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## INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND COOPERATION IN SLOVENIA<sup>11</sup>

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### Abstract

Population ageing and the current crisis require a new solidarity between generations. With low birth rate and the prolongation of life, the classic intergenerational relationships in Slovenia are quickly changing, therefore it is demanded from policymakers, that in cooperation with experts and civil society, they re-define them. The purpose of the research is to study and analyse intergenerational connectedness by way of reviewing the current situation. The prevalence of older generation is increasing more and more. Older people often encounter problems like loneliness, depression, loss of motor and functional abilities. They are also prone to various illnesses. For elderly, loneliness especially can represent a common problem which makes their past rich lives empty and unworthy. On the basis of the survey conducted, activities that could bring together different generations are suggested. The study focuses on two groups: the young and the old generation. The questionnaires were designed for each of these groups separately. Thus we managed to compile the needs and wishes of both target groups. The complementary knowledge of our study contributes to a new level of quality in the field of intergenerational cooperation and health improvement. Moreover, it contributes to a

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better integration of lonely elderly people as well as young people deprived of physical social integration due to the negative influence of advanced technologies.

**Keywords:** intergenerational relationships, intergenerational cooperation, crisis in Slovenia.

**JEL:** A13, C12, C15, H12, M14

## 1 Introduction

In most professional literature, the old age is defined as a period in one's life beginning at the chronological age of 65, however, several researchers have claimed that this boundary should be moved towards the age of 70 or 75 (Russi Zagožen, 2001; Čehić, 2011). Defining the old age is a problematic issue as there are great differences between the individuals of the same chronological age. For this reason, chronological age is distinguished from functional age which indicates the objective condition of an individual at a certain age and from psychological age which is related to an individual's personal perception of their own age (Russi Zagožen, 2001).

The average life expectancy is increasing and the number of the elderly is growing. However, for the most part, the elderly are not helpless individuals but an active and increasingly demanding part of the population, which is due to better life and health conditions. Representing a great part of the population reflects in greater social power, which is the main reason why more and more attention is paid to the third generation. In order to fill their needs, many clubs and associations have been established and education programs introduced. They are also special newspapers aiming at this group. If the average age really rises up to 90 in the future, as some predict, we may witness a century of the third generation, which will cause severe economic, social, family and other problems that will be hard to resolve (Pečjak, 1998; Čehić, 2011).

The third age can be very pleasant and enjoyable if we plan it with care and do something for ourselves and our health. As the quality of life increases, the life expectancy increases as well. Therefore, it is essential for the elderly to remain functionally independent to the highest degree possible. Regular and adequate level of physical activity can be beneficial. (Videmšek, Cvetković, Mlinar, Meško, Štihec & Karpljuk, 2008). By practising sports and other physical activities in groups, the elderly can also improve their social contacts and avoid isolation and loneliness which is nowadays a very common distress for people at that age. When people get retired they have more time for themselves, nevertheless, this could also lead to isolation and a rapid impairment of life functions.

It is of utmost importance to prepare for the third age before it arrives. One should plan his future activities and keep in touch with his generation as well as with the young. This way, the transition from working life to retirement can be smoother and in several cases less stressful as a retired person becomes aware of their inconvenience.

In some Slovenian cities there are different day centres that provide educational, cultural and sports activities where the elderly can spend their free time (Čehić, 2011). There they socialize, meet new people and plan different group activities, like dance classes, excursions and other activities. Day centres should provide appropriate space, time, care and social environment. This is where the elderly socialize with their peers, get help and support for solving their problems and spend quality free time.

## **2 Problems of the elderly (Physical and mental health issues of the elderly)**

The elderly often suffer from chronic diseases as cardiovascular diseases, respiratory diseases, extremities dysfunction, cancer and diabetes. (Accetto, 1987; Videmšek, Cvetković, Mlinar, Meško, Štihec & Karpljuk, 2008). In addition to this, the elderly suffer from geriatric syndromes or diseases which are almost exclusively associated with the old age, like urinary and fecal incontinence, bedsores, memory disorders (e.g. dementia), osteoporosis and other (Turk, 2004).

