Stronger together? Intergenerational connection and Covid-19

Stephen Burke

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to review how intergenerational connections and relationships have been affected to date by COVID-19. It provides lessons for the future.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is a review of policy and practice.

Findings – Although there are some excellent examples of creative approaches such as online strategies to bring generations together in the face of social distancing, there remain barriers to building stronger communities. Many people of all ages remain lonely and isolated. Community projects are under-funded and will struggle to maintain connections beyond the immediate crisis. Inequalities and the digital divide have been exacerbated by COVID-19. Intergenerational relations are likely to be further strained by the economic impact.

Originality/value – None of us have known anything like COVID-19 and its impact on all aspects of our lives. It will continue to affect generations to come, and we need to learn the lessons as we move forward.

Keywords Relationships, Connection, Intergenerational, Interaction, Older, COVID-19, Young

Paper type Viewpoint

Summary

COVID-19 and social distancing have created many barriers to formal and informal mixing among generations. Lockdown meant that many organisations involved in intergenerational activities were closed to visitors or closed completely for the duration, and their intergenerational activities ceased when face-to-face contact ceased.

As the impact of coronavirus became clear, local communities mobilised to support those who were shielding from the disease and isolated. Their initial focus was on giving practical support such as help with shopping, collecting prescriptions and befriending. Community volunteering was backed by a national effort – National Health Service (NHS) Volunteer Responders, who provided similar help with these and other tasks for NHS patients.

Those offered help were primarily older adults unable to leave their home. These older people were supported by younger people, many furloughed or working from home. Local mutual aid groups sprang up in most communities to maintain the support and build connections among neighbours. This growth in solidarity and community spirit has been one of the most heartening features of the response to the pandemic.

The difficulties posed by coronavirus and social distancing have also prompted creative responses from some community organisations and charities to develop new ways of connecting people. To replace direct face-to-face contact, they have adopted online- and paper-based solutions. By recognising the particular difficulties facing residential care, many communities have made and kept contact with their local care homes through letters, artwork, poems and videos.
These initiatives have yet to be properly evaluated. In particular, how far have they reached those of all ages who are most isolated and lonely? We probably will not know for years the true extent of damage caused by the isolation and loneliness of both younger and older people resulting from lockdown and the pandemic. On the surface, the growth of community initiatives must be widely welcomed, but there are concerns that the pandemic has exacerbated underlying inequalities and ageism while straining relations among generations. It has amplified existing risks such as ill health, poverty and unemployment, which in turn may have increased tensions between younger and older people.

This is important given what we know about age segregation and its consequences. Britain is already one of the most age-segregated countries in the world. Every effort is therefore needed during and after COVID-19 to promote contact and connections among generations. Social distancing and other restrictions make such connections much harder and demand more creative and determined efforts to build meaningful relationships. Connection is crucial for trust among generations at a time when public trust is being eroded in so many areas of our society.

Amongst many lessons, there are three key issues highlighted that need to be addressed as we emerge from lockdown to a different future:

1. reaching the most isolated and digitally excluded and making technology work for all ages;
2. building and sustaining meaningful connections and relationships among people of all ages in communities; and
3. ensuring that relationships among generations are not further damaged, as tensions grow between recovering from the health consequences and the economic consequences.

Pre-COVID-19 to April 2020 – locking down

Britain is one of the most age-segregated countries in the world. Most people have little contact with people outside of their generation apart from their own family. This segregation has led to a marked lack of connection among generations, which in turn has resulted in loneliness for people of all ages, poor health and care, intergenerational misunderstanding, stereotyping, ageism, lack of trust and division, affecting individuals, communities and our wider society [1].

To address such issues, there has been an upsurge in intergenerational activities in the UK in recent years. Spurred by media coverage, thousands of older people’s care homes and housing schemes were linking with children’s nurseries, schools, colleges and universities. Many other activities were taking place in the community. The benefits of intergenerational interaction were increasingly recognised for people of all ages – from improved health, care and learning to reduced loneliness and ageism, while also addressing intergenerational fairness [2].

