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1-21-2021

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Recommended Citation

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Faculty Scholarship. 70.

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Intergenerative Transdisciplinarity in “Glocal” Learning and Collaboration

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Received 17 December, 2020; **Revised** 20 January, 2021; **Accepted** 20 January, 2021

Available online 21 January, 2021 at www.atlas-journal.org, doi: 10.22545/2020/00152

In this report, authors from North America, Africa, Europe, and Asia share commonalities and differences in the lessons we are learning from COVID-19, especially about scholarship and collaboration. We represent different ages and disciplines hence our focus on intergenerational perspectives and transdisciplinary considerations. Our work is intergenerative—that is going “between to go beyond” by connecting creative sources of culture and focusing on the emergent, that is responding to changes in the context in which we work. And importantly in our view, we will point beyond whatever the next phase of COVID or even the next pandemic brings to a more hopeful, sustainable, and flourishing future, even as we face mounting social, health, and environmental challenges.

Keywords: Transdisciplinary, intergenerative, glocal collaboration, COVID-19.

1 Introduction

Students’ Collaborative Research through International Partnerships (SCRIP) is an innovative transdisciplinary effort to encourage research on COVID-19. In this paper, we intend to both celebrate and expand the intellectual and value space surrounding the SCRIP program. Specifically, we wish to highlight the importance of *intergenerative* relationships (across ages, communities, disciplines, art forms, nations, and species) to social change. We will do this by sharing examples of communities of practices that co-create stories and deepen relationships. In this space-time field of possibilities and probabilities, we have the opportunity to imagine new visions of our individual and collective humanity, as well as our connections to the planet, in order to transform our civilization. Intergenerativity, as a concept and practice, can help the emergence of what we call cosmopolitanism with greater attention to social and environmental justice for today and tomorrow. Transdisciplinarity is a concept and methodology that helps us to explore boundaries among human fields of endeavor and hence innovate for social change.

In this paper we first briefly describe the context of COVID-19 that complicates our responses to the pandemic, share in more detail what we mean by intergenerativity, and illustrate our ideas with examples of on-the-ground projects in individual communities and countries. Our illustrative projects cover four continents and various multi-age learning relationships.

2 Context

COVID-19 is occurring in the context of other wicked problems like political unrest, economic challenges, social injustice, and climate change, all of which are complexly interlinked. COVID-19 has amplified and made more visible social inequities around the world. It has exposed and exacerbated injustice both within and between countries where health systems struggle to care for people fairly, especially those with conditions that make them more vulnerable. These vulnerabilities include not only chronic diseases but structural conditions that marginalize people like ageism, poverty, or racism (International Monetary Fund 2020) [1]. The United Nations Secretary-General has described inequality as the defining challenge of our era, which the COVID-19 crisis has thrown into even greater relief (United Nations DESA 2020) [2].

COVID-19 is also making it more clear how our health and our planet’s health are inextricably intertwined. Scientists remind us that pandemics emerge from our damaging ecological footprint and exploitation of the environment. The impact humans are having on the planet is putting us at greater risk of other future pandemic diseases and threats to the health of the public. Human and animal diseases are intimately linked and exacerbated by ecological change with decreasing both habitat and animal diversity (Kessel 2020) [3].

3 Intergenerativity

The word intergenerative signifies blending and going *between* many different forms of creativity to design a flourishing *beyond*. Intergenerative community building aims to construct a meaningful fusion of conversations and experiences among often disconnected sources of human creativity (e.g., generations, disciplines, or nations) that inspires new possibilities and innovative actions (George et al., 2011 [4]; Whitehouse and Flippin, 2017 [5]; Whitehouse and Whitehouse, 2020 [6]; Bodiford and Whitehouse, 2020, [7]).

An essential aspect of intergenerativity is the recognition that we need to examine our current use of social constructs particularly in our relationships to relationships between humans and nature. Humans are a part of nature, not separate. Intergenerativity itself is a new (eco)social construct. Human culture is part of our response to the natural environment which includes humans and other living creatures. Finally, part of being intergenerative involves critical thinking about what it means to learn more deeply, including evaluating evidence of all kinds and how we use evidence to take action. Each of the following stories from around the world illustrate attitudes and behaviors of being intergenerative.

