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Changing Generations

Findings from
New Research on
Intergenerational
Relations in Ireland

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About this report

This report presents key findings from the *Changing Generations* study – a collaborative research project undertaken between 2011 and 2013 by the Social Policy and Ageing Research Centre (SPARC), Trinity College Dublin, and the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology (ICSG), NUI Galway.

Changing Generations addresses important issues concerning the relationships between different generations in Ireland. Against a backdrop marked by economic recession and demographic change, the focus is not only on how people of different generations live together, help each other and depend on one another in their daily lives, but also on how they perceive the social policies that support individuals at different stages of the life course. These are important features of what is termed in the scientific literature

‘intergenerational solidarity’. Practical examples of such solidarity include making provision to meet costs of health care, pensions and social welfare, and family members, friends or neighbours of different ages helping each other with everyday tasks.

In some countries, there is a growing concern about the nature of intergenerational relations. Some commentators question the status of solidarity between the generations, increasingly pitting young against old. Understanding how people think about and practice intergenerational solidarity at individual and societal levels can provide an important foundation for a constructive dialogue about intergenerational relations in Ireland. By reporting on selected findings from a unique study, the *Changing Generations* team hopes to play a role in shaping such a dialogue.

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Introduction

Discussions about the nature of relations between different generations are taking place in many countries around the world. Driven in part by the ageing of our populations, and exacerbated by the current economic recession, debates can sometimes be marked by the language of conflict. Indeed, some commentators emphasise the potential for a growing conflict between young and old, proposing a view that society's resources are increasingly being stretched by the ageing of our populations.

In the United States, the pejorative term 'greedy geezers' has sometimes been used to refer to the older generation's perceived disproportionate share of public welfare benefits. In many European countries, frequent references are made to the 'unsustainable' burden of public pension provision, and growing health and social care costs. In some quarters, the idea of conflict between the generations is being talked up by leading figures in politics and the media. In the UK, for example, current Cabinet Minister David Willetts published a book in 2010 provocatively entitled *The Pinch: how the baby boomers stole their children's future – and how they can give it back*. In similar vein, journalists Ed Howker and Shiv Malik wrote *Jilted generation: how Britain has bankrupted its youth*.

These types of debates have been slow to take hold in Ireland. However, even here the language of inequities in the distribution of resources between young and

old occasionally emerges in the public domain. In 2012, for example, the *Irish Times* carried a piece by its political editor, Stephen Collins, entitled 'Punishing the young for the sins of their elders' in which it was argued that older people were being privileged during the recession whilst the young were being punished.

A key role of research is to seek out evidence so that public debates on major topics, such as the relations between young and old, can be better informed. In countries where appropriate evidence has been collected, it is interesting to note that despite the emerging language of conflict, there is in fact little evidence of serious tension between the generations. On the contrary, research points to an abundance of mutual support for people of different ages and generations, reflecting the enduring nature of intergenerational solidarity.

To date, the evidence base relating to intergenerational relations in Ireland has been underdeveloped. This means that debates about intergenerational solidarity are necessarily limited. The *Changing Generations* study reported here sets out to provide a deeper understanding of how people of different ages and positions living in Ireland think about and practice intergenerational solidarity. Our intention is to generate the evidence that is necessary to inform an emergent national discussion about the relationship between the different generations in Irish society.

Research Methods

Changing Generations is a qualitative study. Its methods were carefully designed according to a particular tradition that lends itself to the analysis of major social questions, such as the nature of intergenerational relations. This approach is termed ‘constructivist grounded theory’. It involves asking people about the details of their lives and actions. The focus is on the meanings people attach to such details so that understandings derived from the research are grounded in people’s lived lives. The method pays close attention to how social, historical and cultural contexts shape the processes being studied.

In order to inform our understanding of intergenerational relations in Ireland, and by adding qualitative substance to an emerging body of work on ageing in Ireland,¹ we set out to collect new information. The dataset for the study comprises two elements:

- 100 interviews with ‘ordinary’ people living in Ireland
- 20 interviews with ‘powerbrokers’

¹ For instance, the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) is a large-scale, longitudinal survey of people aged 50 and over living in Ireland. It provides valuable data, showing, for example, that older people tend to transfer financial resources to younger people (see www.tcd.ie/tilda). The *Changing Generations* study allowed us to explore in more depth how these practices unfold in people’s everyday lives.

Interviews with ‘ordinary’ people living in Ireland

Having gained ethical approval, between September 2011 and July 2012, the research team conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with 100 men and women aged between 18 and 102 years. Participants were chosen to reflect the diversity of Ireland’s adult population in terms of such factors as age, gender, socio-economic status and urban or rural place of residence.

