



develop intergenerational activities locally: unchain your potential



Trends and Challenges in Generational Ageing: some introductory notes on the European context

Alexandra Lopes, PhD*

* Alexandra Lopes is a sociologist and holds a PhD in Social Policy from the London School of Economics, for her work on living arrangements of the Portuguese elderly. She is the Director of the Sociology Department of the University of Porto and Head Researcher in the Porto cluster of the Observatory on Social Inequalities.

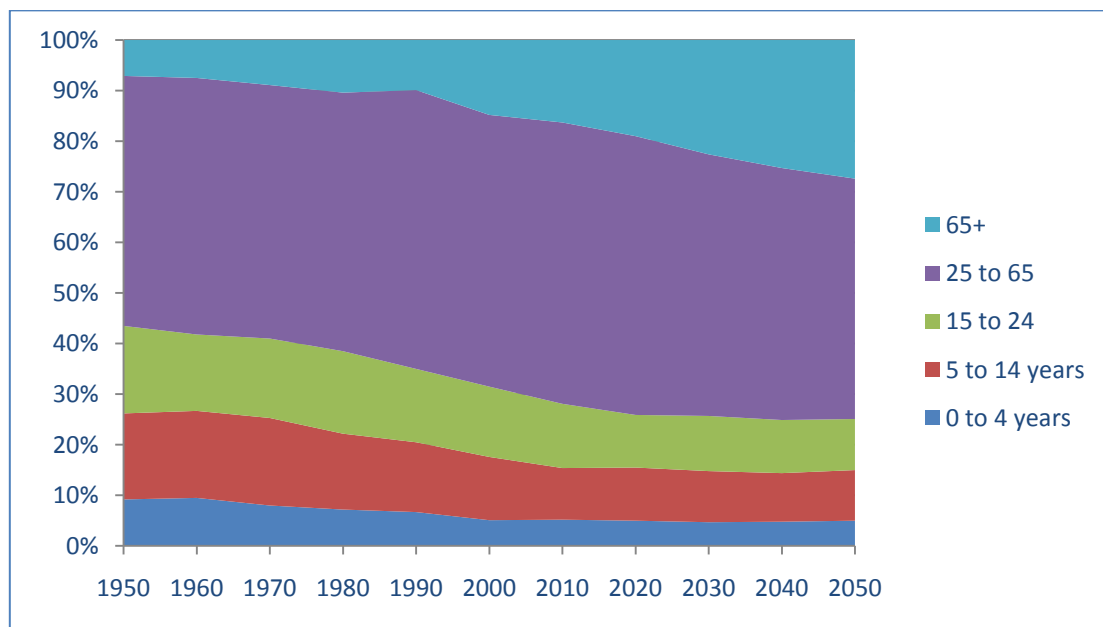
Any questions/comments should be forwarded to aslopes@letras.up.pt



1. Some demographic trends

From a purely demographic perspective, generational ageing means we have more old people and less young people. In fact, and focusing on Europe, in 1950 we had 43,5% of the population below 25 years. Those over 65 years accounted for 7,1% of the total European population. Nowadays we have 28,1% of the population below 25 years and 16,3% in the older group (65 plusers). The image below depicts the demographic evolution of generation in Europe in the last 50 years and projects some estimated scenario up to 2050.

Figure 1. Population estimates by age group (% of age group in total population):
1950-2050



Source: UN World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision, available at <http://data.un.org/Browse.aspx?d=PopDiv>



The demographic changes depicted in the image are not necessarily taking place in all European countries in the same way at the same time, but overall the trend is the one we can see in the graph. The variants used to obtain the population estimates were the estimate variant up to 2000, and from 2000 onwards the medium variant. This means that all estimates refer to intermediate scenarios, therefore not taking as base assumption neither optimistic nor catastrophic demographic scenarios (namely in what involves fertility rates and migrations).

This generational ageing takes place alongside a series of other changes: socio-economic changes, changes in the labour market, political and cultural changes, not all of them necessarily triggered by the ageing of the population. But those dynamics are very much intertwined with what has been happening in terms of intergenerational relationships and are often seen as bearing a lot of negative effects for those relationships.

2. Discourses on intergenerational relations

One interesting approach to the topic of intergenerational relationships is the one that focus on how the concept is used in public and political discourses.

Most often the concept of intergenerational relationships appears within the debate about the sustainability of social protection systems, and in particular of the pensions system. The growing weight of the older in the total population is seen as a pressuring force on the current welfare state arrangements: the growing number of pensioners is often seen as representing a disproportionate burden on active workers in the labour market as well as a massive absorber of resources that could otherwise be used to benefit the younger population. This argumentation usually ends in theses that claim the need to revise the institutional arrangements of modern welfare states to reintroduce equity and justice in the contract between generations.



