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Alex Fanghanel, [Ernestina Coast](#) and Sara Randall

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Mapping Intergenerational care across households in the UK: Analysing proximity, propinquity and resources in the 'tacit intergenerational contract'

Alex Fanghanel, UCL

Ernestina Coast, LSE

Sara Randall, UCL

Introduction

Intergenerational exchanges of care and support form the backbone of informal care arrangements in the UK. Against a background of cuts in public spending and an increasingly aging population, the centrality of familial or kinship care, in the provision of everyday or practical intergenerational care (including providing housing, personal care, doing the shopping, providing childcare etc) is an ever more pressing question for policy-makers and ageing professionals.

At present, flows of intergenerational care are difficult to capture precisely in surveys enumerated at the household level. In 2011 in the UK, the ONS defined the household as 'one person living alone or a group of people (not necessarily related) living at the same address, who share cooking facilities and share a living room or a sitting room or a dining area'. Within this definition of the household, recognition of transfers of care which transcend the household are lacking. This has implications for recognising the financial, residential and temporal (amongst others) obligations which might tie households together and impact in a very real way on the day-to-day well-being of people at a societal level. Instead, the use of surveys such as ELSA, enumerated at the individual level, have proved more appropriate and helpful when it comes to recognising the complexity of the ties that bind people within and beyond households in the provision of everyday or particular intergenerational support and care. Indeed, in order to appreciate the extent of the ways in which this care is provided, the forms it takes and when, how and where it occurs, it is necessary to take a closer look at the networks of intergenerational relationships which emerge in the way in which people talk about how they give and receive care and support.

Here, we explore what a more fluid conceptualisation of the household might offer the household survey in order to better garner understanding of the operation of intergenerational care that household members are implicated in. This paper explores how geography (proximity), affective ties (propinquity) and wealth (access to resources) impact on tacit intergenerational expectations play a part in the way in which intergenerational relationships operate in order to shed some light on to their construction and evolution both within and beyond the household unit.

Taking Stock of Intergenerational Relationships

The dynamics of intergenerational exchanges have been explored from a number of disciplinary directions (Vanderbeck, 2007, Bonvalet & Ogg, 2007, Bengtson & Roberts, 1991, Lloyd-Sherlock & Locke, 2008). These multiple perspectives have afforded some insight into the operation of care and support across the generations and have enabled us to consider the importance of the ways that care and support flows up, down and across the generations. Preliminary data collected through

interviews with policy-makers and local and national level, as well as with ageing organisations reveal that as yet, there are few ways of capturing intergenerational relationships of care which transcend familial or household boundaries in national or local level household surveys and it is this lacuna that this paper addresses, through qualitative analysis of purposively sampled household surveys in order to examine the operation of intergenerational care in and out of households.

We explore how proximity – the spatial closeness between people – and propinquity – the emotional closeness between people – and access to financial resources – intersect to influence normative familial expectations (e.g. that children will contribute to their elderly parents' care, that grandparents can be relied upon to look after grandchildren) intertwine to weave a tapestry of intergenerational care that transcends both familial kinship ties and the household itself. In order to do this we draw on data collected as part of a collaborative ESRC/ANR grant which examines the extent to which household surveys are appropriate tools with which to measure exchanges of care and support across the generations.

Methodology

The data used to inform this paper were collected between February and November 2011 and comprise of 36 interviews with households. As part of these interviews, issues of intergenerational care and support, household care arrangements and interactions with family members or non-family members, either living inside or outside of the household were explored. Participants were asked to answer the following questions (amongst others);

- Who lives in this household with you?
- Is there anybody who lives here normally who does not live here at the moment?
- Is there anybody living at this household who usually lives elsewhere?
- Do you receive any help or support from anyone who may or may not live in this household?
- Do you provide any help or support to anyone who may or may not live in this household?
- If you had to turn to somebody for help in an emergency, who would you be able to ask?

These questions formed the starting point of discussions about intergenerational and inter- and intra- household support and through these interviews we have been able to gather insights into the array of ways that care and support operates. Once analysed we created genographs which plot the relationships of care and support across the generations and identify the proximity and propinquity of the care-provider to the care-receiver to examine the impact that such geographic or emotional ties have on the provision of care and support within and outwith the household, if at all. These genographs take as their starting point the household in question, and the relationships between the people who live in it, then link the household to other households with whom the participating household has intergenerational relationships of care and support. We then plot the exchanges of care and support as they are affected by familial or non-familial ties, the directions of the care and how these intergenerational relationships of care are impacted by geography (proximity), affective relationships (propinquity) and assumptions about care provision between family and non-family members.

Findings and Analysis

Whilst analysis of these relationships and exchanges is still on-going at the time of writing, our preliminary findings, which will be concluded in early 2012, suggest that the reality of intergenerational exchanges of care and support transcend familial and household boundaries and are, in fact, more fluid and heterogeneous than existing data collected at household level might suggest.

Conclusion

The genographs enable us to better appreciate the terrain of how intergenerational care can operate in the UK, how the household is, in fact, implicated within this and provide a way to think through care, and how it is accounted for, beyond and within the household. We will present a couple of case studies which exemplify this complexity before concluding by reflecting on the reality of the tacit intergenerational contract, how it operates, how it might be exploited at policy level and, on the other hand, how relationships of care and support which are not accounted for at policy level might be protected. The work presented here offers an alternative way of understanding and accounting for the operation of inter- and intra- household generational support and care, whilst keeping the household as the focal point of the analysis.

References

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