We made contact with participants through local organisations, but also ‘snowballed’ out from these contacts. As a result, this component of the *Changing Generations* sample includes people who are connected to and participating in organisations (ranging from centres for unemployed youth and organisations for the homeless, to sports clubs and active retirement associations), and also individuals who are less inclined to join groups and are potentially more isolated.

One hundred participants represents a substantial sample size in the context of in-depth interviews: this was called for due to the breadth of the issue addressed and its applicability to the entire population. Nonetheless, we did not set out to generalise across the population or across sub-groups of the population. Rather, our intention was to generate sufficient information to cast light on key issues and processes regarding intergenerational relations in Ireland.

TABLE 1: Sample of ‘ordinary’ people living in Ireland by gender, age and socio-economic status (N=100)

Socio-economic status	Men (N = 46)				Women (N = 54)				Totals
	18-25 years	26-50 years	51-74 years	75+ years	18-25 years	26-50 years	51-74 years	75+ years	
High	4	5	8	3	1	10	3	2	36
Middle	1	4	3	2	4	5	3	5	27
Low	6	4	5	1	6	6	4	5	37
TOTALS	11	13	16	6	11	21	10	12	100

Table 1 above summarises the *Changing Generations* sample of ‘ordinary’ people living in Ireland by gender, age group and socio-economic status (with the latter defined according to approaches used by Ireland’s Central Statistics Office).

In the interviews, the research team sought to avoid imposing their own, or indeed other, existing ideas about intergenerational relations on participants. Instead, accounts of give and take between people were allowed to emerge from participants’ own interpretations of their life experience.

An interview guide consisting of ten open-ended questions began with two introductory questions allowing participants to locate themselves in their life stage and closest personal networks (“tell me about the stage you are at in your life now?” and “who would you say are the people closest to you?”). Four further questions sought to tap into “give” and “take” at family and community levels:

- Can you tell me about the help and support, if any, you are receiving from other people at the moment? [receiving – at the level of the individual/family]
- Can you also tell me about any help and support **you are giving to others** at the moment? [giving – at the level of the individual/family]
- Thinking about Ireland as a whole, in what ways do you think that you are **contributing to Irish society**? [giving – at the level of the community/political economy]
- What do you see yourself **receiving from the State**? [receiving – at the level of the community/political economy]

Through probing, interviewers introduced the passage of time into each of these questions, asking participants whether they “had received” support in the past, “anticipated receiving” support in the future, and so on. There were also questions asking participants how they *felt about* giving and/or receiving support.

Solidarity at societal level was explored by asking about “Your thoughts on the State’s role in supporting the young and the old” and “After reflecting on the giving and receiving you are involved in as an individual, what are your views on the balance between the ‘give and take’ for you personally?” The interview guide concluded with two questions that invited participants to introduce something they considered relevant and to ask questions of the researcher:

- Is there *something* I haven’t asked you that you think is relevant to our topic?
- Is there *anything* you would like to ask me?

Interviews ranged from 31 to 160 minutes in duration, with the average being 72 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by professional transcription services, yielding a substantial dataset comprising of 3,737 pages of text. This component of the *Changing Generations* dataset provides invaluable information about contemporary generational practices in Ireland at the level of ‘ordinary’ people.

Interviews with ‘powerbrokers’

To complement the information arising from interviews with ‘ordinary’ people, *Changing Generations* also interviewed 20 representatives in key positions of influence across various sectors of society. Our aim was to engage leading individuals – ‘powerbrokers’ – from the public, private and civil society sectors as partners in our attempt to initiate a constructive discussion on intergenerational relations in Ireland. Participants were chosen on the basis that their role, organisation or institution featured in ‘ordinary’ people’s interviews.

Interviewing people in powerful positions allowed us to compare state, market and community leaders’ perceptions about intergenerational relations with those of ‘ordinary’ people. In the ‘powerbroker’ interviews, just as in those with ‘ordinary’ people, we used a short guide with open-ended questions that probed into the agenda of the ‘powerbroker’ or the organisation they were representing and how this related to intergenerational relations. Thirteen men and seven women were interviewed.

TABLE 2: Sample of ‘powerbrokers’ by sector (N=20)

Civil Society Sector	Public Sector	Private Sector
Head of trade union	Former university president	Head of business confederation
President of Christian charity	Former prison governor	Head of multi-national corporation
Religious leader	Former Taoiseach	Veteran entrepreneur
President of students’ organisation	Research professor	Young entrepreneur
President of youth movement	Former head of national agency	Former editor of daily national newspaper
Director of theatre company	Assistant Secretary General of government department	5
Director of older people’s organisation	Judge	
Head of older people’s non-governmental organisation	7	
8		

Table 2 above summarises the *Changing Generations* sample of ‘powerbrokers’ by sector (public, private or civil society).

