

SABINA JELENC KRAŠOVEC & SONJA KUMP**INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING IN THE FAMILY****Abstract**

Intergenerational learning in the family is today often hindered due to the family changes and changes in society. We start from the supposition, that social transitions between generations are still important for transmission of heritage and knowledge. In the paper we discuss the connectedness of intergenerational learning, socialization, and communication. The research focuses on the perception of three generations in the family about mutual learning and cooperation, the influence of family members' interconnectedness and the contents of mutual learning between the three generations. On the basis of case studies analyses we can ascertain, that learning in the family truly includes cognitive, emotional and social components; social learning, which goes on in the family, is closely related to interaction, communication, and the quality of relations in the family.

Learning as an accompanying process in the family

Many authors (Bengtson, 2001; Popenoe, 1993) have posited that from the sixties of the preceding century the nuclear family has been in decline. Some social theoreticians claim that due to the specific economic and cultural circumstances in the industrial society the process of modernization the 'family' gradually transformed from an extended family, which was the predominant form in the preindustrial societies and initial phases of industrialization, to a small nuclear family (Putney & Bengtson, 2003, p. 150). Those claim that at that time new social institutions developed and took over many of the family functions, which influenced the changing functions of the family from socially-institutional to emotionally-supportive, which is typical for the modern nuclear family (Burgess, 1960, in Putney & Bengtson, 2003).

Family changes are presented as a heterogeneity of family forms; families are reorganized, new types of families are reestablished. Nevertheless, most of the intergenerational support goes from older to younger generations for financial as well as for social support (Bengtson, 2001; Gauthier, 2002; Albertini, Kohli & Vogel, 2007). Researchers thus claim that also in new social situations and adjustments to change multigenerational families still perform their function.

Family remains the key socialization factor through the life course; intergenerational learning plays an important role in this process. Intergenerational learning in the family involves intentional and unintentional learning activities and exchange of experiences amongst generations (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008); it is based on reciprocity and cooperation between young and old, which results in variously strong ties between the generations and in a benefit of one or both groups. It is intergenerational family socialization, which can be defined as lifelong mutual influence between generations inside the family, occurring in changed social and historical circumstances (Kemp, 2007, p. 859); it involves (both-way) intentional and unintentional transmission of positions and behavior between generations (Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2003, p. 126). The research of socialization in the family

community can be based on conceptualization of interpretative paradigm of symbolic interactionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1988; Mead, 1997). Due to the theory of symbolic interactionism an individual is formed in social interaction and communication in social relation, and in confrontation with important others. Family members' behavior is a result of mutual acts of family members and interpretations of meanings of social situations, where it is evaluated, confirmed, and rejected. "Theory of social exchange" defines relations between involved actors and mutual interdependence (Silverstein et al. 2002, p. S4). The act of giving to others and setting conditions for later return is social glue, which promises stability and solidarity in the family.

Social learning in the family is strongly connected with existent interaction, communication and the quality of relations in the family. It is comprised of cognitive, emotional, and social components, which are closely interconnected¹ (Illeris, 2004, p. 19). Lave (2009) describes the learning process in the family as activity, reflection, communication, and negotiation among included members. Learning is personal, teachers are relatives. It is learning by observing and imitating; it is a tradition, perseverance, and continuity and it involves understanding, insight, emotions, and opinions. Also, Wenger (2009, p. 211) understands learning as social phenomenon; his 'social theory of learning' indicates that learners in the family experience the same historical and social sources, networks, and perspectives, which connect them in common learning activities.

Research methodology

For the purpose of this paper the qualitative data was gathered² within the research "Intergenerational solidarity in Slovenia".³ The research was carried out in the spring of 2010.⁴ We have involved three generations in the same family. The gathered data was analyzed using grounded theory (Strauss in Corbin, 1990). This inductive methodological approach allows a deeper understanding of analyzed comprehension and viewpoints of interviewees and explanation of semantic relations between them. We' analyzed the statements of all interviewees about their own understanding of intergenerational learning and the experiencing of it, cooperation and mutual help in the family, the connection between their comprehension of learning in the family and the evaluation of that learning.

¹ The cognitive learning process in the family includes acquiring skills and knowledge, an emotional component that comprehends interpersonal energy, and is transmitted with emotions and values. But, learning is also a social process, social interaction, which includes the interaction between an individual and their environment, and is influenced by social context, where it is happening.

