Age-Segregation in Later Life
An Examination of Personal Networks

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(2004)

Introduction

Margaret Mead (1970) argued that in societies where change is slow and imperceptible, knowledge and culture are passed on from older generations to younger ones. In these traditional settings, she suggested, it is essential for older people to teach newcomers how to function in the society. In contrast, in modern societies where social and technological change is pervasive, it also is necessary for younger people to teach the old. If older people do not interact with and learn from younger people, they risk becoming increasingly excluded from contemporary social developments as they age through later life. Older people may not need or want to know everything that younger ones know, but acquiring some new knowledge is essential to avoid becoming marginalised in later life. The most common example of what the young can currently teach the old is how to use email and the Internet, but many other areas of new knowledge created by cultural change could be described. In either traditional or modern societies, therefore, age-integration is needed if all generations are to be productive participants in the society. Of course there are additional reasons why it would be mutually beneficial for older and younger people to interact with each other. Older people may have resources that could promote the well-being of younger people (and vice versa). The absence of interaction, or age-segregation, promotes ageism and insensitivity to the challenges faced by others who differ in age. In general, it seems likely that age-integration promotes a more civil society. In this paper we take the perspective of older people and explore the level of their integration with, or segregation from, younger adults.

One way to examine the level of age-segregation of older people from younger ones in contemporary society is to examine the age-composition of personal social networks. How diverse are the ages of those with whom individuals interact most frequently and most significantly? Age-integration at the level of personal networks is relevant because network members play an important role in integrating individuals (of any age) into the larger society. Through network members, information and ideas are shared, new ways of thinking and living are discussed, and advice is exchanged. Network members exchange social, emotional, material and informational support that promotes well-being. Through networks individuals are recruited into social movements and organisations, which provide further opportunities for developing personal bonds (Marsden 1988; McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001). Thus it is likely that older people whose personal networks lack younger members may be excluded from full participation in the society in which they live.

Forces Promoting Age Homophily in Networks

The social forces that have produced the institutionalisation and age-related stages of the life course over the past two centuries are also likely to have led to widespread age-segregation in
social networks (Kohli 1988). Consider, for example, the structured social contexts from which network members might be drawn. A structured pattern of age-segregation begins early in life, for educational institutions use single years of age to group most children throughout childhood, while nurseries and day-care anticipate the age-homogeneity of the school environment from soon after birth. Sports and music for children are often tied to school, and result in age-segregated activities after school and on weekends. Churches imitate schools by establishing Sunday schools, where children are taught in age-homogeneous groups. Laws forbid children to participate in work settings. Specialised doctors see children; specialised therapists counsel and work with children; and special courts deal with children. The separation into homogeneous age groupings is further promoted by television, movies and other forms of entertainment that target children of particular ages. Quite similar institutional forces now largely segregate adolescents and young adults to age-homogeneous networks and activities (Lofland 1968). In these ways a culture that emphasises age-homogeneous groups is established early in life, so that one expects to find a deficit of older people in the personal networks of children and young adults, and vice versa. In somewhat similar ways, the age-segregated social institutions encountered by older people encourage age-homogeneity in personal networks through later life.

Work organisations tend to exclude people past age 60 or 65 from a significant life activity, excluding them from one mechanism that promotes integration and some cross-age interactions with younger adults. Old people continue to be excluded from mainline educational settings (Hamil-Luker and Uhlenberg 2002). When efforts are made to involve older people in educational activities, they often operate from an age-segregationist principle, with separate programmes for old people. Many older people report that participating in church or other religious activity is their most significant social activity outside the family.

But in church people often are grouped on the basis of age for activities, so older churchgoers interact with other old people, and their social networks remain age-homogeneous. Participating in a senior centre or other age-restricted organisation may increase social activity and help expand social networks, but also reinforce age-segregated interactions. Similarly, nursing homes, retirement homes and retirement communities promote extreme age-segregation towards the end of life. In many ways, therefore, older people encounter a society that restricts opportunities for developing age-integrated personal social networks.