Data Analysis

Data from both sets of interviews have been, and continue to be, analysed following the principles of the ‘constructivist grounded theory’ method. This means that we use the thoughts, ideas and views of study participants to construct new knowledge about relations between generations living in Ireland in 2011-12. Questions arising from the data, directions of analysis and coding have been discussed in regular meetings of the *Changing Generations* team. Insights from across the dataset are pooled and then debated for contrast and overlap and according to team members’ specific knowledge and interests. When used in other studies, this approach has been shown to be beneficial in generating new understandings of a wide range of socially relevant topics. Further information about the analytic approach is provided in scientific outputs arising from the *Changing Generations* study (selected further sources of information are listed at the end of this report).





Findings: Intergenerational Relations in Ireland

The *Changing Generations* study has collected a substantial amount of information about intergenerational relations in contemporary Ireland. It would be impossible to report on all of our findings in a single short document. Indeed, analysis of the study's dataset will continue for several years to come. However, drawing on some of our initial analyses, this short report strives to convey a number of key messages arising from the analysis to date. This fits with our goal of informing emerging public debates about intergenerational relations in Ireland.

Findings relating to six major themes are presented in this report:

- Abiding strength of intergenerational solidarity at societal level;
- Unfairness located outside the intergenerational sphere;
- Intergenerational solidarity keeping families afloat during the recession;
- Socio-economic status and gender substantially shape intergenerational relations at household and community level;
- Socio-economic status shapes attitudes towards care and support;
- 'Powerbroker' perspectives.

Where we present information from interviews, please note that all names used are pseudonyms in order to protect participants' identities.

Abiding strength of intergenerational solidarity at societal level

The *Changing Generations* study yielded little evidence of intergenerational conflict, either within the private or the public sphere in Ireland today. Older people were almost universally perceived as a deserving group that merited more and improved transfers and services from the State.

Noelle Lynch, a 19-year-old retail worker, exemplifies the general view among the younger research participants

that older people's benefits and free health care are deserved, should be universal, and must not be cut:

Noelle: [Older people] get the pensions but they work[ed] for it, it is their money. The way I see it, they paid enough money over their life time into the State so they should get something back. I think the government cutting their pensions...is a disgrace. That is absolutely disgusting.

I: **Your view is that at that age you deserve...**

Noelle: They have worked all their lives...They should be able to sit back and have no financial worries. They should enjoy life.

I: **Say the medical card [free primary and hospital care]...it was given to everyone over seventy, regardless of their income. Would you support that or do you think some should be means-tested?**

Noelle: Anyone over seventy should get a medical card...[An older person] who is middle class, no illnesses...deserve[s] a medical card in case anything ever did go wrong. Then you could have someone who is well off or you could have someone who appears to be well off [but] could have a hell of a lot of illness [who] really needs that medical card. [Without free health care], all their money would go on treatment.

Noelle, a low-paid teenager, makes a strong case for universalism in older people's entitlements. She identifies several ways in which all older people, regardless of private resources, currently have or could in the future develop needs that the State is best placed to meet. In line with all younger participants, Noelle sees no need to juxtapose public expenditure on older people with expenditure on younger people: in fact, with the exception of only three of the 100 participants, the idea of taking from one generation in the interest of another does not feature across the *Changing Generations* sample.

The only exception to strong approval and call for further supports for older people was constituted by some *older* people from high socio-economic groups; well-off older adults within this group stated that some benefits they enjoy (in particular, free medical care) were excessive:

[The medical card] should be means tested...that blanket [cover for] over seventies was a magnanimous gesture... without too much thinking behind it...I think you have got to look after yourself from the cradle to the grave.

Martha O'Flynn, 69,
high socio-economic status

Older people who sought improvements in old-age-related benefits also tended to call for improved supports for (some) younger groups. Tommy Keeley is an example of an older rural dweller whose sense of solidarity cuts across both social class and geographical boundaries as he expresses strong support for increased investment (through education) into the life chances of children and young people in deprived city areas:

It is an old cliché, but it will cost more at the end of day if those kids are not looked after properly...inner city and rundown areas...need extra help. That is where the big effort should be to eradicate a lot of that old stuff and try to bring everyone up a bit...I think it is terrible to see that they were going to cut down on teachers in those areas... [Helping children and young people in deprived areas] would be my priority.

