



Potential Barriers and Benefits to Intergenerational Interaction Between Strangers

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Abstract:

Despite close proximity, younger and older generations rarely develop meaningful connections outside of family ties. This is reinforced by social norms, stereotypes about age, technological shifts, and internal fears. As a result people miss opportunities for a range of benefits from shared stories, finding common ground, to general connection rooted in empathy. The present research examines the benefits and barriers of intergenerational interactions through the examination of various sources based on strangers and cross-generation connection. In this synthesis of literature, the benefits of these connections suggest they may increase confidence in conversation ability, reduce loneliness, and lead to a greater sense of belonging. Simultaneously, these benefits come with the barriers of structural environments, societal norms, and the psychological barriers. These findings have implications for community interventions for the promotion of connection, yet more research within this topic should be prompted for the furthering of intergenerational relationships in our community.

Introduction:

Despite physical proximity between older and younger generations in everyday life—grocery stores, walks, parks, etc. —these age groups rarely connect in a lasting and meaningful way outside of familial relations. Meaningful human relations, in all capacities, are at the foundation of human existence, yet reaching connections in diverse areas of life can be quite a challenge in an increasingly age-segregated and socially divided world. From stigmas—such as the belief that older adults are out of touch or a burden and the idea that young people are immature and lack awareness—to stereotypes, to social norms, and to the general fear of stepping out of these limitations, the distance between generations only grows and continues to discourage such interactions. People naturally tend to gravitate towards individuals that resemble their comfortability level, whether that be how they act, look, or think—limiting opportunities for differing generations to achieve perspective and emotional growth. Connecting with others that are outside of our ordinary circle is widely recognized as beneficial, age—like gender, race, and culture— could be another valuable source of diversity (McPherson, et al., 2005). This brings up an important question: What are the benefits to intergenerational stranger interactions/conversations? Because cross-generational interactions are perspective changing, I suspect that they carry unique benefits to one's well being. In this paper I will investigate the various benefits that can be found within intergenerational connections and the positive impacts that are possible on individuals in society once broken beyond the barriers (Mofasta, 2025).

Background

Human beings are innately deeply social creatures, and our emotional well-being depends on the meaningful connection found around us. Studies consistently show that strong social bonds are some of the biggest indicators of one's mental and physical health affecting not only one's life satisfaction but can have an effect on longevity (Holt-Lunstad, et al. 2010). In recent years, loneliness is increasingly being recognized as a public health issue contributing to the preexisting growth of depression and anxiety (General, O. the S., 2025). As communities grow more fragmented with digital interactions replacing face-to-face contact and limiting opportunities for genuine human relation—especially across generations—have diminished. Yet some of the most meaningful and uplifting moments of connection present themselves in unexpected places. Research suggests that brief positive interactions can boost one's mood and lessen a sense of isolation, alongside that these moments reveal that deep history is not necessary to experience the benefits of being open to new perspectives (Sprecher, et al., 2023).

While close relationships are vital, the simplicity of stranger interaction has a major effect and often goes unnoticed as a critical form of connection. Not only do moments with a stranger foster a sense of purpose, but they also allow one to feel like they belong and are seen. Whether it be a shared smile, short conversation, or kind gesture, these moments culminate into a larger social fabric of feeling seen, valued, and momentarily less alone (Gunaydin, et al., 2020). In a world where many feel increasingly disconnected, the endless opportunities for connection lay right in front of them: strangers as a means for belonging.

Generational differences can be more than simply the differing lived experiences individuals have encountered, alongside it is the varying values, social norms, and even beliefs. Young people tend to navigate the fast-changing trends of the current century and general digital culture or emerging priorities, while older adults carry a more substantial amount of insight shaped by historical events and societal shifts. Although people generally feel most comfortable seeking connection with individuals that resemble their reality and morals, when people move beyond these safe connections and engage with someone of a different generation, they may unexpectedly find they share common ground (Holt-Lunstad, et al., 2010). We all, despite our differing backgrounds, are rooted in the same shared humanity and curiosity that coincide with the emotional experience of life.

