



Inter-generational contact from a network perspective



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ABSTRACT

Pathways for resource – or other – exchanges within families have long been known to be dependent on the structure of relations between generations (Agree et al., 2005; Fuller-Thomson et al., 1997; Silverstein, 2011; Treas & Marcum, 2011). Much life course research has theorized models of inter-generational exchange – including, the ‘sandwich generation’ (Miller, 1981) and the ‘skipped generation’ pathways (Chalfie, 1994) – but there is little work relating these theories to relevant network mechanisms such as liaison brokerage (Gould & Fernandez, 1989) and other triadic configurations (Davis & Leinhardt, 1972; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). To address this, a survey of models of resource allocation between members of inter-generational households from a network perspective is introduced in this paper. Exemplary data come from health discussion networks among Mexican-origin multi-generational households.

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1. Introduction

After more than a half-century of two-generation households being the norm for American families, demographic forces have given rise to an increase in multi-generational households (Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997; Harrell, Kassner, & Figueiredo, 2011). A combination of new waves of immigration from Asia and Latin America, expanded longevity, and increasing variance in dependence during advanced age, has driven an uptake in three- and four-generation households. Even among whites, whose household structures have trended toward increasingly single-generation since the middle of the 19th Century (Ruggles, 1996, 2007), there has been a recent rise in grandparents living with their grandchildren and adult children since the start of the Great Recession (Kochkar & Cohn, 2011). From 1940 to 1980 the share of Americans living in multi-generational arrangements had been declining from 25% to 12%, only to gradually begin to

rise again after 1980 (Taylor et al., 2010). By 2012, the Census estimated that 5.1 million households (~5.6%) were multi-generational, which was up from 4.8 million in 2009 (Lofquist, 2012). This means that roughly 17% of Americans live in such multi-generational households today.

This demographic trend poses an opportunity for social scientists to reflect on the structure of family relations from a multi-generational network perspective. In particular, the last several decades have given rise to many gerontological and life-course theories that address a variety of pathways for resource and communication to flow from one generation to another. In this paper, we review network structures consistent with many of these theories and, following Agree, Biddlecom, and Valente (2005), outline an analytic strategy to evaluate those theories given network data.

Taking a network perspective on inter-generational relationships sheds light directly on the interpersonal patterns of relationships within families by measuring exchange flows between household members. This is in contrast to alternative approaches that may rely on assumptions about inter-generational relationships by

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indirect observations, such as inferring that resources flow from grandparents to their grandchildren based only on observing grandparent-headed multi-generational households (Casper & Bryson, 1998). Moreover, aggregating these patterns to family (or network) level statistics facilitates comparative analysis of the prevalence of different patterns of exchange within and between families (Park et al., 2013).

The balance of this paper is outlined as follows. First, we consider the definition of a generation, resolving on one that incorporates both social and biological relationships. Second, we review the relevant literature on gerontological theories on inter- and intra-generational interaction and tie that literature to related processes and structures from social network analysis. Third, we use data on health discussion networks among Mexican-origin multi-generational families to evaluate several structural models of contact between and within generations using network analysis.

2. Generation as a socio-biological construct

While gerontologists have implied consensus on what constitutes a generation – a matter settled years ago in the field – there are competing definitions of generation in the broader scientific literature and it is useful to review them here because they may be useful to a broader audience. Biologists, especially geneticists, consider the concept of a generation as strictly involving the hierarchy of lineages based on pedigree within families. This is a micro view, focusing in on families and bloodlines and mainly relevant for understanding family health history and Mendelian trait heritability. Demographers, on the other hand, take a more macro view, and operationalize generations as consisting of all members of a particular range of ages spanning some window – often, the window defined as the mean age of mothers at the birth of their children (Shryock, Siegel, & Larmon, 1980, p. 527). Even more generally, sociologists – and some economists, historians, and anthropologists – think of a generation as all people born within a window of historic import. This definition is aligned with the life course perspective in sociology as it resonates well with the notion that shared experiences bring people together as they navigate life (Elder & Johnson, 2002; Ryder, 1965).

This life course approach to the definition of generation provides a generalized framework from which many alternatives may be derived. This includes popular branding of generations (The Greatest Generation, Generation Y, Millennials) (Barrett & Montepare, 2015) as well as empirical treatments, such as those employed in the international migration literature (1st generation, 2nd generation, 0.5 generation) (Rumbaut, 2004; Treas, 2015).

When it comes to the role that generation plays in shaping social relations, it is useful to think of generation structures in a nested, or multilevel manner. Individuals are nested within networks, which are in turn nested within broader social contexts (say families, neighborhoods, and societies) or what Gans and Silverstein (2006) call social-ecological spheres of development. Membership in a generation, is one such sphere, and the inherent

correlation between generational membership and the age-structure provides a particular social context that shapes baseline interaction between and within generations as detailed by Blau's (1977) theory of social structure.

Intuitively, as Easterlin (1978) pointed out in his 1978 presidential address to the Population Association of America, the age-structure constrains between- and within-generation interaction based on the availability of living persons in one versus another generation. Leaving aside the age-grading of institutions that insulates cohorts from one another (Heinz & Marshall, 2003), a largess in the share of the population in one generation, such as the baby-boom following WWII in the United States (Easterlin, 1961), naturally increases the likelihood of interaction between members of that generation with all others. Similarly, if there are fewer members of a certain generation (e.g., the cohort of Russian men who died in WWII), then people of other generations have fewer opportunities to interact with them (e.g., are less likely to know their grandfathers, or have older male neighbors to befriend). At the same time, people in a smaller generation have fewer like-aged alters and a smaller opportunity pool for generation-assortative mixing. As a corollary, a cohort largess might lower the likelihood of out-group interaction just as a cohort dearth might increase such interactions (Blau, Blum, & Schwartz, 1982).

Although some cohorts and generations are larger than others when they reach midlife, every group declines in size eventually. Under normal conditions, older people are at greater risk than younger people of losing their same-age peers due to mortality (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987). Compared to younger people, older people have fewer opportunities to interact with same-age peers, whether maintaining current ties or seeking out new ones. Following Blau's theory of group size and group mixing rates, then, we would expect that relative inter-generational mixing rates would be higher than intra-generational mixing rates for the older population. For example, older adults will spend more time with their children than with their siblings.

Finally, it is not just life and death that shapes the baseline potential for inter-generational interactions. Group size is also affected by population displacement, such as migration. Migration results in two different dimensions that affect inter-generational relations in what Park and Myers (2010) call a "double-cohort" process: generational members who migrate are insulated from those who do not, and those that do migrate become the first in a new succession of generations. The experiences and linked-lives shared by members 1st, 2nd, and further generations have been known to strongly shape both intra- and inter-generational relations over the tandem life courses within foreign-origin families (Silverstein & Attias-Donfut, 2010).

3. Multi-generational relations

We have established that membership in a generation is an important sphere of social interaction that is shaped by both shared-experiences and the age-structure (Elder & Johnson, 2002). Now, we move onto propositions about the

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