Frieder R. Lang · Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello

Editorial to the special section on intergenerational relations

Published online: 2 September 2005
© Springer-Verlag 2005

Over the past decades there has been a notable upturn in research on intergenerational relationships in later adulthood. One reason may be that life-course perspectives have advanced the insight that many phenomena of aging cannot be fully understood when not addressing in what ways aging is embedded in multi-generational, family and kinship ties across the life span (e.g., Pillemer and Lüscher 2004; Fingerman 2003; Harper 2004; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Silverstein 2004). The challenge of such empirical and theoretical approaches to intergenerational relationships lies in the difficulty of bringing together and integrating differing disciplinary perspectives and approaches to the phenomena. No single monograph and no special issue may suffice in order to fully or to at least adequately address the many implications and dynamics of intergenerational relationships in the process of aging. Also, there is no reasonable doubt that research on intergenerational relationships contributes fundamentally to an improved understanding of the societal, developmental, and behavioral aspects of human aging. We contend, though, that there still is a lack of effort of communicating across the borders of research disciplines in the field of aging on this issue.

Although there is a wide agreement that the phenomenon is of great importance and urgency to all modern societies, it is not well understood how the processes of aging are embedded and depending on the quality of intergenerational relationships. There are at least three dimensions of understanding the implications of intergenerational relations in later adulthood (and these three different ways of understanding are rarely if ever addressed all at the same time in research or the-

ory). The *societal dimension* of intergenerational relations pertains to the extent to which one perceives of intergenerational relationships as constituents of change and stability in the society (resulting from the co-existence of different generations at a given historical time). The societal dimension necessarily involves also historical perspectives as well as issues related to economic, technological, medical, or normative changes within and differences between societies (e.g., Attias-Donfut et al. 2005; Daatland and Lowenstein 2005). The *ontogenetic dimension* refers to intergenerational relationships as constituents of the individual's ontogeny (because all humans are born to social or biological parents that may influence the course and direction of their development). The ontogenetic dimension of intergenerational relationships involves issues such as how members of different generations take influence on their mutual courses and outcomes of development across the life span. This is evident, for example, in the attachment process (e.g., Schwarz and Trommsdorf 2005). Finally, the third *experiential dimension* relates to the intergenerational experience as a constituent of the individual's life course trajectory (because individuals are typically seen as members of a certain generation (e.g., the postwar generation) during their lifetime). The experiential view on intergenerational relationships relates to the behavioral characteristics of cohort members across time. In this perspective, intergenerational contacts permit (virtual or narrative) travels in time, for example, when members of different generations in the family communicate with each other about their past or future experiences (Perrig-Chiello and Höpflinger 2005). All of these three dimensions contribute to an improved understanding of the societal and behavioral processes that characterize intergenerational relationships across the life course.

In our view, though, the understanding of how intergenerational relationships relate to aging phenomena in societal, experiential, and ontogenetic ways can be improved best, if research endeavors on this issue manage to fulfill at least three requirements: First, intergenerational relationships can only be understood

F. R. Lang (✉)
Martin-Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg,
Halle, Germany
E-mail: flang@psych.uni-halle.de

P. Perrig-Chiello
University of Berne, Bern, Switzerland
E-mail: Pasqualina.perrigchiello@psy.unibe.ch

within a life-course approach (e.g., Rossi and Rossi 1990). According to this, research should cover a broad range of the human life span with members of more than one generation. Life-course perspectives illuminate the complex interplay of the societal, ontogenetic, and experiential dimensions of intergenerational relationships. Second, research on intergenerational relationships should include scholars and perspectives from more than one discipline such as sociology, demography, economics, or psychology. Typically, an integration of the societal, ontogenetic, and experiential levels of intergenerational issues can only be achieved when scholars broaden their own disciplinary focus to such wider perspectives. Third, research on intergenerational issues should consider cultural specificities of intergenerational phenomena. It is obvious that across Europe there are quite different cultural and structural differences that affect the quality, functions, and impact of intergenerational relationships on aging. One example, are differences in welfare and social policy.