The first ever national UK Intergenerational Week had been scheduled for 23–29 March 2020 [3]. Many projects planned special events and activities to mark the week. But COVID-19 intervened, and from 23 March full lockdown was imposed in the UK. Older people’s care homes, extra care and other housing schemes were closed to visitors; schools, nurseries, colleges and universities were closed altogether.

As a result, many traditional intergenerational projects came to an immediate standstill although some projects furloughed staff to ensure their longer term survival. “Social distancing” made most intergenerational activities, particularly face to face and group work, impossible. Links stopped between nurseries/schools and older people’s care and housing schemes. Schools and nurseries either closed or had limited operational activity.
Care homes and older people’s housing were put into complete lockdown, shut away from not only their local community and residents’ families but also even internally with older people often isolated from each other to minimise the risk of infection. That made not only face-to-face work impossible since March but other options for group work, e.g. video and Zoom, were no longer viable and were “paused”. As a result, some organisations, such as The Together Project that supports visits by parent and toddler groups to care homes, furloughed staff to protect the organisation so that they could later resume as lockdown was eased. In September, they were able to relaunch with a Hand in Hand Together art project [4].

April to July 2020 – growing community responses

The coronavirus crisis led to an outpouring of community concern. Initially, this was directed towards those people shielding and unable to leave their home, helping them with a range of practical tasks such as shopping and collecting prescriptions, as well as checking on their welfare and providing befriending support. Although not explicitly intergenerational, inevitably these schemes primarily linked older people over the age of 70 with younger people in their local community.

The pandemic also led to an outbreak of creativity. From April onwards, we saw a wealth of initiatives to find novel ways to sustain and develop intergenerational relations.

Some organisations, such as InCommon and Friend in Deed, have devised creative ways to maintain relations between children and older people. InCommon’s Buddies project provides online activities for 7–11 year olds and their families to link with older friends and relatives. Friend in Deed has been using video calling to maintain virtual connection between individual care home residents and children. The challenge for all organisations in this position is to maintain meaningful relationships that can be recognised as real, in a way that is and will be sustainable.

There has also been a growth in telephone befriending, mainly using landlines, connecting some of the loneliest older people with younger generations. Organisations like Silverline, which was founded in 2013, have been joined by Re-engage, which has shifted from running Sunday tea parties to providing tele-befriending. Even more “traditional” has been the growth in Pen Pal schemes.

Relationships between older and younger people have blossomed as the provision of practical support and befriending has grown in local communities. Many neighbourhoods seemed almost overnight to develop informal groups, which have provided the social glue to support self-isolating older people through the crisis. There appears, however, to have been some duplication of efforts with individuals getting similar help from several different organisations such as the national NHS Volunteer Responders, social housing providers and local community groups. Although NHS Volunteer Responders has recruited some 750,000 volunteers nationally, they have only completed half a million tasks among them in over three months. A lesson here must be that this kind of support is best organised and provided locally by groups that know their local population and community.

Intergenerational organisations working in local communities have continued to support one-to-one relationships, e.g. shopping and befriending, and by using Zoom to enable virtual group activities. These by and large have engaged younger and older people they were already working with, building on existing relationships. Most successful has probably been The Cares Family, which across several cities has brought older and younger neighbours together through various online activities and practical support. But like others, they have had to undertake special appeals and crowdfunding to support the changes in the way they work [5].
InCommon has written a report with Clarion Futures with examples of how intergenerational and housing organisations have worked with local communities during COVID-19 (Sustaining intergenerational connections at a time of crisis) [6]. Others such as My Home Life’s Care Home FaNs initiative have developed a range of online resources that community organisations can use to maintain contact between school-aged children and care homes, remotely during social distancing [7].