There are several resources we like to engage with that help to spark intergenerativity.

- ***Attending to relationships*** - Intergenerativity invites a specific focus on the relational space-in-between. When we place an explicit focus on relationships among humans, other species, and the world around, we are able to value and engage the strength of differences and diversity. As we do so, we magnify relational responsibility – in which we are focusing on and responsible to the process of co-creating meaning we are making in each moment, engaging in deeper listening and attunement, and increasing empathy towards each other.
- ***Embedding in community*** - Community and societal change require new, more comprehensive and inclusive approaches. Intergenerativity is thus embedded in community, based upon values of human dignity and equity.
- ***Thinking intergenerationally*** - Intergenerational approaches engage multiple forms of difference such as age, knowledge, wisdom, experiences, skills, perspectives, and connections that create senses of time that extend generations before and ahead (Indigenous Ideas of Seven Generations).
- ***Expanding global connections*** - Intergenerativity recognizes nation state borders as social, political, and historical constructions and seeks to expand our interconnectedness for collective knowledge production and social action.
- ***Finding the spirit of and in global and local collaboration*** - Seeing work and play together as vitalizing.
- ***Valuing of difference*** - With a focus on this between-space, differences can be seen as a relational resource for transformative potential that helps us create new futures. Diversity in all aspects of nature and culture are celebrated.
- ***Encouraging*** the quest for beauty in nature and in our own aesthetic enterprises as human beings. Seeking beautiful relationships in organizations.
- ***Conceptualizing the involved (eco)systems*** - Intergenerativity highlights the interconnectedness of social and ecological systems. A deeply rooted sense of interconnectedness of human and non-human life is a precondition for ecosocial flourishing.
- ***Considering deeper ethical issues of relationship to nature and responsibility for the future*** - Intergenerativity invites a relational ethic of responsibility and responsiveness that is value-embedded and recognizes the consequences of actions. Each choice is accompanied by a moral responsibility to not cause harm.
- ***Shifting to a multispecies perspective*** - If our relationships and even our own identities are social and dialogically constituted what does this look like in relationship to non-human life? How do we create opportunities to engage in this relationality with nature?
- ***Recognizing death is a part of life*** -Appreciating our mortality is key to spiritual health.
- ***Creating collective wisdom through experiential learning*** – Deeper learning needed for individual and social transformation.
- ***Learning to create and share new inspiring stories of genuine hope*** – Narrative helps system thinking and integrating values.
- ***Critically examining the need and nature of evidence*** - Considering what counts and combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

4 Collaborating Countries through Their Students and Advisors

4.1 Africa - Community-based Responses to Build More Resilient Food Systems

(by Arthur Namara Aarali and Sylvia Asimwe)

During COVID, group meetings by older persons in Uganda have been disrupted. As a result, loneliness, isolation, and neglect increased. The community reported increased deaths among older persons due to a lack of access to health care services, especially those with non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like diabetes and hypertension. Starvation due to lack of food was also reported. Health Nest Uganda (HENU) is a non-governmental organization whose work is firmly embedded in the community. It has a long history of working intergenerationally and in collaboration with older persons groups. In response to the challenges older persons and their families were experiencing, HENU mobilized different stakeholders locally and globally to respond. They worked collaboratively with Entebbe Hospital and the President’s representative in the area to deliver NCD drugs to older persons within their community. In addition, HENU is working with a volunteer from the US to build the electronic data capability so that they do not face the challenge of lack of information in the future and to empower community volunteers who are retired health workers to participate in refills for the drugs.