Tommy Keeley, 71,
middle socio-economic status

Tommy does not perceive any need to 'trade off' between younger and older people's entitlements, but rather expresses strong support for both. In short, our research suggests that surveys and media portrayals that pit one generation or age group against another are using ideas that are far removed, indeed abstract, for 'ordinary' people in Ireland for whom the idea of generational conflict at societal level is alien.

Unfairness located outside the intergenerational sphere

For participants in *Changing Generations*, the source of perceived injustice and unfairness in Irish society lies entirely outside the 'intergenerational sphere'. Instead, critique is directed at two different groups: politicians and (highly paid) public sector workers on the one hand, and recipients of some means-tested welfare benefits on the other. For example, while lone parents are one of the groups most at risk of poverty in Ireland, many participants were sharply critical of this particular group. These perceptions were especially acute for Valerie Jenkins, who was expecting her first child at the time of interview and contrasted her own family's financial struggle with the perceived entitlements of lone parents:

...if I wasn't married and I was pregnant and [husband] wasn't living with me...I would get everything paid for me. I wouldn't even have to worry about working. Because I have friends who have kids...outside of wedlock and they get everything like, they are able to go out every weekend...it does make you very jealous and very, what's the word, like you would be very bitter towards them and it is terrible that we should be bitter towards the people themselves; it is the Government that are doing it.

Valerie Jenkins, 33,
middle socio-economic status

In addition to lone parents, other more amorphous groups of social welfare recipients were portrayed as abusing the system, or not making any effort in return for the State supports they receive:

...my idea, and the way I was reared, was that you went out and got a job, you [paid] some tax and you fell back on the system when you needed it. That's when you got your money back. So it was almost as if you were saving for a rainy day by paying tax. Whereas there's many who just think 'sure someone else

is paying it and I'm entitled to it'. And I don't agree with that and some people are brought up that way.

*Gary Hogan, 36,
middle socio-economic status*

The apparent lack of solidarity towards a perceived 'welfare-abusing' group has no intergenerational dimension except the belief, expressed by Gary, that a culture of 'welfare dependency' is passed on from one generation to another within some families.

Another significant perceived fault line within Irish society is the purported difference between the social rights and work ethic of public sector workers on the one hand and that of private sector workers and/or the self-employed on the other. This view was articulated strongly by many of the private sector workers and entrepreneurs within the *Changing Generations* sample:

...the public service pay awards, again that is something that I have an issue with. I know several people in the public service who tell me that they are way overstuffed and that it is a different world to the private sector. I have always worked in the private sector. I am somebody who has invested in businesses and the private sector has taken the brunt of what has happened to us over the last couple of years.

*Barry Allen, 43,
high socio-economic status*

The perceived fault lines in Irish society are therefore located between those portrayed as 'undeserving' welfare recipients and contributors to the economy/ deserving welfare recipients on the one hand, and between 'hard-working' private sector employees and entrepreneurs and 'pampered' public sector workers and 'corrupt' politicians on the other. In contrast, accounts of intergenerational transfers through the welfare state are characterised by expressions of solidarity. 'Upward' solidarity towards older people is particularly marked among young people who belong to low and middle socio-economic groups.

Intergenerational solidarity keeping families afloat during the recession

The context of the recession underpins much of the evidence gathered by the *Changing Generations* study. We found that family generations are providing high levels of support for one another through periods of unemployment, emigration and in meeting repayments to banks. For instance, Matt Coyne, a retired participant, told us that he is providing financial help for his adult children. When the interview turned to discussion of financial transfers from older to younger generations he remarked:

That's where a lot of my disposable income is going. I have an unemployed son who has a family and I have a daughter that I had to support. It's my pleasure and my privilege to help my children, but I worry about my son because he has a family.

*Matt Coyne, 70,
high socio-economic status*

While some families have the resources to help younger generations through the economic downturn, others do not.

Emigration is another option available to people who see few job prospects in Ireland. The traditional pressure valve for rising unemployment in Ireland, emigration has increased exponentially since the current recession began. By 2012, Central Statistics Office figures suggest that emigration was responsible for slowing population growth to 0.2 per cent per annum, despite increasing life expectancy and a baby boom. Plans to emigrate emerged spontaneously in interviews with many younger people in the *Changing Generation* study. When asked about her expectation of receiving from the State in the future, Rosalind Keeling stated that she sees no future in Ireland:

I would be gearing up for leaving Ireland, so I don't expect to be keeping my contract with the State. And I don't expect to be paying any tax back to them either when I do eventually start working. I think they are realising that now as a lot

of people are leaving...Most people are going to Australia aren't they?