One other topic that has become quite central in public discourses on generations is the one related to the rising demand for health and social support services. As population ages there is a growing likelihood of people living a considerable period of time in later life with some type of dependency or disability. Acknowledging their inability to cope with the growing demand for support services, many states have been calling upon families to bear the responsibility for caring after the elderly, using once more the argument of solidarity between generations as the building block of cohesive societies.

However, these dominant discourses on intergenerational ties embed some underlying assumptions that, from my point of view, it is urgent to fight: firstly, the assumption that intergenerational relationships are, predominantly, a one way movement – the older need the younger more than the younger need the older; secondly, and much related to the first, the assumption that the older are predominantly a recipient of care and support and, as such, a burden on younger generations.

These discourses represent to a large extent the dominant collective representations about the relative place and role of each generation in contemporary societies. They have impacts in all dimensions of life.

3. New demographic scenarios in intergenerational relations

Contrary to some widespread assumptions about the dissolution of family ties and the erosion of intergenerational solidarity, the truth is that with the growing life expectancy of people there has been a remarkable growth in family ties. The relationship 'father and son' can easily last on average six to seven decades. The relationship 'grandparent and grandchild' can last three to four decades.

In fact, the length of the relationship between grandparent and grandchild as no precedents in the history of mankind and this is a trend that will continue in the foreseen future. All population estimates suggest that most of us will live a significant



part of our lives in family structures that have 4 or more generations. As an example we can look at the data displayed in table 1 below.

Table 1. Proportion of individuals with at least one surviving parent, by age group and country, 2004

Country	50 - 59	60 - 69	70 +
Austria	48	15	4
Denmark	57	16	1
France	62	23	7
Germany	55	14	4
Greece	56	19	4
Italy	49	16	9
Netherlands	47	14	2
Spain	55	16	5
Sweden	59	16	1
Switzerland	54	19	4

Source: Börsch-Supan, A. et al. (eds.) (2005) Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe. First results of the survey on health, ageing and retirement in Europe. Mannheim: MEA, 221-222

Yet, and despite these demographic trends, what do we see in social policies?

Family policies usually target young families with children and tend to focus a lot on the topic of conciliation of child care and work. For adults and their adult children we have Ageing Policies or Active Ageing Policies. In fact, if we read it carefully we see that even the Madrid Plan left children and teenagers out.

It is as if we are segmenting something that would otherwise be a long chain of relationships.

This is the result of institutionalized age segregation by which rights, duties and activities are defined according to the age of the individual. Age is usually divided in 3 parts: one third is for preparing for adulthood and active life (education); one third is devoted to working and creating a family; the last phase is for retirement and leisure.

Some authors actually suggest that this age segregation at the institutional level leads to a real separation of people in different dimensions: institutions, space, culture, etc.



Let us think about the topic of how space is used. Age segregation takes place when individuals from different age groups do not use the same spaces and are therefore unable to interact in person. The most extreme examples of this type of segregation is what we see in homes that are built with the intent of being homogeneous in terms of the age of their users: elderly homes; orphanages; assisted living residences; etc. Intervention over space should certainly be one of the biggest priorities of all those that are involved in implementing intergenerational practices. And it should include projects that target both public and private spaces.

4. How do you bring generations together?

One last topic I would like to raise about the challenges of generational ageing has to do with the most common explanations to account for why generations have moved away from each other.

The most used explanations are the behavioral type: we have become an individual-driven society made of self-centered selfish people that gravitate around the esthetics of the young and beautiful.

We know, though, that only very rarely does behavior change because the individual became mean, irresponsible or selfish – behavior changes as a result of structural social and economic changes that in turn bring about changes in culture, in identities and in relationships.

The argument I am trying to put forward is that to fully understand the challenges of generational ageing we need to bring those challenges to context and keep in mind the challenges brought by the new dynamics of contemporary societies.

It is relatively easy to think of some examples. Family has always been and still is the main locus of interaction between generations. But, what happens when dissolution of family takes place? A growing body of research has been showing that the dissolution of traditional family models and the emergence of a plurality of family types raise



develop intergenerational activities locally: unchain your potential



considerable challenges to relations between generations. Men, in particular, are left in a rather vulnerable situation in the sense that they are the ones who tend to lose the most as a result of family dissolution.

One other topic that has been gathering some interest is that of geographic mobility and its impact in patterns of relations between the younger and the older generations. This geographic mobility is often related to mobility in the labour market. This is particularly relevant if we think about migrant communities. A study carried out by the University of Manchester tried to test the importance of new information technologies, namely video-conference, in helping children descending from Malaysian immigrants and living in London keeping in touch with their grandparents still living in their country of origin. They focused in particular those cases of grandparents living under financial strain which, in principle, could represent an additional obstacle to keeping opened the communication channels.

All this to say that the shape of relations between generations is changing itself, hand in hand with the changes observed in the broader society. This means that the projects that plan to implement intergenerational practices need to consider the multiple social dynamics that characterize contemporary societies and not stay too attached to traditional trends in intergenerational relations that may, at time, be too narrow.

Thank you for your attention.

Porto, September 8th 2009

Alexandra Lopes