories about ageing, family and immigration in explaining the influence of ethnicity and immigration on older adults. She concludes that a lifecourse perspective can be employed in two different ways to further a theoretical agenda. A lifecourse perspective provides scaffolding for other theories whereby seemingly incommensurate epistemological positions can be accommodated, and that the principles of the lifecourse can be integrated into existing theories to deepen an understanding of migration in later life. In sum, 'one of the most enduring puzzles in family research is how to conceptualize and theorize intergenerational family relationships' (Katz *et al.* 2005: 393). In order to explore the complexity and diversity of family intergenerational relations during an era of rapid societal changes, there is a need to develop various theoretical and conceptual lenses because no single approach can facilitate comprehensive understanding. This collection of papers has been designed to advance our theoretical and methodological tools and to help us learn from their limitations. We hope that the special issue of *Ageing & Society* will enrich and expand the existing knowledge base and will enable scholars to look critically at the different issues involved in studying the area of intergenerational family relationships.

Acknowledgements

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Address for correspondence:
Ariela Lowenstein, Center for Research and Study of Aging,
University of Haifa, Haifa 31905, Israel.

E-mail: ariela@research.haifa.ac.il