*Rosalind Keeling, 28,
low socio-economic status*

Many younger people who do decide to stay cite family as the main reason for weathering the recession in Ireland. Some younger people are very disillusioned with government policy; they feel they have been left with unsustainable debts, which they will carry for much of the rest of their lives. Majella Carey expresses a frustration shared by many participants of similar socio-economic status and life stage:

I try to be law abiding, and I think sometimes you just get no thanks for that...It's like they [the Government] reel you in and then they just take the lifejacket off you and throw you into 10 feet of water.

*Majella Carey, 32,
middle socio-economic status*

Even for middle and high socio-economic groups, the extent of financial insecurity and debt arising from the current recession means that adult children, who had well-paid jobs during better economic times, are now being forced to ask older generations in their families for financial support. In many instances, this family-level intergenerational solidarity is maintaining younger generations through the recession.

Within our study group, those who described being separated from their family by either distance or family breakdown illustrated the toll that the absence of such support networks meant for them. For instance, Glen Giddens expresses feelings of isolation and depression since the breakdown of his marriage:

I: So, life is good at the moment?

Glen: I don't know about that. I'm pissed off and lonely. I don't have much contact with the world outside of my job and my hobby. I'm quite a shy person anyway.

I: Yes, it's hard.

Glen: I'm not happy about my separation, it wasn't my idea.

I: That's hard. Is that recent?

Glen: It's about two years now, so it's recent enough really. It still feels recent to me so no, it's not good, no. I'm very stuck for money as well and that's really hard.

Another participant, Terry Chong, an undocumented migrant worker who has lived in Ireland for 22 years, became homeless when he lost his job and his relationship broke down. Terry's English is limited, and his case is unusual. However, his story clearly demonstrates what happens when an individual lacks intergenerational family support.

I: So the first question is can you tell me about the stage you are at in your life now?

Terry: My life. Oh, hard life you know. Before – OK, when I got job no problem, now very hard.

I: Very hard is it? Go on, tell me why.

Terry: I homeless three week and (names homeless charity) take me up.

I: You were homeless for three weeks?

Terry: Yes, job sinking. Three years ago like. Now I am working.

I: So what happened, you lost your job is it?

Terry: Yeah and children – separate – everything.

I: You were separated is it, your marriage...

Terry: No married like. We got kids together like, three like. I don't know what happened, she just walked out, I mind the kids.

I: Oh I see.

Terry: And she don't want the kids.

I: She doesn't want the kids.

Terry: I see my kids every week.

I: Very good. So, where do they live now?

Terry: With my ex-aunty.

Terry goes on to express his deep desire to set up a new home with his three children. However, poverty, social norms and his undocumented status mean he cannot claim custody of the children he supported financially for years.

Socio-economic status and gender substantially shape intergenerational relations at household and community level

The *Changing Generations* study shows that socio-economic status has an important influence on how people experience 'give' and 'take' between generations. There are also significant differences in how men and women experience giving and receiving of help and support.

In households where economic resources are most scarce, children grow up observing parents, especially their mothers, sustaining the family with meagre resources. Many suffer strain and ill health as a result. This shapes the kinds of help and support younger generations contribute into the household once they leave school. Young people from low socio-economic status families often described actively seeking to alleviate the strain witnessed on older family generations. Stacey Kennedy describes how any money coming into the household is often pooled, no matter how little it is:

I have come home nights and listened to my mother crying over money...I just see her struggling so much like...I get paid [social welfare] the Tuesday and she gets paid on a Thursday, so if we are going shopping and she runs low or anything I just give her a few of my bob and then she will give it back to me on the Thursday. We help each other out that way. But it's not actually [me giving], because she is giving it back to me.

*Stacey Kennedy, 19,
low socio-economic status*

Having observed how tight household budgets are, young people in low-income households are acutely aware of the fine line that separates their presence in the household being a contribution or drain on family resources. *Changing Generations* data suggest that young people of lower socio-economic status often close down options, such as further education, international travel or job seeking, that are taken for granted by their peers in middle and higher socio-

economic groups. Options are also closed down by a commitment to 'stay close by' to be available as a supportive resource to their family.

Help and support flowing between generations can take the form of care, material goods or money, time and labour helping out with chores, as well as space in the form of housing. Gender differences feature in the provision of care. Both women and men *do* caring, but there are differences in the type of care work they are involved in. Care can be described as having two components. '*Caring for*' refers to looking after someone's needs or 'hands-on' care. *Caring about* encompasses emotional support and showing concern for the person. Our analysis shows that women do most of the care labour entailed in *caring for*, while men's care work tends to be confined to *caring about*. This is reflected in the caring roles people engage in at both family and community level.