Benefits

One of the key potential benefits of cross-generational conversation lies in the capacity for emotional connectedness and well-being. Through memory sharing, storytelling, and high-quality listening both older and younger generations build emotional rapport and a sense of belonging, consistent with evidence on connecting with strangers (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). For older adults, cross-generational connection may directly combat loneliness and reinforce a sense of purpose, and for younger people these connections may make for a broader understanding of the world around them. In a study in which participants practiced connecting with strangers over five days, confidence improved over time, suggesting both age groups in a cross-generational interaction may similarly show improved confidence if engaging in similar interaction intergenerationally (Sandstrom et al., 2022). Through the unveiling of different life perspectives and experiences cross-generational connections also promote greater learning between strangers (Atir et al., 2022). As such, these interactions foster perspective taking and increased openness to diverse viewpoints, resulting in a deepened appreciation for generational differences and commonalities. As participants reflect on their life experiences and give into the

idea of expressing, they gain empathy and a more nuanced understanding of others. However, future research should directly address these benefits in cross-generational situations.

Beyond emotional and mental wellness, social connection has direct links to physical health benefits. Studies show that strong social bonds reduce stress levels, improve heart health, and even contribute to greater longevity (Holt-Lunstad, Golant, (Eds.), 2023) (Cacioppo, 2014). Regardless of cause of death, research on mortality rates dating back to 1979 show that more socially connected individuals live longer, and those with social deficits have just as profound health risks as smoking. Isolation within childhood years can be associated with an increase in cardiovascular risks in adulthood like glucose levels in blood, high blood pressure, and obesity. Simultaneously, effects of social isolation on hypertension have proven to be even more profound than health issues like diabetes. Older adults regularly participating in relationships and gaining frequent exposure to emotional support within family and friends are profoundly less likely to show any form of undiagnosed or uncontrolled hypertension. Particularly for populations at-risk for social isolation, such as young adults and the elderly, cross-generational connection not only becomes a source for emotional enrichments, but a potential contributor to long-term health.

Barriers:

Despite the many benefits that exist within intergenerational connection, several psychological, structural, and cultural barriers exist and hinder the natural occurrence of these interactions. One of the limitations laying at the forefront of this reality is the internal hesitation for fear of one's own ability to converse in a successful manner. For instance, research on people's fears regarding talking to strangers and their general confidence in conversation ability shows a defining shared experience in feeling lacking skill to communicate in social settings (Sandstrom, 2022). People often fear initiating a conversation will result in awkwardness, rejection, or the possibility of saying the wrong thing. These anticipated discomforts prohibit the initiation of a conversation, highlighting a sense of risk and minimizing perceived sense of reward. However, research by Gillian Sandstrom also finds that these fears are overblown, as the rate of confidence in conversation ability was projected and anticipated to be much lower than was reported post-conversation.

Within generational differences, either side may offer differing values, perspective, and even general communication styles. Moreover, conversations between people of different generations may come with further unique barriers as younger generations feel a stronger sense of anxiety relative to that of older generations (Sikström, 2023). This may raise a fear of lacking general ability or experience to overcome daunting barriers and maintain a sense of confidence in their own capacity to perform in conversations. On the other hand, Older generations may feel invalidated in their attempts to continue connections around them, or their general desire for connection to be burdensome (Jahn, 2013). These differing anxieties reveal the complexities in the barriers of either generation, but ultimately culminate into the same result of avoidance.

Furthermore, people of different generations are more societally and spatially segregated than ever before (Kingman, 2016). Whether it be the community spaces of school, retirement homes, workplaces, social areas, and even digital platform spaces these spaces are usually curated in age-specific ways—making different age integration the exception, not the norm. This lack of exposure to one another reinforces the insecurities to step out of the concrete spaces that continually be set for either side, undermining the solidarity between age groups and

exacerbating loneliness. General fears remain consistent around stepping outside of one's comfort zone, instead trying to find people that resemble their age, language, or worldview. These physical implications compile into a general effect on the surrounding social norms also play a crucial role in this—enforcing a feeling that either generation shouldn't converse deeply without a reason. These physical and structural barriers lead to perceived limitations shaping behavior, even when going against it could pose some incredibly mutually enriching revelations.

Technology adds another complex layer, as not only do most individuals of differing generations lack physical proximity, but, if contact is reached, the element of the smartphone may take away any possibility for interaction—filling in that space of time for interaction to occur. Each generation has developed their own nuanced relationship towards social media platforms and generally respond to them quite differently (Dwyer, et al., 2023). Younger generations being exposed at a much earlier point hold a reality that is hard to distinguish without the presence of such devices. Every interaction and aspect of life is intertwined with the usage of a cellular device. Simultaneously, older generations were raised in a time when this wasn't the case—now, just trying to figure out how to fit the new world into the one they knew previously. Either implementations culminate into the limiting of social interactions in a face-to-face sense, so, despite the general differences that either age may hold in pertains to the uncomfortable act of conversing with new and different faces, the inevitable world of technology keeps those interactions that much further away.

