

# A Study of Intergenerational Community Relationships

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## Background

This study took as its focus a concern for inter-generational relationships and their relevance to social cohesion and wellbeing. In collaboration with Sheffield City Council (SCC), a research team from the University of Sheffield conducted research to explore intergenerational relationships in two areas of Sheffield. The research was prompted by colleagues at the council who reported tensions in intergenerational relationships, with older people describing themselves as feeling both intimidated by young people and, as a result, excluded from full participation in their communities. The study aimed to unpick some of the concerns that older people expressed about young people and also sought to explore young people's perceptions about intergenerational relationships in their local communities.

## Aims

- To map current generational understandings and concerns by investigating how people of different ages perceive generations across the life-course.
- To explore how older people understand 'youth' and what it means to be a young person, and the concerns they have about young people in their community.
- To investigate how young people perceive adulthood across the life-course, how they identify and categorise older people and old age and the concerns they have about older people in their community.

## The study

- One-off, in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were undertaken.
- Young people were recruited through a secondary school and a youth club and interviewed in friendship groups of 2-3.
- Older people were recruited through the council and included residents in a supported living complex and other pensioners living independently.

## Key Findings:

- Both older and younger people feel they are discriminated against because of the labels attached to them.
- Older people generally agree that young people are threatening and risky to their local communities. This view is particularly prevalent among older people living in supported accommodation, who experience limited or no contact with young people.
- Young people congregating in groups (often referred to negatively as 'gangs') in public spaces, such as the street, are perceived to be threatening by both older and young people.
- Young and older people are scared to go out at night in their local area because of groups of young people hanging around.
- The majority of young people have extremely positive attitudes towards older people and demonstrate considerable respect towards familial elders and tolerance of inter-generational differences.
- Young people are critical of the bad manners and problematic behaviour of adults and older people, and express a sense of unfairness that such behaviour is stereotypically associated with the young.
- Older people feel that young people should be encouraged to get out more and be more active and young people feel exactly the same way about older people.

## Findings

Young people believed that older people had a bad impression of them as a generation and felt that these perceptions were fuelled by the media. They expressed the view that labels were unhelpful in categorising people and insisted that 'all people are different'. Older people generally accepted that they were negatively stereotyped as being 'old' and 'vulnerable', but also felt that negative stereotypes of young people were accurate. Older people found it difficult to think of aspects of being young which might be enjoyable. They expressed concerns for the lack of opportunities available for young people and felt that the younger generation faced far greater challenges than they had when they were young. Young people found it difficult to imagine life as an 'old person' and frequently attributed old age with frailty and vulnerability.

Both old and young people have 'scary' stories to tell about their neighbourhood and neighbourhood histories colour their perceptions of their neighbourhoods, even if they themselves have not experienced troubles. The attitudes of both seem to be fuelled by TV stories of neighbourhood gangs. Young people do not, however, see older people as a potential threat to their safety and well-being. They perceive themselves to be much more at risk of harm in public places from other groups of young people. Like young people, older people confirmed that they are scared going out at night, but rarely do so, so they live in fear of fear, rather than actually drawing on experiences. There was a marked difference in attitudes towards young people in the narratives of community-living and care-home-living older people. The former, who tend to be embedded in wider community networks, were generally more measured in their understanding of young people's lives. Older participants felt that there was not much for young people to do in the neighbourhood, something with which young people agreed.

Older people made important distinctions between their own grandchildren, with whom they generally had positive relationships and 'other' young people who were widely constructed as problematic. They lay considerable stress on what they perceived to be deficits in contemporary parenting practices and emphasised the need, from their generational perspective, for parents to exert greater control over young people's lives within the family environment. In contrast, the majority of young people had extremely positive attitudes towards older people in general; they were overall respectful and tolerant of intergenerational differences and drew upon personal experience of older people (often familial) to reject stereotypical, homogenising statements about old age and to emphasise heterogeneity in the population of older people. Young people's attitudes to-

## Further information

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## Research Impact

- The study highlighted discrepancies between the feelings that different generations have about one another. Young people felt the media was responsible for fuelling negative perceptions about them. Likewise, older people reported media stories as fact, feeling that young people posed a real concern. Thus, further work is needed to open communication between the generations to address common fears and misunderstandings.
- The study highlighted the limited number of community spaces that are both inviting and accessible to older and younger residents simultaneously. Despite their initial comments that young people were a concern, older people reported that they would welcome opportunities to share supervised spaces with young people. Further work that encourages and enables older and younger residents to share community spaces is required.

wards older people were strongly informed by their familial experiences. Contact with grandparents was welcomed and seen as positive and the older generation was valued.

Young people were critical of the bad manners and problematic behaviour of older people and their criticism related to experiences from everyday life, such as people pushing to the front of a queue instead of waiting their turn. They expressed a sense of unfairness and double standards that adults engage in bad manners and problematic behaviour that is stereotypically attributed to young people. Young people also demonstrated a sympathetic awareness of the potential vulnerability and loneliness of older people and related this to their own experiences of feeling afraid and lonely. Young people were critical of adults who do not maintain regular contact and ensure that their elderly parents are well cared for after entering residential care. Young people showed awareness that older people occupy a distinct social position that confers certain rights and responsibilities. As a result, they were willing to accept the advice and instructions of older people in general and showed a marked reluctance to ignore or question them.

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