HENU also combined resources with the Lions Club of Entebbe to purchase basic food staples and soap for the most vulnerable older persons and the grandchildren they are raising. Older persons decided to develop more sustainable solutions to these challenges and have created a project to do intergenerational training in backyard gardening of traditional nutritious foods in order to ensure food security and income generation. Unfortunately, older persons were not able to access loans for their project as they are considered risky borrowers by banks in Uganda. As a result, older persons started their own saving scheme. They contributed their own money to a SACCO (Savings and Credit Cooperative Organization) account. They also raised money from global partners to engage in impact investing, where the community is the steward of investing funds for social impact, with a “heart rate of return”, investment return firmly rooted in a philosophy of partnership, relationship, and love.

4.2 Canada - Post-humanism and Multi-species Collaboration *(by Vanessa Vegter)*

Vanessa Vegter is a doctoral student at the University of Calgary in Canada exploring multispecies entanglements and rural mental well-being. That is, she is interested in the co-constituting (together constitute each other and the world) interspecies relationships that feature in the understandings and practices of mental well-being among rural citizens. For many rural people, animals – and varied ways of relating/orienting to them – meaningfully “co-constitute” daily life (together constitute each other and the world). In counselling psychology and related mental health fields, animals have served as intervention tools to enhance conventional forms of therapy and are typically described in terms of their utility in reducing symptoms of mental illness or enhancing mental health. Such perspectives on human-animal relationships and mental health are arguably anthropocentric (regard humans as central and most important) and fail to account for the significant and varied human-animal relationships that comprise some rural lives.

The “animal turn” is a scholarly movement, inspired by a posthumanist decentering of the “human” and acknowledgment that all elements (human-nonhuman, living-non-living, material-discursive) are inextricably linked and mutually influential. The animal turn represents a shift in how animals are viewed (i.e., no longer reduced to their utility), but remains an undertheorized area in counselling psychology. If rural people are always already interconnected with animals in their environments, supporting everyday mental well-being in rural communities requires a greater appreciation for these multispecies entanglements.

For Vanessa, shifting to a multi-species frame was prompted by her draw to critical forms of inquiry (and a myriad of contributing scholars)- which raise the questions of who can know and what is knowable. If humans are not the only beings capable of knowing, and thus are not the only subjects or objects of inquiry, then the “tectonic plates of knowledge building” must undergo yet another shift – one that might better account for the complexities of multispecies realities. Vanessa is curious about the possibilities

enabled when we shift our view from blinding human exceptionalism to one that recognizes humans and animals as inextricably linked, particularly in a field (counselling psychology) that has been so firmly held by the omnipresent grips of traditional humanism. Some scholars that have prompted her curiosities and informed her approach include Haraway, Barad, Braidotti, Mol, and Tsing, among others. In particular, Vanessa has been inspired by Haraway's way of querying how critters "render" each other "capable" and what this means in terms of our "response-abilities" (abilities to respond).

4.3 Puerto Rico - Changing Culture through Art and Play (by Paloma Torres-Davila)

Art has been valued for its aesthetic, economic, cultural, and social attributes, but above all, art is a means by which people, communities, and societies can express their experiences and identities, and therefore better understand and connect with another. Art therapy uses different methods (plastic art, visual art, photography, dance, music) for a person to express their lived experiences in ways that are not daunting and allows them to observe, process, and learn from it. Paloma Torres-Dávila is a community organizer and therapist. In Puerto Rico, she has collaborated with multiple artistic organizations (dance and theatre companies, art teachers, and museums) that have supported communities to express their experiences of hardship, trauma, and thriving through catastrophic Hurricanes Irma and María in 2017. During the earthquakes of early 2020, support brigades built cots for refugees in tents and each person painted their own cot. This allowed for processing of emotions as well as redefining the narrative of something initially seen as a rescue item to their own bed and support. Most recently during COVID, through virtual means, Paloma is facilitating creative writing and story work as a way for people living with cancer and their caregivers to process their experience and fragility in these times, as well as create a support network through the process.

