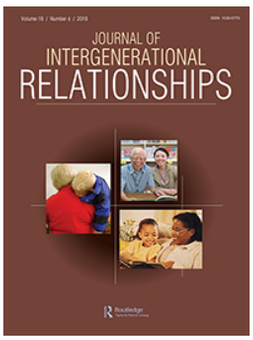

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Policy

Thinking intergenerationally: intergenerational solidarity, health and active aging in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to provoke thoughts into intergenerational relations and future policies that can strengthen solidarity within families and community in order to face the challenges of aging population. It first provides an overview of intergenerational relations and the efforts to promote intergenerational programs in the specific context of contemporary Hong Kong. Through a sociological lens, it draws on a theoretical framework that explains how intergenerational relations are constructed. It also sets out the factors leading to cohesive or conflicting relations at the individual, family and community levels. The paper concludes by applying this framework to inform intergenerational programming, and to suggest ways to promote IP and to take intergenerational perspective into policy design towards a healthy and intergenerational cohesive community.

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Introduction

Emerging from concern for rapidly aging population with an increasing burden of chronic diseases, and the consequences of age discrimination, the use of intergenerational approach in social service programs would be one of the key attempts to promote an age-friendly society and to lead an aging population towards a healthy community. Intergenerational approach or intergenerational programs (IP) that engage biologically-unrelated older and the younger generation groups are acknowledged as "vehicles for the purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations for individual and social benefits" (Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000, p. 11). Such asset-based approach that aims to initiate a process of social capital exchange provides opportunity to health enhancement across generations.

Research of gerontology and intergenerational fields demonstrate that various aspects of intergenerational relations are associated with enhanced well-being. By

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using IP to promote intergenerational relations, research shows an improved quality of life (Ellis, 2004), reduced social isolation (Jarrott & Bruno, 2007; Kaplan, 1997; Pain, 2005), and a renewed sense of worth (Ellis, 2004; Kaplan, 2002; Stanton & Tench, 2003). Studies have found positive outcomes for the youngsters including gaining higher personal developmental scores (Rosebrook, 2007); making positive behavioral and attitudinal changes towards substance use (Dickson, Derevensky, & Gupta, 2002; LoSciuto, Rajala, Townsend, & Taylor, 1996); improved knowledge and attitudes towards older people (Chung, 2009); and strengthened youth leadership skills and motivation for social change (Christens & Dolan, 2010). Socially, IP has the potential to actualize the phenomenon of "age in place" when individuals are holding positive self-perception of aging, family members of multiple generations are bonded with intergenerational solidarity, and when positive attitudes towards the other generation groups are fostered within the community. With the multi-benefits yielded by promoting intergenerational relations by means of IP, it demands attention of policy makers to take the intergenerational perspective into account while formulating policy in creating Hong Kong (HK) a more inclusive society for all age groups.

To meet the challenges of aging population by unleashing the talents of the generations, IP have been implemented in HK for nearly a decade; yet there is limited availability of theoretical-and-evidence based programs, nor understanding of how intergenerational perspective can embrace policy making to support a healthy and inclusive society. This paper is intended to provoke thoughts into intergenerational relations and future policies that can strengthen solidarity within families and community, and therefore facing the challenges of aging population. The objectives of this paper are twofold: to review and lay out a framework of intergenerational relations at three levels and explain why an understanding of intergenerational relations is important for program and policy design; and to suggest ways in which the intergenerational perspective or program can be encompassed in policy to create a healthy and cohesive community in HK. The following paragraphs first provide an overview of intergenerational relations and local efforts to promote intergenerational solidarity in HK; then illustrate a theoretical framework of intergenerational relations; and finally followed by making the recommendations on IP with the inclusion of an intergenerational perspective in policy design that can benefit individuals across generations.