² The data was gathered by students from the 4th year of Andragogy studies at the Department of Pedagogy and Andragogy, Faculty of Arts, Ljubljana, who were especially trained for the conduction of deep, semi-structured interviews.

³ The basic research project, headed by Dr. Valentina Hlebec, is an ongoing project (2009 – 2012).

⁴ Each student described his family with the previously described guidelines, and as well selected an appropriate line of observation (student – one parent – one grandparent from the selected parent line) with whom he conducted two in-depth interviews.

In the sample there were 23 families (69 persons, 9 men and 60 women). The average age of the interviewees in the 1st generation was 24 years, of the 2nd generation 49 years and the 3rd generation 75 years. The level of education differs between generations.⁵

The case studies of three families were chosen due to the intensity of mutual connectedness and communication between three generations in the family, and due to the inclusion of the family members into the community's activities. In this presentation some of the answers are presented.⁶

Tightly knit and close family

A four member nuclear family (a father, a mother, and two children) lives in their own house in a village. Contacts with the grandparents are daily (phone calls), and family members visit them weekly. As the student described, mutual trust, respect and support exists in the family. Members of the extended family are not involved in local community activities. This is clearly illustrated by the mother's statement: "*We have our family and friends, and that is enough for us.*"

We asked the members of three generations about the most important asset, value, or lesson, received from grandparents or another older person; their answers match to a high degree.

MSS-02-Maja-25-1: *I received many lessons from my grandmothers and grandfather...life lessons. Maybe the most valuable asset was that they convinced me to look for good in others.*

About the similar question, if they received any values or lessons from their children or grandchildren, a mother thinks that she can get a lesson only from somebody older than her or somebody as old as her. A grandmother avoids answering. We can conclude that social learning in the family is understood mainly as a one way process, a transfer from older to younger family members and not the other way around.

About the reciprocity and mutual assistance between generations in a family, the interviewees responded similarly.

MSS-02-Ivanka-69-3: *Reciprocity and mutual assistance were present especially from my mother and my sisters. Assistance is, of course, present between me, my daughter, and her family. So this has always been here in our family.*

The grandmother shakes her statement about mutual assistance in a family, when thinking that young people don't take care of her enough, that her role in the family isn't important because she is a widow and lives alone. When she talks about it, her feelings of loneliness and isolation are noticeable despite the fact that she lives in a house next door to her children and grandchildren, and by the statement of the student, that they keep in touch with each other daily.

⁵ Most of the 2nd generation interviewees (40%) completed secondary school, 30% had a college or university degree, 21% went to vocational school (3 years), and 9% had a primary school education or less. Grandparents (the 3rd generation) have substantially lower level of education than their children (the 2nd generation); most of them (69%) completed primary school or less, 13% secondary school and only 5% a college or university degree.

⁶ The used quotations are labeled with a research code (MSS), family code, fictional name, age of interviewee, and the mark of generation to which the person belongs.

Disconnected family

A student lives in a five-member family in an apartment in town with a mother, stepfather, stepbrother, and stepsister. Her father died. The grandparents live in a house in a suburb. The student believes that there is no trust in the family and communication is insensible. She is only emotionally attached to her mother. Student has monthly contact with grandparents, but her parents have even less than monthly contacts with their parents. Members of the family are not active in the community, only the grandmother is (in a charity organization, helps older and sick people with domestic care).

When asked what was the most valuable thing, value, or lesson, which she received from an older people person, the student mentioned her granddad. At this point she again mentioned the alienated relations in the family.

MSS-08-Nina-30-1: *I think that they, above all, taught me modesty. My favorite memory is about granddad; I bring him slippers every day when he comes home from work, while other family members "hardly" noticed that he came home.*

The mother avoided answering the same question and talks about her early youth, when she was forced to be independent.

MSS-08-Irena-49-2: *... I had to be independent very early... as a young girl I earned money on my own, you know, when I was delivering newspapers. I was independent and that's obvious even today.*

A member of the 3rd generation had an interesting opinion about her self-esteem.

MSS-08-Olga-70: *Kapo di banda! (Laughter). I have my own car, my own money...I'm not dependent on others, others are more dependent on me... (Laughter).*

Mutual and reciprocal help between generations in the family is, in the opinion of interviewees, understood as one-way help, from older to younger generations in the family. All three interviewees speak exclusively about instrumental support, which is not mutual between generations.