Implementation

With these barriers in mind we should implement ways to encourage connection in daily life. Research suggests that the implementation of intergenerational connection within daily life can not only allow for pleasant interactions—but powerful ones. These interactions not only address the ever-growing ever-growing presence of loneliness, but build empathy, challenge stereotypes, and contribute to emotional and cognitive wellbeing. Within just five days of practice, individuals notice a significant development in their ability to converse and general attitude towards such conversation, thus intervention in one's singular life is possible. Yet in order for these true benefits to be achieved individuals, communities, and institutions must work to create space for such underutilized connections to take place and to take active measures to dismantle the barriers in place.

On an individual level, it is the simplest and most immediate implication and step towards a more intergenerationally connected community. To seek out these conversations allows for a multitude of low-stake opportunities for meaningful connection, whether that be grocery shopping, outdoor walk, coffee shop, or the gym, taking the extra step towards a brief positive interaction can begin to alter and break down the stereotype. Evidence shows that even seemingly meaningless and short conversations can increase confidence levels with conversational ability, suggesting that with practice such exchanges become easier and more rewarding (Manis, 2022). Individuals should resist the norm they undoubtedly feel to default toward the easier option of remaining in their bubble—instead embracing that barrier and giving in to age diversity.

At the community level, structured, yet low-pressure programs can create the necessary space to normalize cross-generational connection. Whether that be in schools, retirement homes, local community organizations, hosting regular conversation sessions could help to embrace storytelling as a powerful tool. For example, programs that facilitate intergenerational communication could be a very viable source and space to not only foster such connection, but



allow individuals to see the value. The usage of collaborative activities could also serve as a space to foster mutual respect and a shared purpose. Embedding these programs in spaces where intergenerational connection is already passing by, but not being taken advantage of could help to bridge the invisible gaps present. Within libraries, gyms, places of worship, cafes the intimidation factor of seeking these conversations out can be reduced.

For policy and research there is a vast room to further the work in intergenerational connection and truly invest in the broad space for programming as a public health and social wellbeing strategy. Policymakers could begin incentivizing community spaces to host mix-aged events whether that be in community spaces, restaurants, etc. opening this up publicly could make for positive implementation.

Alongside this researchers could continue to look deeper into the ways that cross generational connection affects the general population—exploring the long-term effects of such interactions as a means for growth of resilience, wellbeing and interconnectedness. Future tools could also research how these same ideals can be applied with the ever growing world of technology without replacing face-to-face interactions.

Ultimately the impacts of implementation are clear—if we want a more interconnected world that seeks connection rooted in empathy, understanding, and confidence cannot leave intergenerational connections unacknowledged. With growth of awareness and intentional participation in such growth, we can improve our own well being and the strength of our social communities.

Conclusion:

The question of what can be gained from intergenerational stranger interactions is answered clearly: the benefits are not limited to simple conversation, instead they may potentially extend to numerous cognitive, emotional, and physical benefits. Evidence showcases that such interactions can foster increased conversation ability, reduced loneliness, and, in an ever-growing isolated world, foster feelings of belonging. These interactions also open doors to achieving a sense of empathy and perspective taking. They stand to additionally offer physical benefits correlated to longevity, heart health, and general physical well-being. Often overlooked as a source of diversity relative to other demographics such as race or gender, such findings prove that age diversity can yield a unique set of positive enhancements.

Barriers to cross-generational interactions still remain incredibly prevalent as social norms, stereotypes, technology and structural limitations prohibit the rate at which interaction spontaneously occurs. Additionally, mental barriers remain a challenge from individuals anticipating awkward conversation, lacking confidence in skills to communicate, or lacking the social energy to put into a seemingly meaningless interaction. All these perceived barriers stem from a core avoidance for fear of rejection. These deterrents lead people to underestimate the extent that the benefits outweigh potential uncomfortableness yet research shows that such fears are exaggerated and everyday interactions can significantly shift these perspectives.

Implications extend far beyond the individual and into the broader community. With loneliness growing as a public health crisis, intergenerational interactions stand at the forefront as a viable strategy for strengthening community ties. Individuals can take simple steps to embrace connecting across generations in their everyday life, from seeking interaction in their community spaces to embracing it when it comes their way, while communities, institutions, and policy makers can take steps to normalize and encourage these connections.



Ultimately, intergenerational connection is not only a perspective-shifting and meaningful moment for individuals, but it is an underutilized tool to combat the human experiences of loneliness and yearning to feel seen. In a fragmented world, even the smallest of connections can extend outward and renew the sense of humanness everyone holds at their core with the presence of connection.

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