One centre for all ages in Camden, north London, Castlehaven [8], has been very busy with engaging its older members in offline and online activities, which provide a variety of workshops such as Tai Chi, ballroom dance, choir, Coffee’n’Chat and birthday parties. They have organised conference calls so those older people on landlines and not IT savvy are not excluded. They also hold befriending calls with members regularly, especially those who have been shielding and are more isolated. Their environmental project has been running frequent zoom classes on anything from growing vegetables, houseplant A&E and recycling items. Many of these sessions are intergenerational, as families and older people could access the sessions together, passing on knowledge and starting up friendships. However, reopening its community centre for face-to-face contact is still some way off and the subject of many risk assessments.

Digital exclusion is not just an issue for older people but, as has been seen with school closures, is now key for many families and children too. Helping families deal with bereavement, particularly supporting children who have lost grandparents and great-grandparents to coronavirus, has become another widely seen intergenerational issue. Sharing such resources online is crucial, but we also need to develop simple, easy to use platforms that people of all ages can use without support.

What is still unknown is how far these newer community initiatives have reached the most isolated and lonely older and younger people and engaged with them. Although many of the activities outlined above and elsewhere have found innovative ways to engage older and younger people already involved with the projects, there is as yet little evidence that they have also been successful in reaching out to new participants such as isolated older people. Building new relationships does seem at least initially to rely more on face-to-face contact, particularly for groups not used to engaging online.

Impact on older people and relations among generations

Professor Sir Michael Marmot has argued that COVID-19 “exposes and amplifies underlying inequalities”. Lockdown and social distancing measures that constrain people in social groups multiply this impact.

As time goes on, exposing and amplifying inequalities seems to be the most fundamental consequence of COVID-19. Poorer and disadvantaged people of all ages have experienced more ill health and higher death rates although they have also been more likely to pay the price of losing jobs and income. This is even more pronounced by gender, ethnicity and disability.

The Commissioner for Older People in Wales, Helena Herklots has highlighted discrimination shown towards older people during the coronavirus crisis. She has called on the Equality and Human Rights Commission to investigate whether there has been a breach of older people’s rights in Wales, particularly focussing on the discharge from hospital of COVID-19 positive patients to care homes [9].

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Growth in loneliness is a feared outcome of COVID-19. One in four adults has reported having no real friends during lockdown. This substantial level of loneliness among people of all ages will have severe mental health consequences and reduced life expectancy in the long term as a specific result of the loss of human connection and increasing dependence on digital technology.

In contrast, one of the primary aims of intergenerational interaction and projects is to tackle ageism by increasing mutual awareness and understanding through greater contact between younger and older people. Overall, contact among generations appears to have markedly diminished during the pandemic, but its nature has also changed, for good and bad. As above, there have been some great initiatives to maintain and transform contact among generations.

Alongside the good news, the worries are three-fold:

1. Firstly, older people aged over 70 have been pigeonholed as frail, helpless, vulnerable, dependent and at risk during the pandemic, thereby increasing ageism towards older people in our society.

2. Secondly, the emphasis on “saving the NHS” led to the neglect and marginalisation of older and disabled people in care homes and living with and without personal support in the community and those workers and family members that care for them, reflecting the low value placed on care. This is not just about ageism and ableism but also reflects sexism and racism towards carers and care workers.

3. Thirdly, younger people have seen their education, work and life chances put on hold seemingly to protect the health of mainly older people. Facing this delicate balance between health and economic recovery risks generational conflict, stirred up by the media and reinforced by issues like the cost of housing.

Evaluation of intergenerational projects needs further development, focussing on the contributions made by older and younger people and the gains of being involved with other generations as well as the outcomes. Further research is needed into the experience of people of all ages during lockdown in terms of how their everyday lives, relationships and contacts may be sustained or change. Some projects have supported older people to keep diaries, which could provide valuable learning about intergenerational interactions during COVID-19 and exemplify social history.