Overview of intergenerational relations in Hong Kong

With a large ethnic Chinese population at about 94%, the cultural construct of individuals embedded in family relations has been a guiding principle in the HK society. However, the changing demographics is affecting HK families in many important ways and require special attention. Similar to

other countries, a rapid demographic shift is apparent in HK as a result of increased life expectancy and lowered fertility, implying that HK has an aging population as many other OCED countries do. The average life expectancy for males and females was 81.2 years and 87.3 years, respectively, in 2015. As projected by the HKSAR government, the percentage of older people aged 65 or above will reach 36% of the population by 2064 (Census and Statistics Department, 2015). The birth rate remained low with 8.6 per 1000 population in 2014. With marriage postponement, prevalence of spinsterhood, and increased birth rates, there is a significant declining trend in fertility (Census and Statistics Department, 2015). These changes mean a rise in diversified family forms including single-families, split families, childless families and so forth, indicating a future rise in a pool of population living alone with lack of support from informal caregivers. At present, the proportion of older adults aged 65 or above living alone has increased from 11.6% in 1991 to 14.8% in 2014 (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, n.d.).

The traditions of filial piety that many Chinese valued in the old days and still value today are nonetheless challenged by social changes. Policy change, such as the New Town Policy (started in the 1960s and 1970s), initially aimed to accommodate booming population by developing new areas has led to a drastic shape of living arrangement from extended co-residence to small nuclear families characterized with geographical distance from their older parents, inevitably shaping the intergenerational support within family (Chi & Chow, 1997; Chow, 2000). The changing role of women as intergenerational caregivers has also shaped the forms of care that the elderly experience. Research suggests that women's participation in the job market has altered daughters' sense of responsibility, leading to an increasing use of institutional care by the elderly (Holroyd, 2001). Even when adult children are willing to take care of their elderly parents, their filial actions are often constrained by numerous social and economic commitments (Cheng & Chan, 2006). This sandwich generation, who are sandwiched between the roles of providing care for both children and aging parents, falls into the age group of 30 to 45 in HK which constitutes 1.5 million people, i.e., 27% of the total population. They reported that they spent a large amount of time and money on elder care, similar to those in other Asian counties (Morris, 2010).

While intergenerational relations characterized with the norm of filial piety within family is widely discussed in literature (Cheng & Chan, 2006; Holroyd, 2001; Lee & Kwok, 2005); studies about intergenerational relations beyond kinship is rather scant. A sociologist, Lui (2007), suggests that there are four generations among HK people, each with a distinct ethos, as a result of the exposure to political factors from World War II until the present day. The capital (financial and social) for social exchange is different from generation to generation, so as their needs. A complex intergenerational interplay inevitably takes place given the differences between each generation, due

to varied social and economic influences. Besides, generational inequality in terms of wealth and property is also under the spotlight. The younger generation faces many barriers to owning a home, as a result of low salaries and steeply rising housing prices (Liu, 2013). Study shows they have fewer savings and less stable employment comparing with the older generation (aged 45–64), who are more skilled and experienced and able to accumulate capital through savings and investment (Wu, 2010).

Local efforts to promote intergenerational solidarity

In HK, the efforts of IP have been contributed by the government, private, voluntary, and community sectors, with the aim of strengthening intergenerational relations both in the family and the community context. The initiation by the HKSAR government for the senior citizens to stay active and productive has opened up wider scopes for IP to grow since the last decade. Continuing with the Policy Objectives of Active Ageing that was set in 1997, the Population Policy: Strategies and Initiatives (Chief Secretary Administration's Office, 2015) identified areas for actions, including engaging the older adults in volunteer services team, promoting life-long learning, fostering supportive family relations, and building an age-friendly environment as part of the strategies clearly demonstrate an echo to intergenerational approach. Funding has been provided to encourage the collaboration between schools and NGOs, and the participation of the older and the younger in the Opportunities for the Elderly Project (OEP) in 1998, the Elder Academy Scheme (EA), and the Neighborhood Active Ageing Project (NAAP) in 2008 (Chan & Liang, 2013) which were elderly focused, emphasizing life-long learning, social participation, and intergenerational cohesiveness. The school-based project like EA optimized the existing resources by utilizing primary, secondary schools, and tertiary institutes as "inclusive spaces" where a wide variety of educational courses and activities were provided for the retirees. It generates outcomes of "enhancing self-confidence," and "building up their capability of self-care" (Tam, 2011). The NAAP project has also been funded to engage healthy older adults in serving as volunteer for enhancing the neighborhood mutual assistance network and increasing their roles in the neighborhood context. It was not until recently that the government spotted the growing need of grandparents in delivering childcare when parents of grandchildren fail to provide child-rearing due to hectic schedule, substance abuse, divorce, or death. A pilot project named "Child Care Training for Grandparents Services" (Social Welfare Department (SWD), n.d.), which purposes to enhance intergenerational ties, has lately launched to empower grandparents through a series of child care lessons for delivering child care.