In the research conducted in Slovenia, it was established that high blood pressure is the most common health issue in the elderly, followed by spinal dysfunction, joint diseases and high cholesterol (Videmšek, Cvetković, Mlinar, Meško, Štihec & Karpljuk (2008). The Slovenian annual medical report from 2001 also showed that the elderly in Slovenia

most often ask for medical help for the following reasons: musculoskeletal system diseases, connective tissue diseases, cardiovascular diseases, digestive diseases and injuries (Ramovš, 2003). According to global epidemiological data, chronic degenerative diseases and diseases of the sense organs are the most common in the elderly. It is estimated that 55% of people aged over 65 have severe degenerative changes in joints, 35% to 40% suffer from cardiovascular diseases, 45% have high blood pressure, approximately 40% have sight impairment and 25% has hearing impairment (Tang, Chen & Krewski, 2003). However, the incidence of all of these diseases increases rapidly with aging as well as the possibility for more diseases occurring at the same time. (Videmšek, Cvetković, Mlinar, Meško, Štihec & Karpljuk, 2008). In 2004, health problems were the most common reason for the elderly to be placed into homes for the aged; as much as 76% of the elderly were put into a home for the aged because of their health condition. Second most common reason is old age (7.3%), while other reasons are mostly of social or personal nature (16.7%) (Turk, 2004; Skupnost socialnih zavodov Slovenije, 2010).

Older people often suffer from loneliness which is a common distress in this period of life. The elderly that are lonely start to feel empty and see their past as unworthy even though they have had rich life-experiences. We often hear them say: »It wasn't worth it!«. They isolate themselves and start to lead more and more miserable existence (Ramovš, 2003). An older person that lives a life of idleness and loneliness is at first bored and often angry for no good reason, while later he becomes passive, indifferent and inactive. This apathy leads further on into the loss of

liveliness and interest and deterioration of mental and physical functions (Stoppard, 2003).

### **3 Intergenerational cooperation**

A man lives his life as an individual, as a member of micro-social groups and as a member of macro-social communities. An individual's social functioning strongly depends on the quality of his cohabitation in all three micro-social groups: family, job and private company (Ramovš, 2003).

When the time of retirement arrives, one normally stops socializing at job and starts socializing while engaging in hobbies and other activities which often depend on private company. These contacts may be lost if one do not strive to keep them. Unfortunately, nowadays, there is also less socializing of the elderly within their families; especially when

one of the partners passes away while their children and grandchildren leave, and tend to neglect them due to their busy life-style (Čehić, 2011). This often results in isolation and loneliness of the elderly.

Traditional social networks (families, relatives and neighbourhoods) are nowadays much more functional if the individuals inside them decide to participate in programs educating them about intergenerational cooperation, aging and old age. This way, they can easily perceive completely new forms of cohabitation between generations and new forms of personal relations which will contribute to a better and more joyful life and better cohabitation between generations. The middle and young generation, but especially younger pensioners, often decide to take some voluntary work keeping company to an old and lonely person or to create and lead an intergenerational group for living a quality old age life based on self-help. This is done together with their social learning course for better cohabitation with older family members or for the quality of their own old age after retirement. Pensioners often spontaneously decide to give voluntary lessons to less successful pupils or to participate in other social activities together with younger generations (Ramovš, 2003).

The purpose of the research is to study and analyse intergenerational connectedness by way of reviewing the current situation.

## **4 Methodology**

### **4.1 Sample**

Our sample includes 166 young and 122 elderly people. The young are defined as persons aged 15 to 29, while the elderly are defined as persons aged 60 and above. The group consisting of young people includes 32 males and 134 females – among them there are 13 secondary school students, 49 graduate students, 81 employed persons and 23 persons who are either unemployed or taking part in professional training before employment. Their average age is 22.8 (SD = 6.17). 82 young