Looking forward, building stronger relationships among generations must be key to ensuring that everyone has a say in shaping the future. Renewed contact between older and younger people is critical to addressing ageism faced by people of all ages and creating more inclusive communities and a stronger country. To do this will require means of encouraging and supporting such contact. The twin crises of loneliness and affordable housing remain as we come out of lockdown, but they may point the way to new ways to generate contact. Intergenerational housing solutions could transform emptying high streets and town centres and rebuild community life with shared intergenerational spaces [10].

COVID-19 has certainly raised awareness that stronger connections in our communities must be maintained and extended in the future. Will the connections made during COVID-19 be sustained and will new friendships last, making the 2020s a decade of reconnection? If so, we need to better understand the means and ways of making these connections. And during a second wave in the winter of 2020/21, will the same level of community spirit be evident? If so, we need to better understand and provide policies to generate and sustain community motivations to continue their engagement.

What next? Lessons for the future

The experience from March to July 2020 has thrown up many useful lessons. It is too early to draw long-term conclusions on some issues, but key lessons include:
The marked growth in community spirit and desire to help our neighbours of all ages should be harnessed and encouraged to grow beyond the immediate crisis [11].

More research is needed into whether and how the most isolated groups may have benefited from this wave of goodwill.

The third sector is fragile and many organisations important for long-term community support for older people will struggle to survive beyond the crisis. Local NHS trusts and councils have been quick to signpost people to these organisations but they are mostly not able to secure their funding. Central government must act quickly to do more to support the third sector, above and beyond the measures already announced.

Looking to the immediate future, the third sector now needs to be more closely involved in contingency planning for future pandemics (as well as second waves) and other risks locally and nationally. Better data and systems for cross-referral of the most isolated groups need to be shared with third sector organisations to help them reach out.

Much more needs to be done to support older people with securing online access for social communication, practical tasks such as shopping and accessing basic information. This issue is not unique to older people and could therefore be the explicit focus of intergenerational projects going forward. Digital exclusion risks further marginalising a large proportion of our population.

Intergenerational justice and fairness has been severely tested by COVID-19, as the people most likely to die and to be seriously ill have been aged over 70, whereas most of those likely to suffer economically (through loss of jobs and income) are and will be younger. The economic impact will continue to be felt by those on low incomes, younger people, women, BAME communities and disabled people for years to come as mass unemployment returns to the UK. Older people seeking work will find reduced employment opportunities beyond self-employment and business start-ups.

Intergenerational activities that can bring older and younger people together in building really meaningful relationships will take time to recover from this crisis; even though rebuilding such connections will necessarily be a key part of increasing social cohesion and reducing loneliness across the country.

If the currently predicted changes in the way we live, work and travel come true post-COVID-19, then there will be more scope to mobilise individuals’ time and resources locally to support community connections. Such local mobilisation to strengthen community connections will need to be supported and resourced.

The battle against ageism requires us all to redouble our efforts and resolve and to work with others to challenge inequality and discrimination wherever we find it. Intergenerational alliances offer a tested and well-recognised way of collaborating more effectively to achieve this through raising awareness and changing attitudes towards different generations.

Bringing the generations together will play a key part in Britain’s social and economic recovery from coronavirus. Intergenerational connection is the glue that unites, not divides, us. Building connection is key to restoring trust in our country. Government at all levels and civil society must support local communities and build a Britain for all ages while tackling inequality highlighted by the pandemic.

Notes

3. www.stmonicatrust.org.uk/national-intergenerational-week
4. www.thetogetherproject.co.uk/
5. www.thecaresfamily.org.uk/home
8. www.castlehaven.org.uk/

About the author
Stephen Burke is a Co-founder and Director of the “think and do” tank, United for All Ages which was set up in 2010. United for All Ages aims to create stronger communities and a stronger Britain by bringing older and younger people together. Action for all ages can reduce loneliness and ageism, and improve health, care and learning. Previously, Stephen was the Chief Executive of two national care charities, the leader of a London borough and the Vice-Chair of several NHS bodies. Currently, he is also the Chair and Trustee of several housing, care, ageing and family charities. Stephen Burke can be contacted at: stephen.burke@unitedforallages.com