In socially disadvantaged communities, community involvement served to offset impacts and risks attached to poverty and forms of social exclusion. In areas with higher levels of advantage, such involvement serves the function of enhancing one's social capital through networking and building skills. Participants involved in giving care, mentoring or coaching at community level described a dynamic of 'getting from giving'. Many of these practices represent solidarity at the 'intermediate' sphere of the local community and have a strong intergenerational dimension.

Older participants involved in sporting clubs or community organisations with younger people, such as Jimmy Lannigan (aged 67) and Tommy Keeley (aged 71), described how their contact with younger club members had a 'protective' factor in keeping them feeling young, respected and engaged.

Jimmy's opening statement in the interview was that he does not feel his age because he is in contact with youth all of the time. Extensive giving to clubs at community level is rewarded by the regard returned by young club members and the opportunities to mentor them and eventually see them 'blossom' into confident, civic-minded young people. Jimmy referred to his involvement in supporting young people in terms of a moral duty towards those whose early life chances are limited by having a broad focus on personal development through sport.

There is nothing better than bringing a lad in. He walks in and he can hardly put one foot in front of another and then you see him twelve months later and he can stand up Also you can see, especially when they come in, a lot of them will have self-esteem problems. You can see that all of sudden they start to [stand tall]. ... I would give them the benefit of my experience. Not just as a [sports] coach and all but as a person, you know what I mean? I would like to think that no matter; they can come and talk to me about anything. We have a child protection policy and all here. If you want to talk or you have any problems or anything, come and see me. Not just about [this sport]. I love [this sport] but I know it is not the B-all. There is a long, long life after [sport].

*Jimmy Lanigan, 68,
middle socio-economic status*

There were important gender differences here. Men tended to have volunteered in organisations and been involved in ‘giving’ in a public, organised or ‘institutionalised’ way. Women tended to have been involved in caring for people within the extended family or at community level, for instance for neighbours or through meals-on-wheels (delivered mainly by not-for-profit organisations). Also, women were less likely to be involved with much younger generations. An exception was Rose Jones (aged 59), who participated in a community development organisation and engaged with young people through that. Her ‘talk’ of engaging with young people at voluntary/community level is strikingly different from the accounts of the community-active men, as she orientates this around her (intergenerational) family roles (for example, by helping in the homework club also attended by her grandson).

Socio-economic status shapes attitudes towards care and support

Socio-economic status is also key in shaping attitudes towards care and support. Families with more economic resources can ‘contract out’ elements of intergenerational solidarity, in particular care of both

children and older family members. Expectations regarding future family care from adult children and their families were particularly low among middle and high socio-economic status older adults whose adult children and children-in-law were in employment:

[My daughter] has a house, a partner and two kids. She will have to get back to work. She is working as it is, three/ four days a week...At night time [my son] would come out for a tea break. He would leg it out here for 15 minutes or a half an hour...He hasn't time to bless himself. He goes home then to three kids, [age] two, four and six... I see a pressure on them that they have to work. They have no time. I don't think there is much time.

*Eileen Garvey, 74,
high socio-economic status*

Low expectations regarding family care reflect well-off older adults' observation of the heavy investment of time (and money) by their adult children and children-in-law into their grandchildren, and also the ability and inclination to pay for care from private resources.

The situation of families with lower incomes is markedly different. Participants with limited economic resources are also less likely to move away. As family members settle in close proximity and have less cash to spare, there is a constant flow of direct help and support between generations. This appears to apply especially to women who live in socially disadvantaged communities, in which parents, grandparents, siblings and extended family members are often around to assist with childcare when women have young children:

All my family live [in this area]. My Da lives down there and my three sisters live down there and my aunty lives down there so... We were always, we're a close family so if I wanted to do anything or if I did want to lie down when [the kids] were younger or whatever, my ma would say 'yeah' or my sisters, like there was always somebody...like everyone helped everyone.

*Vanessa Magee, 35,
low socio-economic status*

The lives of women across family generations become closely enmeshed through such processes. In a context where ‘we are all looking out for each other’ across the life course, inter-reliance between generations creates the conditions for elder care becoming part of a progressively evolving set of care relations. It is taken for granted that ‘we take care of our own’:

We would obviously mind [my mother if she needed care]. We would take care of our own. We don’t have to be paid to take care of our own family...If we ever move out and she is at home and she gets too old, one of us will take her into our home.

*Michelle Morgan, 19,
low socio-economic status*

While many sons express strong affection towards their parents, they have not been socialised to adopt such ‘unquestioning obligation’. Brian Lyons, for instance, is in his 20s and feels free to pursue his education and career abroad, thanks to his family’s wealth which means that care can be ‘contracted out’:

I: If you do project forward...and quite extensive care needs [of your parent], how do you think they will be met?

Brian: ...money or whatever that the family kind of says is there should...cover that. I mean...the family is sort of wealthy enough...there is quite a bit there [to fund care].