MSS-08-Nina-30-1: *As far as I know, (material) help from grandparents is in our family provided only to one (of three) daughters. The other children and grandchildren do not receive help.*

The mother is also skeptical about learning from older people in the family. A member of the 3rd generation transmits her knowledge and experiences selectively to one of her daughters; she doesn't mention other, younger family members. From the selected case we can conclude that contacts between generations in the extended family are rare, alienation is predominant, and there is a shortage of warm and open relations. Interviewees experience mutuality as one-way process, going on from older to younger family members.

Connected family

A three-member nuclear family lives in a house in the centre of small town. Both grandparents live in the same community. Family members are tightly knit; contacts are daily as they live close. They trust and help each other financially and emotionally. They are also very close to their neighbors and friends, with whom they spend a lot of time on holidays and celebrations. At bigger events all the relatives and friends gather. Family members are very active in the local community.

The transmission of values and lessons from older to younger family members has been picturesquely described by members of three generations.

MSS-21-Anja-22-1: *Both grandmothers and grandfather contributed much that I became what I am, because they took care of me before I went to school. ... My grandfather gave me the most important life lessons... He says: be aware of the day when a sitting hen lays eggs in the afternoon, when judges will be beardless men and churchmen merchants.*

MSS-21-Katja-46-2: *From older people I have learned really a lot...older people have presented honesty as a value to me.*

A member of the first generation states that in the family there exists mutual and reciprocal help.

MSS-21-Anja-22-1: *Yes. When anybody from the family needs help, others spring to assistance. In good and in bad moments, during sadness or illness.*

A mother confirms that in the family there exists help from older to younger and the other way around and also a grandmother agrees with them. Grandmother states that she also likes to learn from younger.

MSS-21-Majda-65-3: *Yes. Since I remember there have been grandparents and grandchildren in our house. They've played together, worked and cooked together, laughed, and rested (laughing).*

From the answers it is clear that it is the connected family which cultivate intergenerational dialog. Family members who live nearby, unite a lot, mutually exchange instrumental, emotional, and informational support. It is the family, in which mutual help and intergenerational learning is comprehended literally; it goes from older to younger family members and all the way around.

Conclusions

From the case studies analyses we can comprehend the association between the frequency of contacts, communication, and intensity of relations between three generations and the transmission of values and reciprocal learning in the family. In the case of the family with strong connections between the members of three generations, mutual help is understood as something obligatory. In her research Strawn (2003, p. 57) has found out, that people with strongly knit family network are involved in occasional and informal learning inside this network and usually do not search for educational possibilities in the community. Our findings in strongly knit and closed family confirm these results. Uhlenberg in Mueller (2003) state that readiness to reestablish community ties and the patterns of activities in the community are carried on from generation to generation, but also influence social learning in the family. The findings from our research confirm that. In connected, to community open family, interaction is intensive and learning goes both-ways. Social learning, which goes on in the family, is closely related to interaction, communication, and the quality of relations in the family.

Analyses of the interviews show that in most families the 3rd generation transmits values, such as honesty, diligence, respectiveness, preservation of family tradition, as well as practical knowledge to younger generations. Quite some of the interviewees from the 2nd and 3rd generations state that they don't learn from their younger relatives. Some interviewees state that younger generations give them a joy of life, optimism and fearlessness, which go on spontaneously during everyday work

and conversation, by modeling or demonstration. On the basis of case studies analyses we can ascertain, that learning in the family truly includes cognitive, emotional, and social components (Illeris, 2004, p. 19). We have noticed that in families, where open communication and mutual help and learning are present, the 3rd generation accepts their position as positive (they are important, respected); where this is not the case, older members of generation explain their situation with ironic and bitter statements, for example “I’m a housewife and nothing more”.

Learning and intergenerational cooperation in the family should be understood as a very important asset in building learning community, since learning patterns in the family very often influence learning patterns of individuals in the wider community (Strawn, 2003). As we’ve found out in our previous research (Jelenc Krašovec & Kump, 2009), learning is interactive and contextually placed; it is a form of social capital and for its creation social networks are important (Wenger, 1998). Learning as social capital represents the link between the micro, mezzo and macro level of analysis, i.e., between the individuals, small groups and the broader social structure. Deeper insight into the patterns of learning in the families - as a part of adult’s informal learning – taking into consideration also their openness to the community, is important for planning the community intergenerational learning programmes. They are often the extension, but sometimes also the substitute for missing intergenerational ties in the families.

In Slovenia inhabitants still highly value the family and its social support networks (Hlebec, 2009). Our research confirmed that in spite of different intensity of contacts and relations in various families, generally in every family some kind of learning is happening.

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