

# IS SUCCESSFUL AGING IN PERIL? INTERGENERATIONAL TIES TO THE TEST

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## Abstract

As a "crowned" virus conquered the world in the spring 2020, our country had to adapt to an entirely new situation, dominated by uncertainty, doubt, fear and panic. The fight with an unknown enemy terrified everybody, especially the old people. This category proved to be the most vulnerable of all and the huge infection rate as well as fatalities led to a thorough analysis. Under scrutiny was the notion of successful aging and the ties with their families, friends and acquaintances. The role of the intergenerational relationships was analysed in a period when a status of apprehension was dominant and the toll on the human lives was quite high. The "test" imposed by the new virus brought into light new aspects of aging and the significance of intergenerational ties during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative analysis attempted to identify a series of less examined dimensions, such as the power of family and non-family intergenerational links, personal perspectives and behaviours of different generations during lockdown and the commitment of youngsters towards old people.

**Keywords:** *successful aging, intergenerational relationships, pandemic, old generation, young generation, social support.*

## 1. BACKGROUND

The powerful and strange pandemic that occurred in early 2020 changed the world overnight (WHO, 2020). The health crisis that hit the whole globe turned very quickly into a crisis of the whole society. This factual impasse was seen differently by all generations and resulted in ageism (AYALON, 2013; AYALON & TESCH-RÖMER, 2018; SWIFT *et al.*, 2017) and intergenerational separation.

A general tendency to divide generations into "new" and "old" led to "intergenerational-tension" (NORTH & FISKE, 2013). However, this fracture worsened during the pandemic, as the spread of the virus was connected to the family ties and their interaction (DI GIALLEONARDO *et al.*, 2021).

The COVID-19 outbreak sent into oblivion some well-known notions like *successful aging* (ROWE & KAHN, 1997; ARMITAGE & NELLUMS, 2020; HANSEN-KYLE, 2005) *active aging* (WHO, 2002; WALKER, 2002; FOSTER & WALKER, 2014) or *healthy aging* (AYALON, 2020; BENSON, SLOAN, & HALT, 2019). The requirement for limited contacts between old people and their young family members (grandchildren, great-grandchildren) or young friends and/or acquaintances (DI GIALLEONARDO *et al.*, 2021; JIN *et al.*, 2021) was not at all beneficial for the intergenerational relationships, yet highly recommended in order to reduce mortality.

While during normal times the activity perspective was at the core of the aging models mentioned above, the intrusion of the COVID-19 virus into our lives with all its restrictions and constraints changed completely the perception, as the main focus was on survival and resistance. Due to lockdown, imposed social isolation, limited access to shops, markets and public spaces, travel restrictions and the need to certify an urgency with a written document, the lives of old people were completely altered, and the pandemic became an issue mainly linked with the old age (ZHOU *et al.*, 2020; KWONG & YAN, 2021; AGE PLATFORM EUROPE, 2020). From activity to inactivity and apathy, from long walks to very short strolls in the surrounding of the house, shopping only for the vital supplies, all circumstances were distorted.

The goal of this research was twofold: on one had to identify if aging in this troubled period can still prove to be successful, and on the other to check if this stage of life was (or not) advantaged by the intergenerational relationships.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of this qualitative study was to identify some aspects related to successful aging and intergenerational ties during the pandemic of 2020. The interviews were applied to an almost equal number of old and young people, for a total of forty-three people. All interviewers were registered with the mobile phone, after several discussions prior to the actual registration. All participants were orally informed with regards to the aim of the study, the procedures and the estimated time required for their participation. They were also advised in relation to their rights to withdraw or bring to an end the study at any given moment. The oral consent was registered before the interview. The participation acceptance to the research was also given and registered on the phone.

All questions were structured on key themes and we have also identified a series of sub-themes that will be subjected to a future analysis. Among the themes pursued during this research we can mention: the evolution of the relationships with family or non-family members during the pandemic, the support received, respectively offered, as well as the type of help obtained and proposed, the importance of the aid, aspects related to the distinctions and similarities between the generations, reflections upon aging obtained from both generations, with accent on successful aging. A number of eighteen questions were applied and we took into account the time frame of each intervention as a very important aspect of a research conducted during the outbreak of a worldwide epidemic.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We attempted to interview a number of fifty people, both old and young, but only forty-three of them agreed to the interviews. Our sample was quite balanced, with a final number of twenty-one old people, aged sixty-five to eighty-three. As for the young people, a total of twenty-one agreed upon the analysis, aged seventeen to thirty.

The first interviewed group contained 68.20% females and 31.80% males, whereas the young

group had a composition of 61.90% females and 33.10% males. The first age group had a composition of 18.18% higher education graduates, 63.64% high school graduates and 18.18% with minimum school education. The young group contained 30% university graduates, 51% university students and 19% high school students.

Regarding the region distribution of both groups, we registered the following distribution for the old age group: 63.63% were people from the countryside and 36.37 came from urban areas. The group with young people had the subsequent allocation: 19.05% from the countryside and 80.95% from the city (HELPAGE INTERNATIONAL, n.d.).