Amongst families in high socio-economic categories, the older generation expects little, preferring to see the younger generation focusing on their careers and caring for their own children. Such opportunities are more limited for people in low socio-economic groups, because care and support must often be provided directly.

Our research suggests that a process we term ‘generational observing’ is centrally shaping intergenerational solidarity in Ireland today. Older people observe family practices in the middle generation, and the resourcing of children in particular, claiming a large share of their adult children’s resources, including time. As a result, they adjust their expectations for

help and support from adult children downwards. The generational orientation is, therefore, increasingly ‘downward’, with all generations focused on investing into children.

‘Powerbroker’ perspectives

Interviews with twenty leaders and decision-makers from across the public, private and civil society sectors revealed a general view that solidarity between generations needs more attention from Government, employers and other stakeholders. Here we draw out two main findings. First, powerbroker participants emphasised the pressing need to raise public awareness of issues relating to intergenerational solidarity and demographic ageing. Second, they suggested that solidarity between generations and other groups can play a key role in securing Ireland’s future.

Need for greater public awareness of role of intergenerational solidarity across the life course

Powerbrokers identified key issues that required greater public awareness of the largely invisible role that intergenerational solidarity already plays in how we organise social welfare across the life course. For example, the trade union leader remarked on the need for everyone to be aware of how the sustainability of pensions is dependent on intergenerational solidarity at the societal level:

P: ...for example in the area of pensions. There is a distributional settlement to be achieved between people who are still working and people who are retired...It is a huge problem now with pension schemes, you see, because...nearly 80 per cent of them are under-funded...you could find a situation where somebody...has worked for 40 years almost and is just about to retire, might end up getting nothing out of the deal. Whereas the person who is retired, would have their entire pension protected...There is a huge social crisis about to unfold – I would say in relation to the pensions system...

I: Do you think there is a public awareness of that?

P: No, not at all.

*Head of trade union,
interviewed July 2012*

Many powerbrokers see an important role for individuals to plan for the future, particularly in relation to financial provision, education and health. Many powerbrokers felt that individual responsibility came first, but they also argued that more could be done by the State to help people manage critical transition points in their lives (for instance, the State could better support people when moving from primary to secondary school; leaving the parental home; starting a family; or moving from work to unemployment or retirement). The leader of an anti-poverty charity argued that individuals would be better resourced to take care of themselves if the State took a stronger position on raising public awareness of the need to plan for the future through education, investing in a pension or saving for a rainy day:

Awareness [of the need to plan for the future] is a big issue and the State can play a big part in this. Other than that, people have to manage the transition from one stage in their lives to another themselves. It is a big change, but people need to be educated to manage the change.

*President of Christian charity,
interviewed October 2012*

Solidarity between generations and other groups will play a key role in shaping Ireland's future

As in interviews with 'ordinary' people, powerbrokers reported no sense that conflict exists between young and old in Ireland. Rather, many saw solidarity between generations and other groups as a key attribute for Ireland's future. When asked about her organisation's role in facilitating give and take between generations, one civil society leader sought to highlight the importance of trust, particularly in terms of Ireland's austerity programme and its potential to erode solidarities:

Whilst we think of trust in interpersonal terms, in actual fact in terms of a functioning society, trust between citizens and politicians, between institutions and the individuals those institutions are supposed to serve is what's been most undermined in recent times and...a narrative is shaped which begins...if it were allowed to gather momentum, to demonise particular groups. So, we see ourselves (names organisation), trying to make that picture more nuanced all the time.

*Director of older people's
non-governmental organisation*

While the older powerbrokers remarked that the current recession was not as bad as the situation that prevailed in Ireland during the 1950s or 1980s, the younger generation, knowing they carry the debt from this recession, feel differently. For instance, the head of a multi-national corporation (aged under 40) sees the current economic crisis in terms of its future impact. In response to a question asking about the greatest challenge currently facing Ireland, he remarked:

Private and public debt and that's different from the eighties [1980s] because it doesn't just go away...I can't really think of another developed country where that has been the case especially not with a currency that is unlikely to be devalued. That's a really, really big weight around our necks.

Head of multi-national corporation

Despite the reality that the debt burden impacts differently on young and old, the *Changing Generations* study found no evidence of conflict between generations in interviews either with 'powerbrokers' or 'ordinary' people living in Ireland. In practice, the opposite was found. Our interviews provide overwhelming evidence of family generations supporting one another in numerous ways, pointing to the persisting strength of family solidarity across generations. This is echoed by findings that emphasise a strong sense of intergenerational solidarity at the broader societal level. Such high levels of solidarity between generations bode well for Ireland's capacity to maintain social cohesion even in a severe recession.





