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The Social Policy Implications of Intergenerational Exchange

Eric R. Kingson, PhD

SUMMARY. This paper discusses why there is a growing need for intergenerational programs and approaches to public policy. It suggests they provide some important and unique contributions to contemporary American society. These contributions include responding to challenges emerging from an aging society; by developing productive roles for the aging population, bridging stereotypes associated with age, and promoting understanding between the generations that discourages generational competition. These programs and policies can support families and communities through their involvement in family caregiving and the linking of community agencies.

Intergenerational programs and approaches to policy are increasingly needed. Intergenerational programs bring young and old together to learn from experience, enjoy, and assist each other. Intergenerational approaches to policy examine the impact of social policies across the lives of individuals and generations and they seek to build support for services and programs responding to needs of persons of all ages.

This paper discusses why there is a growing need for intergenerational programs and approaches to social policy:

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This paper draws on ideas presented in *Ties That Bind: The Interdependence of Generations* by Eric R. Kingson, Barbara A. Hirshorn, and John M. Cornman (Cabin John, MD: Seven Locks Press), 1986. The author wishes to acknowledge comments provided by Dr. Regina O'Grady-LeShane, Assistant Professor, Boston College Graduate School of Social Work.

- The interdependence of generations
- The aging of America
- The obligation, and I believe the desire on the part of most, to serve others and participate in the community
- The implications of the changing structure of the family with respect to its ability to provide care
- The stereotyping of intergenerational relations as riddled with competition and conflict over the distribution of scarce resources

AN OUTGROWTH OF THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF GENERATIONS

Within families and within society, the generations interdependently require the constant exchange of resources including income, care, time, knowledge and services. Intergenerational transfers, especially private transfers such as care providers to the young and the disabled elderly in the family and public transfers such as education and Social Security, are an expression of and reinforcement for this interdependence. Over time, individuals and particular cohorts are on both the receiving and giving ends of these transfers. In childhood, we receive more transfers (from families and educational institutions) than we give. As parents and taxpayers, young and middle-aged adults generally give more than they receive. And in the later years, increasingly, we receive resources (e.g., Social Security and care from family members if disabled), but we also often continue to give as caring family members and taxpayers (Kingson, Hirshorn & Cornman, 1986).

Intergenerational programs are an important outgrowth and expression of this interdependence. By bringing young and old together, programs facilitate needed transfers across generations. Some, such as Youth in Service to Elders in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, provide youth the opportunity to assist dependent elders, thereby transferring needed services toward the disabled elderly. Others, such as Foster Grandparents, and the Family Friends in Washington, DC, transfer care from elders to dependent children. Still others, such as Mentor Programs at the University of Maryland

and the University of Pittsburgh result in bringing the generations together, and they facilitate the transfer of knowledge and culture.

An understanding of the interdependence of generations also highlights the need for an intergenerational perspective on social policy. A comprehensive social policy ought to focus on the needs of individuals and generations throughout their entire lives because the quality of life for any one age group is affected by policies and services directed toward all age groups, and the well-being of each generation is shaped by policies and services directed to public policy which focus narrowly on the momentary interests of any one age group or generation (Kingson, Hirshorn & Cornman, 1986). Moreover, we ought to apply a policy perspective which examines policy and service interventions in terms of the whole course of life and the needs of all age groups and generations.

ONE RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGE OF AN AGING SOCIETY

The population of persons age 65 and over is expected to increase rather dramatically, from approximately 29 million persons today to 65 million by 2030. The very old population, those persons 85 and over, are projected to increase the most rapidly among our older population, from approximately 3 million in 1988 to 4.9 million in the year 2000, to 8.6 million in 2030 and to 16 million in the year 2050 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984).

The aging of the large post-World War II baby-boom family, persons born from 1946 through 1965, combined with relative declines in the size of the family which follow, and anticipated increases in life expectancy are resulting in population aging. The median age of the population, estimated today at 32.3 years, is projected to increase to 40.8 years by 2030 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1984).

The fact that more people are reaching old age and that the quality of life in old age (indeed at every age) has improved during the 20th century are significant societal successes—resulting from century long investments in economic growth, public health, biomedical research, and public policies such as Social Security and education (Kingson, Hirshorn & Cornman, 1986). But, as is often the

case, success leads to new challenges (e.g., the growing need for long-term care, the maintenance of social roles for the elderly, maintaining and in some cases improving economic security).

One set of challenges are existential in nature. Individuals and the society, as a whole, need to come to terms with the changes and life choices resulting from aging. Simply adding more years of life is not sufficient. Meaning must be found in those years, regardless of the losses and pain that often accompany them. This meaning must be conveyed to those who follow. Intergenerational programs involving the elderly in giving to the young (e.g., school volunteer programs such as SEER in San Francisco, Intergenerational Programs in Dade County and the Senior Citizen School Volunteer Program in Pittsburgh) can be a source of meaning for some older persons and, at the same time, provide role models for the young in relation to the aging process. Intergenerational programs involving the young in giving to elders (e.g., visits to nursing homes and personal care boarding homes) provide knowledge of one facet of human experience in old age. And, perhaps to their surprise, the young may find some old people who, regardless of much infirmity, still have much to give, an important lesson in the resiliency of the human spirit.

The challenge of the aging society extends to improving the quality of life for all. For example, if today's children are not cared for and provided an opportunity to grow, their chances of experiencing a good life in old age will be greatly reduced. Their ability, likewise, to support the next generation of the elderly, the baby-boomers, will be reduced. Similarly, a report of the Gerontological Society of America observes that

social structure, social policy, biomedical events, and personal decisions at all points across people's lives can and do influence health status in old age in terms of who reaches old age, longevity in old age, and health related quality of life. (Kingson, Hirshorn & Cornman, 1986)

Thus, an intergenerational approach to public policies which identifies issues across the entire life course (e.g., poverty among chil-

dren and the need for universal access to health care) is a necessary response to the challenge of the aging society.