The development of IP also requires the support of private funding. They have been running in the District Elderly Community centres, Neighbourhood Community Centres, Social Centres for the Elderly, and a number of non-government organizations (NGOs), in a rather scattered manner. More currently,

private funding support have embraced a growing number of school-based and community-based projects that are more structurally designed in gathering the efforts of the young and the old, schools and social welfare agencies. Projects like Intergenerational Art Programme for Dementia, Reminiscence Share Site through Art, Intergenerational Responsible Citizenship Project, Life Mentorship and English Language Training, has a topical theme of addressing varied needs of the generation groups, using the approach of reciprocal exchange through an array of creative activities. They are not limited to be held by a single organization, but a co-creation by NGOs and educational institutions that optimize knowledge and resources available by stakeholders (Chung, 2009). Although studies providing comprehensive evaluations of program outcomes are limited (Community Investment And Inclusion Fund Consortium, 2006; So & Shek, 2011), the growing interest in IP is clear.

Theoretical model of intergenerational relations

The overview of intergenerational relations and local efforts of IP are presented in the earlier section. The following discussion on suggestion about promoting IP initiatives and taking intergenerational perspective into policy design is guided by a review of theories from a sociological lens (Pain, 2005). The theoretical model outlined in this paper makes use of three levels to understand intergenerational relations. The first is the individual level: how the "elderly" perceive themselves and are perceived by others, which allows us to understand the boundaries created by age. The second is the family level, where dynamics may vary culturally. The third is the community level, at which intergenerational relations are shaped by social and economic policies.

Social identity at the individual level

Sociology and anthropology have long recognized age as fundamental to social systems, where age is tied to a system of roles and identities. *Identity* refers to the public and shared aspects of individuals, defining a person as a social object by establishing "what and where the person is within social structure, thereby linking self to social structure" (Gibson & Singleton, 2012, p. 249). In the process of growing, humans experience changes in biological capacity when their bodies age, transitioning between "child," "youth," "adult," and "old age." Yet when humans place emphasis on a sense of efficacy, or the ability to control the world, as central to self-esteem, this leads the elderly to feel devalued, because they may become dependent on family members as they experience bodily impairment (Kerckhoff, 1966).

The construction of identity is not merely a matter of self-identification, but occurs through interaction with others. Research suggests identities

imposed by others convey positive and negative *stereotypes* of the aged, such as negative stereotypes of "severely impaired, despondent, shrew/curmudgeon, and recluse," and positive stereotypes of "perfect grandparent, conservative, and golden age," as reported by Hummert and her colleagues (Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994). Pain (2005) reminds us that age should not be examined alone; the intersections of class, gender, faith, sexuality constitute a person's identity and structure their experiences in the community. To blur or eliminate the boundary between "us" and "others," scholars suggest that cross-age activities bring the benefits of "*recategorizing*" generational groups (Anastasio, Bachman, Gaertner, & Dovidio, 1997). To encourage cross-age activities, *activity theory* from the gerontology literature suggests that volunteering promotes positive social identity, contributing to a sense of satisfaction and active aging as supported by several studies (Havighurst, 1968; Mjelde-Mossey & Chi, 2005; Nakano, 2000). Literature also suggests that the breaking of negative stereotypes between individuals will require the action of *generative socialization* (Luescher, 2013) that can be actualized by education and training.