The fundamental goal of this special issue has been to put together research contributions that meet all of these requirements while at the same time considering issues of intergenerational relationships that involve all three dimensions: society, ontogeny, and idiosyncratic experience. It is obvious that such demands can hardly be fulfilled all at the same time. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the research contributions in this special section have a disciplinary focus. In particular, the contributions to this special section on intergenerational issue address the following questions.

1. How do financial and time transfers between generations differ between European countries and what are the motives for intergenerational transfers? (Attias-Donfut et al. 2005)
2. In what ways is intergenerational family solidarity affected by the different welfare state regimes across Europe? (Daatland and Lowenstein 2005).
3. How do new communication technologies such as mobile phones and the internet affect intergenerational familial relationships differently across Europe? How do such technologies relate to more traditional forms of social interaction and relationship quality? (Quadrello et al. 2005)?
4. How do demographic changes, such as increasing life expectancy and longer common lifetime of generations, involve new demands for middle-aged children? What are the determinants of filial obligation and filial maturity in midlife? (Perrig-Chiello and Höpflinger 2005).

5. In what ways are contents and exchanges of social support between adult daughters and their mothers depending on the relationship quality and attachment of mothers and daughters? (Schwarz and Trommsdorff 2005).

All of these contributions differently address specific facets of each of the three dimensions of intergenerational relationships in terms of societal issues (Attias-Donfut et al., Daatland and Lowenstein, Perrig-Chiello and Höpflinger), experiential meaning (Attias-Donfut et al., Quadrello et al, Perrig-Chiello and Höpflinger) and ontogenetic processes (Perrig-Chiello and Höpflinger, Schwarz and Trommsdorff). Together with the two discussants of this special section (Litwin 2005; Marcoe 2005), we are convinced that the composition of empirical contributions in this special issue allows new and integrative insights on how aging in European societies is associated with the ontogeny and the experience of intergenerational ties in the family.

References

- Attias-Donfut C, Ogg J, Wolff FC (2005) European patterns of intergenerational transfers. *Eur J Ageing* (this issue). DOI 10.1007/s10433-005-0008-7
- Daatland SV, Lowenstein A (2005) Intergenerational solidarity and the family-welfare state balance. *Eur J Ageing* (this issue). DOI 10.1007/s10433-005-0001-1
- Fingerman KL (2003) Mothers and their adult daughters. Springer Publishing, Berlin Heidelberg New York
- Harper S (2004) Families in ageing societies. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Litwin H (2005) Discussion: intergenerational relations in an aging world. *Eur J Ageing* (this issue). DOI 10.1007/s10433-005-0007-8
- Marcoe A (2005) Parent care: the core component of intergenerational relationships in middle-and late adulthood. *Eur J Ageing* (this issue). DOI 10.1007/s10433-005-0009-6
- Perrig-Chiello P, Höpflinger F (2005) Aging parents and their middle-aged children—demographic and psychosocial challenges. *Eur J Ageing* (this issue). DOI 10.1007/s10433-005-0003-z
- Pillemer K, Lüscher K (2004) Intergenerational ambivalences: new perspectives on parent-child relations in later life. Elsevier, Amsterdam
- Quadrello T, Hurme H, Menzinger J, Smith PK, Veisson M, Vidal, Westerback S (2005) Grandparents use of new communication technologies in a European perspective. *Eur J Ageing* (this issue). DOI 10.1007/s10433-005-0004-y
- Rossi AS, Rossi PH (1990) Of human bonding: parent-child relations across the life course. Aldine de Gruyter, New York
- Schwarz B, Trommsdorff G (2005) The relation between attachment and intergenerational support. *Eur J Ageing* (this issue). DOI 10.1007/s10433-005-0005-x
- Silverstein M (ed) (2004) Annual review of gerontology and geriatrics, vol 24. Intergenerational relations across time and place. Springer, Berlin Heidelberg New York