The study lasted for a period of four months, from March up to June 2020. All interviews were transcribed and a series of major themes emerged. This first theme underlined the power of the family and non-family intergenerational links. During the analysed period the support of the family was paramount. Some of the interviewed old people benefited from help from volunteers, neighbours, acquaintances and church. The crisis that occurred exceeded the boundaries, becoming one that quickly needed an intervention, cantered upon the unforeseen occurrence (IRIMESCU, 2008; STOCK et al., 2021).

*I have very good relationship with my children and nephews; we see each other very often. Less during this period, but enough ... (OP, F1, 68 years old)*

*I have received a lot of support from both my children: they went on shopping for groceries, drinking water, cleaning products ... It was not easy but they managed ... I hope to overcome this situation as soon as possible ... (OP, B1, 71 years old)*

*My children help me with everything; they also buy my medicines. Without their support I could not make it ... it is so difficult especially now ... (OP, F4, 75 years old)*

*I am all alone and I had the chance to be helped by a very good neighbour who lives nearby ... there was also a member of an association who bought me some cleaning products ... I am truly fortunate ... (OP, F15, 79 years old)*

Despite the obvious perceived risks, the trust of the old people in the support offered by the young generation increased. We were able to observe a degree of benefit of both generations during these uncertain times, a strong sense of solidarity (STOK *et al.*, 2021). This theme opens up a series of personal perspectives and behaviours of different generations during lockdown and afterwards.

*I believe that the young generation has a very beautiful relationship with the old people, or at least this is my opinion. In times like these we have to be connected even more. (OP, F4, 75 years old)*

*A good relationship between the generations is not for granted, it is built, but you have to be willing to construct, we have all the materials. (OP, B2, 71 years old)*

*I would like to point out that old people, most of the times, are like unseen treasures, simply because they do not shine anymore ... It is my believe that there will always be a good understanding between the old people and the young ones. We proved this to be true these days. (OP, B7, 75 years old)*

*Young people should learn from the wisdom of those like me, and all my peers should learn from the agility and intelligence of the young. We were young once and we should not forget this. (OP, F12, 81 years old)*

The material and moral support offered by young people to the old generation proved to be encouraging for the development of the intergenerational relationships, although the interactions were not direct (due to the risk of infection). However, both parties experienced a sense of fulfilment. This one-to-one activity, which in fact was one-to-the-door or ear-to-ear phone conversations, due to the obvious constraints, was, nevertheless, well-received and rewarding for both the old people and the youngsters (BENSON *et al.*, 2019), especially in a time when the restrictions were very severe for the old people.

*I think I am optimistic, especially during those moments when the circumstances are distressing, or I am upset and disappointed. But I may say that my grandmother is*

*super-optimistic. She is extremely hopeful for her age and I sometimes wonder how she succeeds in being so positive although life was not quite fair to her. (YP, M2, 19 years old)*

*I am a student in the 1<sup>st</sup> year and my life is pretty good, but at the same time it is quite harsh. It is beautiful due to the new experiences, but also difficult because of the new challenges. (YP, M1, 19 years old)*

*When I am around old people I have a conscious attitude, oriented towards learning. Maybe because I lost most of my grandparents ... I am left only with the paternal grandmother. (YP, F7, 23 years old)*

The study revealed a contribution to the role-support perceived by the youngsters who have participated in the study. We distinguished a sense of commitment on behalf of the youngsters towards the old people, either belonging to their own family or non-family members, despite all odds. Some of the interventions of the young people targeted both old and lonely old people, neighbours and family friends, as well as old people from the community, either city or village. All these social interventions were determined by the complex situation of the old people, and most of them were personal initiatives, or small aid programmes for this age category, developed by different associations (COJOCARU, 2002a; COJOCARU, 2002b). In fact, this was a wakeup call for the whole society facing a crisis of the entire system.

*In my case I have always followed my family's model: we have to show respect towards all old people, not only from our families but also from outside our families. And when such fearsome circumstances occur, we have to take initiatives or join other projects ... we cannot be indifferent. (YP, M4, 27 years old)*

*I wanted to offer a helpful hand to some of my old neighbours because they are cheerful even in stressful situations. I hope they will not lose this spirit, despite this awful epidemic. (YP, F7, 23 years old)*

*My grandparents have always told me I have to be honest and helpful whenever necessary. We live very strange times; I have to do something for those in need. This is like a duty for me. (YP, F3, 19 years old)*

We would add that the constraints imposed by the pandemic were an important aspect of our study; however, the answers of the interviewed people confirmed the positive reactions of the youngsters' interventions, whether family or non-family relationships (UNDERWOOD & DORFMAN, 2004; UNITED NATIONS (UN), 2020). These ties proved to be even stronger in perilous times.