Although age-composition has seldom been the focus of studies of personal social networks, several report interesting findings on age homophily (and homogeneity) in networks. A recent review of the literature on homophily in social networks concludes that age consistently creates strong divisions in personal networks (McPherson et al. 2001). In his studies of Detroit men and Northern California residents, Fischer (1977, 1982) reported striking age-homogeneity in non-kin friendship networks. Indeed, 72 per cent of the close friends of the Detroit men were within eight years of their own ages. Similarly, Feld (1984), analysing the Northern California data, found that approximately half of all non-family associates with whom respondents were sociable or discussed problems were within five years of their age. In her analysis of friendship structure, Verbrugge (1977) reported that half of the friends identified by Detroit men occupied the same 10-year age category as the respondent, as did over 40 per cent of the friends of respondents in a German survey. And, as noted above, the GSS study of discussion-partner networks found most non-kin partners to be similar in age (Burt 1991; Marsden 1988). In general, studies have found age-homogeneity in non-kin networks across respondents of all ages, although it is stronger among younger than older people.

As already suggested, however, much less age-homogeneity is observed in kin networks (Burt 1991). This is not surprising, because
older people often identify the relationships with their adult children, who tend to be 20 to 40 years younger than themselves, as very important. The 1988 National Survey of Families and Households showed that two-thirds of older women in the United States who had children visited a child at least once a week, and over 80 per cent had weekly contact with a child (Uhlenberg and Cooney 1990). Not only do inter-generational ties involve a high level of communication, but also these relationships are generally reported to be emotionally close and significant for instrumental support (for a review see Lye 1996). Furthermore, other kin (parents, aunts and uncles, siblings, cousins, grandchildren, and nieces and nephews) of diverse ages are frequently cited as significant network members. Thus one would expect the age-heterogeneity of personal networks to vary by the number of kin who are included in the network. The primary factor affecting the number of kin in a network is kinship composition. Other family-related events may affect how often older people include kin in their personal networks. In particular, partner status and partner history are relevant, e.g., adult children tend to intensify social interactions with a recently widowed parent who had been in a first marriage (Lopata 1996; Wolf, Freedman and Sildo 1997), and an earlier parental divorce reduces the likelihood that adult children interact frequently with their fathers in later life (Doherty, Kouneski and Erickson 1998; Dykstra 1998; Furstenberg, Hoffman and Shrestha 1995; Jong Gierveld and Dykstra 2002; Lye et al. 1995).

One would expect, of course, that the probability of a network including younger non-kin would increase with the total number of non-kin in the network. More interesting, it is likely that older people have more opportunities to recruit network members of diverse ages when they are active in social contexts that include younger adults. Therefore we anticipate that employed people are more likely than the retired to identify younger non-kin as network members. Similarly, attending church regularly or engaging in volunteer activities might promote greater age-integration, if these occur in age-heterogeneous contexts. The age-composition of the neighbourhood could also be a factor influencing the likelihood of interacting with younger adults. In addition to these structured settings for recruiting non-kin network members, current and past family context may also be relevant. Marital and partner status might be related to the size and intensity of non-kin network relationships. Older adults who are embedded in a large kinship circle, including a partner, children, children-in-law, grandchildren and siblings, need to invest a lot of time in maintaining these social and supportive relationships. In general, therefore, they have less time and energy than others to invest in a varied set of non-kin contacts (Dykstra 1995). Some widowed older adults who live without a partner may intensify contacts with their children, but others may revive latent bonds with others. The latter are to an extent building a new social network of people outside their own household that includes non-kin relationships. Indeed, success has been reported for a special training programme to support widowed older adults to begin new relationships (Stevens 2001). It is not yet known how age-heterogeneous the new relationships formed by widowed persons are.

Adults who divorce and remain without a partner may also compensate for the reduction in the size of the social networks. Personal contacts with new friends, with people 'in the same boat,' may be established in order to rebuild a social network. Those who never formed a partner union and the childless are however in a different position and do not experience the same transition. They often rely on siblings, friends, neighbours and other kin and acquaintances (such as colleagues and co-members of sport and hobby clubs) to maintain social participation and integration (Dykstra 1995). The never-married especially have been found to have a varied network of long-standing non-kin relationships (Wagner, Schütze and Lang 1999).
This interpretation of the literature on networks, kinship and ageing leads to several hypotheses. First, we expect that young adults are under-represented in the personal networks of older people. Second, that the presence of young adults in the personal networks of older people becomes increasingly rare at the more advanced ages. Third, it is expected that a disproportionate number of the younger network members of older people will be kin rather than non-kin. Fourth, the number of living children should be positively associated with having younger kin network members, but not with having younger non-kin network members. Fifth, the likelihood of having younger non-kin network members is higher for those who are employed, attend church, do volunteer work or live in age-integrated neighbourhoods. Sixth, the likelihood of having younger non-kin network members is higher for currently widowed and divorced older adults, who may have renewed and broadened their personal networks, than for those who are currently married, who tend to maintain their past couple-oriented social contacts. Seventh, the larger the number of friends, neighbours and other non-kin in an older person’s network, the more likely that there will be young non-kin in the network.