Solidarity vs. ambivalence at the family level

The solidarity generated from biologically linked generations is often perceived as a positive counterbalance to the ups and downs of life. One of the most commonly discussed theories is *intergenerational solidarity*, as reflected in the following six constructs: affection (degree of sentiment between family members); association (frequency of activities engaged in by family members); consensus (degree of agreement in values and beliefs among family members); resource sharing (exchange of resources within the family); strength of family norms (commitment to perform familial roles by family members); and the opportunity for structure interaction (as reflected in geographical proximity) (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). However, whether solidarity between generations in families exists is debatable. Theorists from social gerontology use the term *intergenerational ambivalence* to capture the negative emotions and thoughts arising from irreconcilable family tension (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Lüscher, 2002; Pillemer & Suitor, 2002; Suitor, Gilligan, & Pillemer, 2011).

Theory of *social exchange* provides a perspective on intergenerational relations on the basis of reciprocation. The elderly person who used to contribute financially, physically, and emotionally to the upbringing of younger generations becomes reliant on their adult children when they experience age-related dysfunction, leading them to experience role reversal (Blieszner & Mancini, 1987; Burr & Mutchler, 1999; Stein et al., 1998). Because the old have fewer resources and less capital to offer in social exchanges, they have less to bring to the encounter, leading to decreased

interaction between the old and young (Bengtson & Dowd, 1981; Dowd, 1975). In some places, such as China, Japan, and Palestine, intergenerational ties are governed by *filial relations* in which respect for the old is emphasized (Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000). Filial responsibility to older parents is a cultural expectation that adult children support their parents as they age (Cicirelli, 1988, 1990).

The system of filial piety is not purely the responsibility of the younger generation to care for their older parents, but also involves "reciprocal" behavior including inheritance and the expectation of obedience and respect (Lee & Kwok, 2005). Research suggests values of filial piety have been eroded by modern life, as well as the individualism, economic independence, and education of the young (Aboderin, 2003; Zhan, 2004). Likewise, youth in many developed countries experience the possibility of greater autonomy from their group of origin. There is a structural break from family patterns that may lead to increased disparity between generations. Following Allport's (1954) suggestion that *contact theory* can reduce prejudice among groups, some studies report that attitudes towards aging can be changed through aging education and intergenerational experiences. For example, participation in IP among ninth-graders can have a significant positive effect on perception of elders by elementary school children (Glass & Trent, 1980). In addition to reducing prejudice, an intergenerational approach can be used to raise awareness about the aging process among children (Blunk & Williams, 1997). While quality of intergenerational contact is emphasized, the new concept of *Intergenerational Contact Zones* (ICZs) as suggested by Thang (2015) has further exemplified how modification of a physical space can create a relationship-focused community for people with generations.

The effects of policy and economy at the societal level

Intergenerational relations are politically and socially produced and shaped at the macro level. *Political economy theory* shows how variations in the status of the elderly can be understood by examining public policies that determine how social resources are allocated (Minkler, 1984; Walker, 1996). For example, some U.S. studies show that the current structure of the healthcare industry disadvantages subgroups of the older population, and thus maintains economic control of the elderly by managing their dependencies through control of medical resources (Biggs, Estes, & Phillipson, 2003; Olson, 1994; Stoller, 1993). Fishman (2010) also addresses the negative economic implications that result when different generations are pitted against each other from the micro to the macro level.

Ageism is perhaps the most discussed issue in connection with *age segregation* at different levels in the community (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005).