4.4 China - Using Data Science to Creating Bridges to the Future (by Wenyue Xi)

During the 2020 Google Summer of Code, a project called "Human-in-the-loop Frame Blends Nomination System" unfolded under the auspices of the Red Hen Lab¹ with Mark Turner as the lead mentor on using large multimodal data sets of media programs (like television news programs) to understand how human beings think about the future by blending cognitive frames, for example, using metaphors. Based on Berkeley FrameNet's frame tagging system, this project explores computational solutions with machine learning algorithms for frame blends identification, especially in conversation about the future. Combined the merits of manual annotation and computational algorithms, this Human-in-the-loop system supports linguists and cognitive scientists to study frame semantics. In this cross-disciplinary study using qualitative and quantitative techniques, attention was also paid in one part of the project about how to use data science in the humanities, and how such blends can contribute to the transformation of both science and the humanities.

This GSoC project could potentially elevate how people use cognitive frames and frame blending to understand the past and think about the future. Making connections through history may provide insights into patterns of potential social change. Taking the COVID pandemic as an example, we can "blend our present condition in facing the COVID-19 virus with the ancient story of what happened to Rome, and how Rome responded, in dealing with the plague" (Red Hen Lab, 2020 [8]). Frame semantics, especially the study of frame blends, can contribute to comparing similar events that have happened and will happen again in the future. The computational approach brings knowledge from a different perspective than those offered by historical narrative accounts alone.

4.5 Sweden - A social Democracy in Action (by Patrik Standar)

Sweden, as an example, has focused on an open approach to COVID-19. Instead of regulations, Sweden focused on strong recommendations. This approach has been both heavily criticised and praised both inside

¹<https://www.redhenlab.org/home>

and outside of Sweden. However, this approach has also been misunderstood. Sweden has a long tradition of social obligation, and Swedes overall trust their government (at least to have the general populations best in mind). The Swedish constitution severely restricts how the government can force their population to act. However, to what extent the constitution really regulates this has been debated. When the Swedish state claims that, they have strong recommendations for the populace, they expect the Swedish people to understand the urgency. There is no space to debate the strengths and weaknesses of this open approach, neither is enough data available yet to say what methods will have been the most efficient. Data is also difficult to compare as different regions and countries have different cultural and political values that are seen as fundamental to their societies.

Whatever method we use to approach wicked problems it all boils down to one important principle, the need for people to change. Not only must we change individual habits but also create real structural change that will in turn require rethinking old beliefs and values, this change process is ultimately of learning. Peter Jarvis defines learning as [9]:

“The combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person - body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, meaning, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively, or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person’s biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.” (Jarvis 2009)

This viewpoint captures not only the intergenerational but the intergenerative.

5 Conclusion

Intergenerative approaches that allow people of different ages, cultures, ethnicities, nations, disciplines etc. to interact should be seen through the lens of the need for fundamental changes in society. It is an approach that aims to create collaborative learning opportunities for personal and social development. The social aspect here is key, we are never truly alone and we always interact with other beings whatever they are there physically, mentally or just figments of our imaginations. By using and creating spaces for intergenerative practice, it is possible to ask people to challenge their own values and grow in relationships with others. Intergenerational and broader intergenerative approaches create learning spaces where the whole person-based relationships can change. It is about growth, not in an economic but rather spiritual and cultural sense. It is about collective learning and hopefully collective wisdom.

5.1 A Final Act and Invitation

In this COVID-19 era we have created a digital space using Zoom called InterHub² as part of the Presencing Institute GAIA (Global Activation of Intention and Action) project to collaborate across many of the projects mentioned in our article and many others as well. Our aim is to bring people together to discuss how to work and play together to change the world by changing ourselves and our communities. We are pleased to be collaborating with SCRIP, the Taos Institute,³ the International Center for Transdisciplinary Research (CIRET),⁴ and others in this dialogic space. Please check us out and join us.

Author Contributions: Research team members equally contributed.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declares no conflict of interest.

²InterHub Presencing Institute - Hubs - InterHub - intergenerational and transdisciplinary futuring - <https://www.presencing.org/community/hubs/interhub-intergenerational-and-transdisciplinary-futuring>

³The Taos Institute - <https://www.taosinstitute.net/>

⁴<http://ciret-transdisciplinarity.org/>



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About the Authors



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