Having the ability to understand (comprehensive)	14 (10%)	38 (26%)	60 (42%)	24 (17%)	8 (6%)	144 (100%)	144	166	2.8	1.0
Capable	0 (0%)	17 (12%)	60 (42%)	52 (36%)	14 (10%)	143 (100%)	143	166	3.4	0.8
Experienced	1 (1%)	3 (2%)	10 (7%)	51 (36%)	78 (55%)	143 (100%)	143	166	4.4	0.8
Not willing to do anything	23 (16%)	46 (32%)	49 (35%)	22 (15%)	2 (1%)	142 (100%)	142	166	2.5	1.0
Overburdened	13 (9%)	45 (32%)	43 (30%)	31 (22%)	10 (7%)	142 (100%)	142	166	2.9	1.1
Possessing a vision	16 (11%)	46 (32%)	48 (34%)	24 (17%)	8 (6%)	142 (100%)	142	166	2.7	1.1
Sociable	2 (1%)	13 (9%)	61 (43%)	52 (37%)	14 (10%)	142 (100%)	142	166	3.4	0.8
Stubborn	1 (1%)	14 (10%)	46 (32%)	49 (35%)	32 (23%)	142 (100%)	142	166	3.7	1.0
Predictable	3 (2%)	6 (4%)	59 (42%)	55 (39%)	19 (13%)	142 (100%)	142	166	3.6	0.9
Economical	0 (0%)	3 (2%)	25 (17%)	57 (40%)	58 (41%)	143 (100%)	143	166	4.2	0.8
Embittered	9 (6%)	26 (18%)	60 (42%)	38 (27%)	9 (6%)	142 (100%)	142	166	3.1	1.0
Critical	2 (1%)	16 (11%)	42 (30%)	60 (42%)	22 (15%)	142 (100%)	142	166	3.6	0.9
Hard-working	2 (1%)	13 (9%)	40 (28%)	59 (41%)	29 (20%)	143 (100%)	143	166	3.7	0.9

The young believe that the characteristics of the elderly generation include, above all, experience (M=4.4), economy (parsimony) (M=4.2), responsibility (M=3.9), diligence (M=3.7) and stubbornness (M=3.7).

The elderly generation is considered more economic than the young generation, who used to live in the era of prosperity (Finančni trgi, 2011), and this may be the reason that the young people see the elderly generation as more economic. The elderly generation is considered to be the generation of workaholics as work is of great importance to them (Horvat, 2012). The elderly are considered more experienced by the young since they are older and more experienced, and therefore possess more knowledge.

Reviewing the analysis of the answers to other questions related to cooperation between the two generations, we established that the young believe that the experiences of the elderly are beneficial to the society and that the elderly help preserve traditional values. The young assess work with the elderly mainly (59 %) as positive since they believe that it presents an important experience in young people's life. 27% of the young respondents believe that work with the elderly encourages the elderly people to solve their problems independently. Most of the young (59 %) would like to spend more time in the company of the elderly, spending their free time

doing variety of activities, preferably going for a walk and doing some sport (114 answers) as well as taking part in social games (61 answers).

The young generation suggests that the intergenerational cooperation should take place in workshops where the elderly would teach the young such skills and activities that used to be practiced in the past: crochet, needlework, bobbin-work, baking, manual skills;

in educational seminars (where the elderly could tell the young what life used to be like, and by doing so they teach the young to be grateful for what they have now), on the other hand the young could help the elderly with the use of information technology; by active socialising during various activities (hiking, trips, social events, cultural events or performances, etc.); in debate clubs discussing various topics; in courses (e.g. photography, drawing, foreign languages, etc.). It is also suggested that regular meetings of local districts (quarters) should be called, where all members of a community could take part and where the goals shared by all community members and fulfilling their needs (also the need for intergenerational cooperation) should be set or determined, and the budget should be allocated.

In Table 2, the opinions of the elderly generation about the young are presented. The elderly assessed the young generation's characteristics on the 1–5 scale, where 1 signifies the lowest rate of a certain characteristic and 5 the highest rate of a certain characteristic.

**TABLE 2. ASSESSMENT OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE YOUNG GENERATION**

Assess the characteristics of the elderly generation on the 1–5 scale (1 – the lowest rate and 5 – the highest rate)										
Questions	Answers						Valid	No. of items	Ave- rage	Stand. deviat .
	1	2	3	4	5	Total				
Having the ability to understand (comprehensive)	0 (0%)	3 (4%)	14 (19%)	35 (49%)	20 (28%)	72 (100%)	72	77	4.0	0.8
Capable	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	15 (21%)	35 (49%)	20 (28%)	72 (100%)	72	77	4.0	0.8
Not willing to do anything	17 (24%)	18 (26%)	25 (36%)	8 (11%)	2 (3%)	70 (100%)	70	77	2.4	1.1
Overburdened	4 (6%)	12 (17%)	20 (28%)	27 (38%)	9 (13%)	72 (100%)	72	77	3.3	1.1
Possessing a vision	2 (3%)	11 (15%)	21 (30%)	27 (38%)	10 (14%)	71 (100%)	71	77	3.5	1.0
Having the ability to understand	0 (0%)	3 (4%)	14 (19%)	35 (49%)	20 (28%)	72 (100%)	72	77	4.0	0.8