Institutionally, children are channeled into schools, adults into work settings, and older people into retirement, creating a sense of isolation, passivity, and discontinuity in old age. Age disparity is deeply embedded in social welfare issues, such as housing, recreation, and healthcare; policies and programs are segregated by age, which is subsequently reified in space and culture. Spatially, separation is evident in how the elderly are relegated to retirement housing or nursing homes. Spaces define what activities people are expected to do (e.g., bars and pubs for youth; elderly centers for the old), and consequently promote age divisions. In the cultural arena, ageist humor embedded in language (e.g., jokes), and media (e.g., cartoons and birthday cards) undoubtedly exacerbate age stereotypes (Bytheway, 1995; Palmore, 1999).

In view of the aging population, the WHO (World Health Organization, 2007) has called for an age-friendly society that features *social participation*. For instance, studies show that learning information and communication technologies (ICT) through IP enhances the cognitive level of the elderly and thus empowers their "*cultural capital*," in Bourdieu's terminology (Binok & Menke, 2015). ICT constructs barrier-free digital environments to connect people across age ranges (Lin, Fei, & Chang, 2013), allowing for the digital inclusion of seniors and acquisition of social capital (Harley & Fitzpatrick, 2009; Harley, Vetere, Fitzpatrick, & Kurniawan, 2012; Kaplan, Sánchez, & Bradley, 2015). Bringing generations together allows the elderly and the young to share activities, leading to cost reduction through sharing of resources and maximization of financial capital. IP also offers volunteering opportunities for active retirees, so that human capital is explored and fully made use of. Volunteering promotes positive social identity, satisfaction and active aging for both the young and the old, a conclusion supported by activity theory and several empirical studies (Havighurst, 1968; Mjelde-Mossey & Chi, 2005; Nakano, 2000).

The foregoing discussion reviews theories that are appropriate to unpack the underlying meaning of the intergenerational relations. The next section attempts to apply this framework to inform intergenerational programming, and to suggest ways to promote IP and, to take intergenerational perspective into policy design towards a healthy and intergenerational cohesive community.

Practical application of theoretical model on intergenerational programming

Despite the growing application of IP in the community sector, little has been discussed in the relevance of design to address the complexity of intergenerational relations at different levels. The following are some suggestions to inform intergenerational programming, with the goal of enhancing intergenerational relations and individuals' wellbeing.

Re-constructing self-identity through recognizing social capital of generations:

• To explore, unleash, display and recognize the social capital of generational groups through providing capital-focused IP (e.g., the older generations, who are the keepers of traditions, have knowledge and skills in the local traditional culture, traditional craftsman skills, and life experience in work setting; while the youngsters are nurtured with new technologies like social media and digital platforms, and have wide exposure to multi-cultural activities).

Removing age-based stereotypes through improving quality of contact between generations:

• To reduce intergroup bias through an increased frequency and quality of cross-age contact; and to reduce fear of aging by increasing relevant knowledge through providing educational-focused IP (e.g., diversified programs that include lessons about ageism, lifespan awareness programs, life course projects, or "mutual concern" awareness programs).

Developing meaningful webs of relations through facilitating social capital exchange:

• To facilitate a process of capital exchange where the older and younger counterparts are given opportunities to equally receive and contribute on topics they value (e.g., technology, language, dialect or cultural knowledge), during which one party is more knowledgeable to help someone in need yet with less experience. The mode of mentorship or co-production will bridge knowledge divide.

Policy implications

Intergenerational approach in policy is distinguishable from IP, with the former referring to a policy that "incorporates an intergenerational approach to addressing an issue" or "has an impact across generations," while the latter referring to activities that are "planned actions" which aims to bring positive impacts on an individual's attitudes and gluing the ties between generational groups. The notion of intergenerational solidarity is expressed as one of the "important tenets of active ageing" by WHO (2002), meaning an age-inclusive approach that advocates intergenerational solidarity is a pre-requisite of age-friendliness. However, one of the criticisms on policy approach with intergenerational focus is the tension of generational conflicts over allocation of resources. It has been widely reported that elderly care is viewed as "burden" to the younger generation due to the increasing healthcare costs (Knickman & Snell, 2002; Lai, 2012; Lee, Yoon, & Kropf, 2007). In Asia, respecting elders remains strong cultural values that is attached to Confucianism, yet it is challenged by the limited public resources available to meet the needs of the aging population (Canda, 2013). Although the familism in Chinese culture has defined a person's responsibility for their family members, it is argued that generational contract is at risk because of the social norm of child-centeredness (Croll, 2006), and a diminishing sense of social responsibility as a result of acculturation of individualism (Albert, Mayer & Zheng, 2009).

