

The impact of generational intelligence on intergenerational family relations and quality of life in Israeli society during Covid-19 pandemic?

Abstract

Covid-19 period was never experienced before globally. Unfortunately its with us again. This article will attempt to investigate types and patterns of family intergenerational relations, trying to understand how communication, assistance, as well as conflicts between different family generations, during such a complicated period Lowenstein & Daatland¹ are solved in Israeli society. Additionally, does Generational Intelligence, which presents a new approach to family relations, contribute to strengthen these relations.²

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Introduction

The study is based on investigation of types and patterns of family interactions and relationships and their consequences by case analyzes data.³ First, data had been collected randomly from 4 older adults aged 75+ living in the community in Israel during Covid-19 pandemic. Half of the respondents were independent and healthy older people, mostly living alone. Other half had some health problems. Two were married and two lived alone. Those in need had a foreign worker helping and taking care of them.

These case studies will be presented, analyzed, and discussed, examining impacts of the pandemic on different family relations. The case studies were brought to the attention of Prof. Lowenstein from professionals in social services in Israel, who are in contact with her.

The topic of communication, assistance when needed,¹ and understanding between family generations has emerged as a key issue,⁴ especially during the current situation. It is relevant in crisis times like now, where we experience the impact of Covid-19 pandemic globally.

Based on theories of Intergenerational Solidarity, Biggs S, Haapala, Lowenstein, as well as Conflict and Ambivalence the advent of aging populations may lead to increased conflict or solidarity in society, and might also provoke a profound ambivalence, both in public and private spheres.

Biggs & Lowenstein² presented a new approach of addressing these issues, offering a critical examination of “Generational Intelligence” as a way of addressing them – Can one put him/herself in the shoes of a different person, or a different age group. What are the main personal, interpersonal and social factors that affect our perception of the “age other”? Meaning, what are the key issues facing families and communities in an ageing society, and now especially within societies in crisis situations because of the pandemic? It is a different approach of thinking about interpersonal relations, based on age and the question of communication between people of different ages and different generations.

Theorizing Generational Intelligence initially arose from Biggs’ and Lowenstein’s attempt to understand the causes of social ageism and elder mistreatment. It attempted to explore the relative absence of

empathy from younger to older age groups, but can be also a method to examine multidirectional understanding. Intergenerational relations have been identified as a priority referenced by the United Nations’s⁵ work toward achieving their 2030 Agenda and 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Generational Intelligence denotes “an ability to reflect and act in a manner, which draws on one’s understanding of one’s own and other’s life-course, family, social history, placed within a contemporary social climate”.⁶ It elaborates the different degrees to which social actors behave reflexively with respect to their sense of identity, and social situations such as meal taking. Such a reflexive awareness of generation creates room for maneuver. It might create a distance between generations, assuming one’s own attitudes and values are universally shared and being able to step outside in order to take a sustainable value position. It turns fixed positions into options.

Biggs and Lowenstein² observed that each life phase has a distinctive set of priorities due to its position in an expanded life span. Once this is recognized, it raises the point that generations differ, and any one single perspective cannot be assumed to be universally valid. Thus, generational positions will require negotiation between each other. The degree to which people become aware of this and their willingness to positively encounter the age-other indicates their degree of generational intelligence.

Using the Generational Intelligence framework, Dow et al.,⁷ found that positive intergenerational relations occurred much more easily in private, rather than in public spaces and that the public domain required forms of activation, such as those described by Kaplan et al.,⁸ Haapala et al.,⁹ study of rural community services, indicated that both older customers and younger assistants might need education on each other’s life-course priorities to increase empathy in the improved delivery of home-based support. Similarly, Au et al.,¹⁰ have shown how supporting younger careers through education on how to take account of the perspective of the age-other (care-recipient), using a Generational Intelligence framework, can be beneficial to both parties.

The following case descriptions may illustrate the current circumstances regarding intergenerational family relations in times of a global pandemic. Mr. Daniel, aged 88, a widower, who has two

children and 4 grandchildren. He suffers from advanced dementia but is physically functional. He has received assistance from a foreign paid caregiver for three years, who lived with him. During Covid-19 only the children used to visit once every week which was so important for him and he still knew who they are.

Over the course of usual daily routine, the caregiver takes care of all his basic needs, including taking him for a walk to the nearby park. Since the beginning of COVID-19 crisis, the caregiver and care recipient have not been allowed to leave the house. They had to comply with the 24/7 lockdown restrictions, where there is now a third lock-down. Thus, the children could not come to visit, but only sent food sometimes. Mr. Daniel started showing signs of restlessness and aggressive behavior towards the caregiver. He refuses to bathe, pushes the caregiver, and shouts at him. As a result of one such event, the caregiver tried to restrain Mr. Daniel using force. Mr. Daniel stopped eating, lost interest in his surroundings and withdrew inside himself. The caregiver, who understood that the situation was deteriorating, became frightened, lost control, started calling the children for help... However, they had their own difficulties to cope with and were hardly available. This, even though they understood the difficulties, but their priority was their own families.