(comprehensive)										
Capable	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	15 (21%)	35 (49%)	20 (28%)	72 (100%)	72	77	4.0	0.8
Not willing to do anything	17 (24%)	18 (26%)	25 (36%)	8 (11%)	2 (3%)	70 (100%)	70	77	2.4	1.1
Overburdened	4 (6%)	12 (17%)	20 (28%)	27 (38%)	9 (13%)	72 (100%)	72	77	3.3	1.1
Possessing a vision	2 (3%)	11 (15%)	21 (30%)	27 (38%)	10 (14%)	71 (100%)	71	77	3.5	1.0
Having the ability to understand (comprehensive)	0 (0%)	3 (4%)	14 (19%)	35 (49%)	20 (28%)	72 (100%)	72	77	4.0	0.8
Capable	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	15 (21%)	35 (49%)	20 (28%)	72 (100%)	72	77	4.0	0.8
Not willing to do anything	17 (24%)	18 (26%)	25 (36%)	8 (11%)	2 (3%)	70 (100%)	70	77	2.4	1.1

The elderly mainly believe that the young generation is, above all, characterised by the ability to understand (AS=4.0), capability (AS=4.0), sociability (AS=3.6), pretentiousness (AS=3.5) and stubbornness (AS=3.5).

According to some sources, the young are very self-confident, strong-headed, self-trusting, prone to experimenting in their sex life as well as with drugs. Most of them were born in the era of the internet, computer and other technology. They adore electronic music and they are also very talented and innovative (Horvat, 2012). The elderly generation also see the young as capable, able to understand and strong-headed. They believe the young are our future, and the future should be different from the present.

Reviewing the analysis of the answers to other questions related to cooperation

between the two generations, we established that the young are considered by the elderly as our society's future, the future which should be different from the past. They relate them to energy, beauty and health, hankering for independence, dependence on modern technology as well as with a difficult economic situation.

Work/engaging with the young is assessed or considered as positive by the majority of the elderly (61 %) since they believe that work with the young represent an important investment. 23 % of the elderly believe that work with the young encourages the young to solve their own problems. The majority (66 %) would like to spend more time in the company of the young, and they would like to spend their free time in various ways, most willingly going for a walk and engaging themselves in sports activities (46 answers), going on holidays (28 answers) and educating themselves (26 answers).

The elderly generation suggests that the intergenerational cooperation should take place within various sports activities (e.g. hiking); trips; various workshops and



courses; debate clubs; camps; social games; by the young generation providing help with every-day chores, e.g. taking the elderly by car when they go on errands, helping with their work in the garden, keeping in touch on a daily basis, etc.

## 6 Conclusion

Sport activities or other activities should be part of intergenerational cooperation. Any form of exercise which brings together different generations (e.g. pensioners and preschool children doing exercises together) is particularly convenient and can bring joy and satisfaction to both generations. Hiking excursions for pupils and the elderly (together) would also be convenient. Pupils would take care of the elderly while the elderly would teach them about nature, historical facts and nature conservation. Middle generations and the elderly could organize competitions together – e.g. competition in badminton, bowling, chess, etc. Another way for different generations to get together is also intergenerational camping.

It is necessary to establish what the new relations and relationships between generations are, since sustainable development is feasible only in a genuine contact and coexistence of all generations. To coexist or cohabit peacefully and to lead a quality life, a positive communication and willingness between generations to achieve this goal, as well as a more active role of neighbourhood, local and other communities are required.

Coexistence and solidarity depends on the cooperation of all three spheres, i.e. the state, which possesses power instruments, the market, which possesses capital, and the civil society, which possesses the quality of solidarity. To exit the crisis, the roles of all the above mentioned spheres and the roles of the young and the elderly generations should be balanced. As the society is becoming more and more aware of this important fact, it encourages intergenerational cooperation and coexistence by implementing various programmes for the young and for the elderly, by which it enhances the active role of the elderly, develops the creativity of the young and connects generations since the quality of life and the future of the coming generations depends on these activities.

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