Despite the concern for a spark of generational battlefield, fostering intergenerational approach is advocated by policy makers in the United States, Singapore, the UK, Germany, Denmark, France, and some countries in South America. As IP impact on supporting and strengthening the quality of ties, and breaking age stereotype, they are useful to change the views of the public and stakeholders. Promoting IP is therefore crucial, if not essential. This paper is not intended to enforce a particular form of behavior through policy change but to open up options that has the potential to benefit the public wellbeing. The following are some suggestions on policy change that can promote intergenerational cohesiveness and health benefits for individuals.

- To use a variety of possible themes of IP as a strategy to develop a culture of life-long learning, mutual respect and appreciation, and thus bringing positive health impacts.
- To upkeep population health by using IP as a pipeline to promote health knowledge and skills in prevention, rehabilitation or other issues (such as self-care, medication management and lifestyle adjustment).
- To provide more opportunities for IP through the support of grant and funding.
- To evaluate the outcomes and benefits of IP and to inform theoretical-and-evidence-based policies.
- To raise the awareness of and motivate stakeholders in the community to take part in IP and to utilize their resources (e.g., inviting collaboration between stakeholders including schools, public libraries, community centers, museums, or Housing Authority, and gathering generational groups at these "shared sites" to facilitate on-going exchange of knowledge and experiences).
- To review policy that impacts on ageism (e.g., welfare policy) and to identify strategies to reduce age-based prejudice (e.g., to review age-related stereotypical images or texts in textbooks or teaching materials; to provide education to identify and refute ageist attitudes; to promote age-friendly working environment; and to promote positive images of older persons in the media).
- To promote supportive working environment that values the contribution of aging labor force (e.g., to encourage part-time working as a form to promote positive transition from work to full retirement (Dendinger, Adams, & Jacobson, 2005; DeVaus, Wells, Kendig, & Quine, 2007), or to postpone retirement age).
- To develop effective support system that allows people to carry out their caring roles in the family (e.g., to give options of flexible work schedule, such as leaving entitlement as practiced in Singapore, Japan, Belgium and Norway to protect the rights of the young working groups without losing their jobs while taking parental care (Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices,

2014); and to advocate family friendliness at the workplace by encouraging supporting attitudes from colleagues in the workplace.
- To review policy that may impact upon intergenerational bonding at the community level (e.g., to make policy efforts to develop social security or pension system will be beneficial to ease the financial burden while the number of young family members are decreasing, and the sense of burden that the younger generation may have towards the elders).
- To create a livable community (e.g., to expand intergenerational contact zone, or to engage people at varied stages of life to plan a safe community that is designed with physical and social infrastructures that foster intergenerational learning, dialogue, and engagement).

To include the viewpoints from generational groups into process of policy design.

Conclusion

As a social production at the individual, family, and social levels, intergenerational relations offer a critical way to explore a sub-disciplinary understanding of population health and active aging through IP. Not only does the theoretical overview of intergenerational relations contribute insight into how IP can act as an intervention in promoting health among different generational groups, it also paves the way for future studies on investigating various topics, such as the bidirectional effects between intergenerational relations and health. The adjustment of mentality and cultivation embracing attitudes towards respecting different age groups requires all-out effort. This paper further calls for the policy makers' attention on integrating initiatives of IP and taking the intergenerational perspective into account while formulating policies for the benefits of generational groups.

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