If we try to understand the reactions of this family members it seems that they had difficulties “putting themselves in the “shoes of their father-grandfather” and to really understand what happened to him. None of them made an effort to come and visit, talk with the caregiver and see how they can help. In other words, their “Generational Intelligence” was not high.

Nora is a 74 years old who decided to move to Sheltered Housing with her 82 years old husband to be closer to her children. At first, she was very happy and there was close contact with her family. However, when the pandemic started a full siege was declared in all long-term care facilities. They could not leave the room, not see their family. Food and other needed elements like medications, which the children got, were left outside their door. All contact with the world could only be done through phones or TV. Even though it meant to protect the residents Nora became restless and showed first signs of dementia. She felt lonely and even the presence of her husband did not help. This full siege had also a strong impact on her relationships with her family. They tried to call every day but many times she did not want to answer and when she did, she scolded them for not coming. The oldest son tried to get permission to come, understanding the difficulties she experienced, and when he could he came, but could talk to her only from downstairs. It made her more agitated and he left not trying again.

In the case of Nora we can see that the son tried to “put himself in his mother’s shoes” but his ability to really get in contact with her was problematic. However, if he really understood the situation we should think that he would contact his father, made more efforts to be available and try at least to talk to them standing near their door. Thus, we can say that he did try to “put himself in the “shoes” of his mother but did not reach a level of empathy associated with higher levels of generational intelligence.

Older adults living with a family member are another population group that we should focus on. COVID-19 period proved to be a challenge for many families and had an impact on their intergenerational relations. It might be even more complicated when adult children were living with their older adult parents and especially if they had to care for a parent, which is many times stressful, and especially during such period. Stress may lead to difficulties in family relations, as well as to abuse and neglect. The question is: what might be the impact of strong generational intelligence on such intergenerational relations?

During this stressful period, we also witnessed situations where adult offspring returned to live with their parent/s due to a job loss or unpaid vacation. Living together can on one hand strengthen family relations, especially if you really can “put yourself in the shoes of your parents”. However, on the other hand if this is difficult for you it might provoke conflicts. When young people lose their jobs and thus their regular income, together with the fact that parents have steady income may be a source of potential exploitation. Even though family relations before the pandemic were warm and strong financial dependency could have an impact on such intergenerational relationships. The case of Josef and his wife Bella puts a spotlight on such a situation.

The following describes the reality of many families:

Mr. Josef aged 80, suffers from advanced dementia. He lives with his wife Bella aged 78, who suffers from functional disability. They are entitled to home assistance 5 days a week. As a result of covid-19 crisis Moses- their son aged 51, divorced and unemployed, came back to live with his parents. Moses cannot pay alimony to his ex-wife and children. He is in debt to a lot of people. He expects that his parents will take care of all his needs and they will also give him money for his ex-wife and children. His demands are accompanied with threats and shouts. The atmosphere at home became tense and un-bearable. A close neighbor heard him shouting and screaming at his parents. She called the social services department.

This case puts a spotlight on a son who can rarely think beyond his own situation, which is itself subject to multiple stressors. Moreover, it seems that he puts “his situation” before anything else and cannot or does not want to understand his parents’ difficulties, especially during such a difficult period. In other words, he does not really have any sense of ‘generational intelligence’

The needs of children living separately from their parents can cause unexpected situations

The following case presents such a situation

Sara aged 75 was an active healthy person. However, she got ill with breast cancer. Thus, she had been getting chemo therapy twice a week and biological treatments for about 5 months. During this period her daughter who had 2 small children demanded that she come and help her, even though Sara lived quite far away from her. Two weeks later when she was with her grandchildren she collapsed and had been on the floor for about two hours till her husband came to pick her up and resuscitated her. This is a special example, but it suggests the development of an abusive situation towards the mother especially when she needs help herself.

This case presents problematic family relations where the daughter does not even consider or takes into account her mother’s health situation and prioritizes her needs to be “free” from taking care of her children above other relations. Thus, again we witness a low level of ‘generational intelligence’.

Each of the situations identified in these vignettes demonstrate multiple stressors that are arguably amplified in a time of covid. While the pandemic has given rise to the opportunity for increased solidarity between generations, this may not be evidenced toward some of the most vulnerable older people, such as those living with dementia or living within family networks where non reciprocal care relations are the norm. Whilst caution should be shown toward data from such a small sample, it appears that generational intelligence varies markedly between cases and may provide an important indicator of how care relations are evolving within a constellation of circumstances arising within the pandemic.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest that are directly or indirectly related to the research.

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