A RESPONSE TO THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY

Young and old, and those in-between, have both an obligation and need to be part of a community: assisting others, sharing burdens (including taxation) and reaping the benefits of working with others. The elderly have a special opportunity and obligation to contribute to community institutions because they (a) have a very special relationship to the future, (b) have a unique role as conveyers of culture, and (c) have much leisure. Young people, too, as the report of a conference sponsored by the Aging Society Project of the Carnegie Foundation and the Foundation for Child Development (Mother, 1985) points out, also need the opportunity to use their skills in service to others. Again, intergenerational programs provide such opportunities and an intergenerational approach to public policy highlights the importance of assisting persons of all ages to contribute to the community.

ASSISTING FAMILIES TO PROVIDE CARE

Families are generally the preferred as well as the major source of care for their members, especially young children and the disabled elderly. For example, of the estimated six and six-tenths million elderly persons requiring long-term care services in 1985, about five and one-fifth million received assistance in community settings (Senate Special Committee on Aging, 1985) with the great bulk of assistance being provided by family members, usually women in their roles as spouses, children or siblings (Brody, 1981; Brody, 1985; Cantor & Little, 1985; and Shanas, 1979).

The care-giving functions of the family are under increasing pressure. The numbers of older persons projected to need long-term care are growing, increasing to nine million by the year 2000 and over twelve million by 2020 in one set of estimates published by the Senate Committee on Aging (1985). One-parent households and households in which both parents work are rapidly replacing the "traditional" two-parent household with an employed husband and

a wife working in the home. Whereas forty-seven percent of children under age six lived in "traditional" households in 1980, only thirty-three percent are projected to do so by 1990 (House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, 1984). Births to unmarried parents and high divorce rates further strain the family's capacity to provide care. Additionally, since it is often daughters and daughters-in-law who provide such assistance, the trends toward smaller families and more women working outside the home means that fewer caregivers will be available for the disabled elderly. Other pressures (e.g., the growing need for community-based care for AIDS patients) may strain the families' care-giving capacities.

Plainly, there is increasing need for adequate child care and after-school care for the children of working parents. Respite services are needed for caregivers of the disabled and even for parents, especially single parents. In short, there is a growing need to underwrite the capacity of the family to do what it generally does so well, provide care.

Intergenerational programs offer one of several important ways of assisting the family. New models, such as developing day care centers for children in nursing homes for the elderly, show promise of providing benefit to children, to their parents, and to nursing home residents. Models involving older persons in providing community-based after-school care and models involving teens in assisting the disabled elderly show similar promise.

A POSITIVE RESPONSE TO THE NOTION OF INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT

In recent years, a new stereotype of the elderly as well-off and healthy has replaced the old, and also equally invalid, stereotype of the elderly as weak and poor (Binstock, 1983). Paralleling this, there has been a growing tendency by some to frame issues in terms of competition and conflict between generations over scarce social resources. From this perspective, programs for the elderly are (a) a major cause of the federal deficit, (b) a major cause of the growing poverty among children (elderly programs drain resources from the

young), and (c) will place an intolerable burden on younger workers of the future.

The flaws of this argument are discussed in detail in *Ties That Bind: The Interdependence of Generations* (Kingson, Hirshorn & Cornman, 1986). Here, suffice to say, the intergenerational inequity argument is based on stereotypes of the elderly and misunderstandings about the aging society. It is a vehicle for some to attack Social Security and other programs directed primarily at the elderly. Moreover, it presents an invitation for young, old and other groups as well (and their advocates) to compete over the distribution of resources, a competition ultimately serving only the interests of those opposing services and benefits responding to needs of all age groups.

Intergenerational programs provide public policy two very positive ways of turning down this invitation to engage in divisive competition. First, intergenerational programs promote understanding about issues affecting other generations. There is a need for forums that bring all the generations together to discuss important community topics such as school bond issues and maintaining tax bases. Senior centers and school systems ought to sponsor events that educate the elderly about the needs of schools in their communities and which serve to recruit the energies of the elderly. Similarly, youth and young adults need to understand the rationale behind social insurance programs (especially Social Security), why they pay payroll taxes, and the benefits and the issues that will confront them as citizens. Second, programs which bring the generations together in service to each other exemplify that, while tensions between age groups and generations may emerge and ought not to be ignored, it is the strength of the bonds between generations which are most striking.

An intergenerational approach to policy is needed to build bridges across many groups to support programs and legislation of common interest to all ages. The centerpiece of such an approach ought to be the elimination of poverty and guarantees of adequate education, employment, housing and health care. An intergenerational agenda should also be extended to include other important concerns. Certainly all generations have a stake in a clean environ-

ment and in reducing the threat to the future posed by excessive defense expenditures and the proliferation of nuclear armaments.

CONCLUSION

Intergenerational programs and approaches to policy are not a quick fix for all that ails us. They can play a role in responding to such critical concerns as the high rate of poverty (twenty percent) among children and the growing need for long-term care services, but often only a subsidiary role. Even so, they provide important ways of building community, responding to new challenges emerging from the aging of America, providing service, developing productive roles and bridging stereotypes associated with age.

Today's children, the young and middle-aged adults of the first part of the 21st century, will play a major role in supporting the retirement of their parents' generation, the baby boomers. As the elderly of the mid-21st century, they will benefit from the programs that support the elderly who went before them. They can benefit also from the knowledge today's elderly, the "pioneers of the aging society," can impart about the value of life at all ages.

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