Key Messages from Changing Generations

The *Changing Generations* study has set out to provide the necessary evidence base that can help to stimulate a constructive and meaningful national dialogue about intergenerational relations in Ireland. Our study is ongoing and promises to yield further important insights about the state of intergenerational relations as it progresses. Based on the findings reported here, four key messages emerge that should help to shape future debates about the relationship between generations in Ireland. These messages are relevant to all who have a stake in Irish society, including policy makers, practitioners, researchers and ‘ordinary’ people who live in Ireland.

KEY MESSAGE 1:

There is little evidence in Ireland of intergenerational conflict, either within the private or public spheres

Regardless of age, gender or socio-economic status, people living in Ireland practice and value intergenerational solidarity in every aspect of their lives. The general view among younger participants in *Changing Generations* was that older people’s welfare entitlements, in the form of pensions and health and social care, are deserved, should be universal, and must not be cut. Where older people sought improvements in old-age-related benefits, they tended to back this up with a call for improvements in supports for (some) younger groups.

KEY MESSAGE 2:

There is considerable evidence that intergenerational solidarity within families is helping people in Ireland to survive the recession

For most people in Ireland, family is the central resource that is helping them to cope with effects of the recession. This is an abiding strength of Irish society. However, it also places people in rather different positions. While most people live in supportive families, which act as the first line of defence when times are hard, life can be tough for people whose families cannot provide support in the form of time, advice and money. Reliance on the family is, therefore, also a source of inequality in Irish society.

KEY MESSAGE 3:

Socio-economic inequality, not intergenerational difference, is a more significant cleavage between groups living in Ireland today

Practices of exchanging help and support between generations are strongly shaped by social class in Ireland. In families of high and middle socio-economic status, the older generation expects little from adult children who they perceive as ‘very stretched’ meeting extensive demands of careers and raising the next generation. The ‘middle’ generation accepts this opportunity to invest most of their resources in raising children, whilst providing emotional support more often than direct help and care labour to older generations. In lower socio-economic groups, interdependencies between generations are more often reflected in the direct provision of care and support. The welfare state context matters too: restricted availability of, and low public expenditure on, long-term care is one of the factors driving private expenditure on care by those who can afford it and recourse to family care by those who cannot.

KEY MESSAGE 4:

Commentators should think twice before making a case for actual or impending conflict between the generations

Evidence from 100 in-depth interviews with ‘ordinary’ people and 20 interviews with ‘powerbrokers’ points to the abiding strength of intergenerational solidarity in Ireland. The *Changing Generations* study has found no evidence to support the idea that relations between generations in Ireland are marked by conflict or indeed that such conflict will emerge in the future. Rhetoric about the potential for conflict is at odds with how generations think about each other in Ireland. Such rhetoric is best avoided, since it does not resonate with the close ties and solidarities that characterise everyday life for members of Irish society.

Selected Further Reading

Publications from the Changing Generations Study

Conlon, C., Carney, G., Timonen, V. & Scharf, T. (2013, forthcoming) 'Emergent reconstruction' in grounded theory: learning from team-based interview research, *Qualitative Research*.

Timonen, V., Conlon, C., Scharf, T. & Carney, G. (2013) Family, state, class and solidarity: re-conceptualising intergenerational solidarity through the grounded theory approach, *European Journal of Ageing* DOI 10.1007/s10433-013-0272-x.

Timonen, V., Scharf, T., Conlon, C. & Carney, G. (2012) Intergenerational solidarity and justice in Ireland: towards a new national dialogue, *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* 10, 3, pp. 317-321.

Other Publications

Arber, S. & Attias-Donfut, C. (eds) (2000) *The myth of generational conflict: the family and state in ageing societies*. London: Routledge.

Binstock, R.H. (2010) From compassionate ageism to intergenerational conflict, *The Gerontologist* 50, 5, pp. 574-585.

Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Howker, E. & Malik, S. (2010) *Jilted generation: how Britain has bankrupted its youth*. London: Icon Books.

Kohli, M. (2006) Aging and justice. In R.H. Binstock & L.K. George (eds) *Handbook of aging and the social sciences* (6th edition). San Diego, CA: Academic Press, pp. 456-478.

Saraceno, C. (Ed.) (2008) *Families, ageing and social policy: intergenerational solidarity in European welfare states*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Willems, D. (2010) *The Pinch: how the baby boomers stole their children's future – and how they can give it back*. London: Atlantic Books.

Further Information

Further information about *Changing Generations*, including details of new publications and presentations, is available from the project's website: <http://www.sparc.tcd.ie/generations>



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