As this study is exploratory, we also include in the analysis two variables of interest but without hypotheses of their effect, namely sex and the educational level of the respondent. One might expect older women from these Dutch cohorts to have less non-family social interaction than men, and hence to have less age diversity in their non-kin networks, but it is also possible that women possess superior social skills that allow them to bridge age barriers more easily than men. Higher levels of educational attainment are associated with higher levels of geographical mobility, so may reduce the breadth of network members that develop over time in a small community. But more education could also be associated with less ageism and greater acceptance of cross-age relationships.

Discussion

Despite the potentially significant implications, previous research has not examined the extent to which people in later life regularly interact with young adults. Using data from The Netherlands, this study has provided evidence on the extent to which older people have age-integrated or age-segregated personal social networks. Further, it has explored the factors associated with diversity in the age-composition of the networks of older people. Several interesting and provocative findings have emerged, and it is hoped that they will stimulate further research.

First, there clearly is a deficit of young adults in the networks of older people. People aged 55–64 years have significantly fewer young adult network members than would be expected if age were not a factor in selection, and the deficit grows even larger for people over the age of 65 years. For example, those aged 75–89 years had only about one-fifth of the number of network members aged less than 35 years that would be expected with complete age-integration. In fact, 68 per cent of the population older than 75 years did not identify any network member younger than 35 years of age.

Second, an overwhelming proportion of the younger network members identified by older people were kin. About 90 per cent of the network members aged less than 45 years old were reported by people past age 65 years were kin, and a large majority of older people reported no non-kin less than 45 years of age in their networks. Most neighbours, friends and other non-kin associates of older people were old themselves. Thus the most crucial determinant of having younger network members is the size of the kin group, and especially the number of living children. Family building in the young adult phase of the life course turns out to be the major determinant of age-integrated or age-segregated personal networks in late life.

Third, although no segment of the older population appeared to be well integrated with
younger adults outside of family relationships, several factors did increase the likelihood that an older person had some significant cross-age interactions. These included participation in organisations that had members of different ages (e.g., work and volunteer settings), and living in a neighbourhood with a high proportion of non-old adults. A plausible explanation for the significance of these factors is that a necessary condition for forming cross-age associations is the opportunity for meeting people of different ages. The failure of church activity to foster more age-heterogeneous relationships may be because church attendance in The Netherlands is much higher among older than younger age groups. In other words, churches may not be strongly age-integrated settings. It also may be that simply occupying common space is insufficient to promote the development of cross-age relationships. Relationships develop when structures promote mutual interaction around a meaningful activity, so while sitting side-by-side in a church service may have no effect, working together on a common project may be highly effective. Further, cultural norms are almost certainly important. When age differences are emphasised and age-stereotypes are prevalent, a significant barrier exists for forming friendships and close associations between young and old people.

Fourth, specific life course events, in particular divorce followed by living alone, increased the likelihood that an older person had some significant cross-age interactions with non-kin. Several studies have shown that shortly after divorce there tends to be a reduction in the number of personal relationships (DeGarmo and Kitson 1996). As time passes after a divorce, however, new relationships are formed. In this process of forming replacement relationships, there is an opportunity for younger non-kin to join the network.

Looking ahead, we anticipate two changes that could significantly increase the age-segregation of the personal networks of older people in The Netherlands. First is the ageing of the population, which will decrease the relative supply of younger adults as potential network members and increase the relative supply of older ones. Around the time of the NESTOR survey, about 34 per cent of the population aged over 20 years was in the age group 20–35 years, while 17 per cent was aged 65 or more years. By 2050, these two percentages will be reversed—21 per cent of the adult population will be aged 20–35 years, and 33 per cent will be 65 or more years. The second and related change in future cohorts will be a significant decline in the average number of adult children. Because children are the major source of young adult network members, a decline in the number of children could have a large effect. Those aged 65 or more years in 1992 lived out their reproductive years when the Total Fertility Rate exceeded 3.0, but the cohorts entering old age in the near future will have completed family sizes of only about half that level. Further, the increasing prevalence of divorce in future cohorts entering old age may lead to a weakening of the tie between parent and adult child for an increasing proportion of older people (Cooney and Uhlenberg 1990; Dykstra 1998; Jong Gierveld and Peeters 2003). The increase in the number of younger non-kin that is associated with divorce is far smaller than the loss of children from the network. Thus, unless other changes occur, older people in the future are likely to have even less interaction with young adults than they currently do—and as shown above, current levels of interaction are extremely low.