*I love to "steal" from the energy of the young people, to get infused by their vitality. I get along very well with the young generation. We are all experiencing tough moments, whether we are old or young ... I am so thankful for all the support I received. (OP, B4, 68 years old)*

*For a young person it is important to have good parents, and righteous grandparents: they can teach a child all he/she requires for a beautiful life. And a very important thing: when your turn comes, help the old people. (OP, F7, 69 years old)*

*Although there are discussions about the conflict between the generations, even if there are different mentalities, the communication is the unifying piece. We have to be proud of this new generation ... I see myself in them. (OP, F11, 77 years old)*

*We were born when there were very few cars, the letters were written by hand, there were no phones, and many others. But I would like to believe that in this old fashion of ours a young person can discover something to learn. (OP, F6, 80 years old)*

Another aspect of our study targeted the success of the volunteering activities of the young people (STAN *et al.*, 2011) who got involved in supporting the old people in need, whether family members, neighbours, friends, acquaintances or affiliates of different associations.

*The grandparents are a real support in the life of a teenager, of a young person. We have to do something for the old people we know these times ... they really need us ... (YP, F6, 21 years old)*

*Unfortunately, some youngsters do not still preserve the traditions and the moral values transmitted from generation to generation by*

*our forefathers. I have great respect for all old people, not only for my parents or grandparents. I am a member of an NGO and I helped a lot of elders during this period dominated by the virus COVID-19 ... (YP, F7, 23 years old)*

A final theme derived from our study, respectively the intergeneration connection as a valuable survival tool, is closely linked with the manifesto entitled "Intergenerationality Adds Up Lives," launched in Spain on the occasion of the "European Day of Solidarity and Cooperation between Generations" celebrated on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2020, in the middle of the pandemic (BARRAGÁN *et al.*, 2020). The affective ties that are created between the old and young generations are paramount for the existence and well-being of both age groups. Our study proved that the understanding between the generations is even stronger in death-defying times.

*Others laugh and mock the elderly, others are thoughtful and attentive, not all youngsters are the same ... (OP, F1, 66 years old)*

*There is a huge difference between generations: all they know now is to use their electronic devices, they do not care about farming the land ... but it is another world, a speedy and a wiser one. We have to love them as they are the better version of us ... (OP, F15, 79 years old)*

*I like to be around young people; I feel I'm getting younger too. But also, young people should listen to the old ones; there are many lessons to be learned from us. (OP, B7, 79 years old)*

*I think that we, as the new generation, should take a close look to the old one and see them as the models they are. (YP, F11, 22 years old)*

A deep sense of accomplishment is perceived by all old people who participated in the study. There is a power in these intergenerational relations, beyond the simple household tasks that can be fulfilled: the power of closeness, even in distressing times, when "social distancing" was the rule. This ability to be near an old person, although not in the real sense of the word, is essential. The emotional support is most of the times better and more sought than the material one. We discovered that there is a close connection between intergenerational

ties and well-being (FINGERMAN, SECHRIST & BIRDITT, 2012). Despite the difficult circumstance, old people were touched by the sustaining gestures of the families or friends/acquaintances. A percentage of 62% proved this assertion to be true. However, 38% of those interviewed stated that there is a huge generation gap and less understanding between the two age groups, sometimes even between members of the same family.

#### **What can we do? Lessons learned**

When we approach the notions of generations, we should bear in mind that the simple separation into age-group related categories is an erroneous approach. This can lead towards a negative approach of the society as a whole (AYALON & TESCH-RÖMER, 2018). In fact, the young generation will become, in just a few decades, the old generation. Avoiding such type of social disconnections, especially in public discourses and mass-media broadcast, will be beneficial for all generations.

Another aspect worth emphasizing is the inaccurate use of the term “social distancing”. The main idea was important, as it meant we should maintain a minimal physical contact for safety reasons during the epidemic. However, the general understanding was entirely mistaken, as people were afraid of all social relationships. We should have used the most adequate term “physical distancing” and underline the role of all social ties, focusing on the intergenerational relationships, which should increase and develop even more, especially in distressing times.

When an old person makes use of a social network, he or she is connected and dynamic, and all social interactions lead to healthy outcomes. This type of engagement can maintain to a low level of the chronic medical status and preserve the overall functioning of an old person, targeting successful aging. The interactions can derive from family or non-family relationships and the main goal is to avoid social isolation. The role of intergenerational ties is paramount as it is beneficial for the parties involved, aiming to buffer the physical and mental decline of old and very old people.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

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The whole population, no matter the age, was seriously affected by the COVID-19 virus and the outcome is not clear yet. The study intended to explore the family and non-family intergenerational connections during the pandemic as well as the outcome of successful aging. The results proved that although there is a strong bond between generations, especially within the members belonging to the close family, the intergenerational gap seems to get deeper. During distressing times there was no question of tackling the notions of successful, healthy or positive aging, as all activities were reduced to mere survival.

Our attempt unveiled the fact that some of the older people, especially those without family support, were left aside. However, they were helped by neighbours, friends and different associations. Their responses are as many challenges for the future intergenerational relationships, as the link between these two age groups seems to be quite fragile. Some findings obtained from the young people participating in the study proved that they were not very optimistic in relation to the intergenerational connections, and saw their own aging process quite far and not very important, given the circumstances.

As we witness a steady increase of aging population, we should pay more attention to the study of the intergenerational ties as a valuable resource to society, no matter the circumstances. Further research and analysis in this field is required in order to obtain more data related to the family and non-family relationships. New policies in this matter will protect all generations and carry on with the further development of successful aging against the harmful consequences of future epidemics.

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