This prospect provokes the question of what changes might divert a trend towards even greater age-segregation of older people. If, as argued in this paper, non-kin network members tend to be recruited from structured social contexts such as workplaces, volunteer settings, educational organisations and neighbourhoods, more attention might be given to increasing the involvement of older people in social structures that include people of various ages. This line of thinking leads directly to the issue of institutional age-segregation, as occurs when chronological age is used as a criterion for participation. Matilda Riley called attention
to the structural lags in major social institutions which denied opportunities to healthy and skilled people reaching old age to engage productively in society (Riley, Kahn and Foner 1994). The institutions which are most clearly structured by age are schools and places of work, but the rules and practices of many others create age-group separation. Age is embedded in the formulation and implementation of many social welfare policies and programmes, e.g., nutrition, housing, protective services and recreation. Concerns related to the old often fall under different government programmes and offices than do matters related to children and youth (Hagestad 2002). Even academic disciplines (such as gerontology) tend to sustain separation by age. There is, however, some evidence that the use of chronological age to structure the life course may have peaked.

A recent tendency to break down structural age barriers has been noted in both work and education (Riley and Riley 2000). Retirement in the United States has recently become more flexible, allowing an increasing number of older people to participate in the labour force. The long trend towards earlier age at retirement stopped in the mid 1980s in the United States, and since then labour force participation rates among those aged 55 or more years have been gradually increasing (Clark and Quinn 2002). The long-discussed idea of lifelong learning may now be happening, as an increasing number of people in mid and later life learn alongside younger people (Davey 2002). There are interesting examples in the United States of breaking down the age barriers around schools and creating community learning-centres open to all ages (US Department of Education 2000). In academic programmes, traditional gerontological approaches are being challenged by a life course perspective that views ageing as a lifelong process. If, as suggested by these examples, institutional age-segregation is declining, opportunities for cross-age interaction should increase.

Related to institutional age-segregation is cultural age-segregation, as reflected in age stereotypes and ageist language. In addition to removing the barriers to cross-age interaction, a reduction in ageism and cultural age-stereotyping could facilitate age-integration. The prevalence of age-stereotypes in society hinders the formation of close non-kin relationships between older and younger people (Bytheway 1995; Hummert et al. 1994; Nelson 2002). There is of course some circularity in this association, because age-segregation is a root cause of age-stereotypes. Nevertheless, educational programmes and media efforts to combat ageist stereotypes and language might play a role in increasing understanding and empathy between disparate age groups. Similar efforts to reduce racism and sexism are generally considered to have produced positive results.

Attention is being given not only to ways of reducing structural and cultural barriers between older and younger people, but also to inter-generational programmes that purposely bring diverse ages together. In The Netherlands, a co-ordinated effort to bring older people into age-integrated settings is occurring through an inter-generational neighbourhood development programme at The Netherlands Institute for Care and Welfare (Penninx 1999). A notable initiative from this inter-generational programme has involved the Dutch Guilds that exist in about 90 municipalities. People who are aged 50 or more years and who are willing to share their knowledge and skills can form a guild that anyone can contact for assistance free of charge. A request for help, e.g., with car repair, tutoring in school, business advice or care for a disabled child, is referred to an appropriate guild member who then responds directly to the individual needing assistance. Through this matching process, older volunteers and younger people are brought together in a context that is likely to promote positive inter-generational interaction. Other inter-generational programmes described by Penninx include: children visiting older people living in age-segregated institutional settings, older people helping children in local schools, adolescent choreteams helping older neighbourhood residents with various household
chores, and older people meeting with immigrant youth to promote their successful integration into Dutch society. Similar inter-generational programmes are developing in other countries. Careful evaluations of the various types of deliberate efforts to bridge age gaps would provide useful information on what structures actually facilitate age-integration.

REFERENCES


**THINKING ABOUT THE READING**

What is age segregation? According to the authors, what are some of the reasons for age segregation? What are some of the everyday consequences of age segregation? Draw a diagram of your personal networks (e.g., the people you see daily, people you spend holidays with, people you work with) What is the age range of the people in your networks? How many older people do you know who are not your relatives? This reading uses information from a study of Dutch people. How would the findings compare to other cultures? In which social settings would you expect to find the least age segregation?