Family Learning Models in Intergenerational Perspective

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Abstract
The article deals with intergenerational learning in the Czech family from three generations perspective. Intergenerational learning means phenomena and processes aiding mutual transfer of knowledge, experiences, and attitudes in the family that take place in specific family life situations, in interactions, and during the shared activities of the participating generations: children, parents, and grandparents. The thesis of pro-learning family culture – the influence of family characteristics such as communication, family climate and cohesion on learning in the family is elaborated on. The thesis of pro-learning family culture is developed further to identify four different models of family learning from intergenerational perspective. A mixed research design was used.

Keywords: intergenerational learning, family relationships, intergenerational communication, family climate, family cohesion, pro-learning family culture

Introduction
The article deals with intergenerational learning in the Czech family from three generations perspective. Hatton-Yeo (2008, p. 3) defines intergenerational learning as “a process through which individuals of all ages acquire skills and knowledge, but also attitudes and values, from daily experience, from all available resources and from all influences in their own ‘life worlds’.” Intergenerational learning can
occur in various environments and situations (Newman, 2006; Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008; Newman, Ward, Smith, Wilson & McCrea, 1997; O’Hara, 2013), primarily in the family, where it means phenomena and processes aiding mutual transfer of knowledge, experiences, and attitudes. It is the learning that takes place in specific family life situations, in interactions, and during the shared activities of the participating generations: children, parents, and grandparents.

To understand the processes of intergenerational learning, it has to be set within the framework of related concepts such as intergenerational contacts and their benefits (Giddens, 1984; Reisig & Fees, 2007), intergenerational communication, and relations (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry & Silverstein, 2002; Bengtson & Lowenstein, 2003; Giarrusso, Stallings & Bengtson, 1995; Hoff, 2007; Katz, Lowenstein, Philips & Daatland, 2005; Logan, & Spitze, 1997; Luescher, 2004; Scabini & Marta, 2006, Williams & Nussbaum, 2001).

Intergenerational learning is interconnected with all of the previously mentioned concepts and builds on them. It also occupies a theoretical position among other types of adult learning (Bandura, 1977; Mezirow, 1991; Dellen, 2012). Using the standard categories of learning, intergenerational learning can be defined as both intentional and unintentional, both conscious and reflected; sensory-motor, verbal-cognitive, and social; lifelong and life-wide; and largely informal. It concerns values and attitudes (social learning), knowledge and information sharing (cognitive learning), and skills (sensory motor learning). The key feature distinguishing it from other types of learning is its focus on the participants belonging to different generations.

Learning in the family undergoes changes having to do with the ages of family members, their independence and maturity, and their relations, as well as with the topics dominating the family and its members at specific life stages of the family cycle. Learning in the family is not restricted to a specific period, although it is evident that learning takes place in different ways at individual stages of development, different things are learned, and what is being learned is received in varying ways as well.

Research topic

The research topic elaborates on the thesis of “pro-learning family culture,” from which the internal conditions necessary for intergenerational learning in the family can be identified. The concept is defined, according to Cherri (2008), by four principal aspects: communication, family climate, cohesion, and family learning. If we
describe a family culture as favorable to learning, those families are characterized by a friendly atmosphere, open communication, and a great deal of family cohesion. Cherri (2008) deduces that a family with this kind of positive culture is analogical to the concept of a learning organization (Senge, 1990), where people at all levels – individual and collective – expand their knowledge, create required results, pursue new ways of thinking, and incessantly learn to learn together (Sedláček, Pol, Hloušková, Lazarová & Novotný, 2013). The stronger the culture of learning and sharing is, the more successful the organization, or family, is. Both factors have a positive effect on the robustness and strength of relations within the family. If the family is thus viewed as a learning organization, then successful, robust, and strong relations within the family depend on the intensity of cohesion, communication, and atmosphere in the family. In other words, the ideal of intergenerational learning is a family whose members learn from one another and share their experiences among themselves to benefit each other. Based on the concept of pro-learning family culture, the following research questions were formulated:

How are the principal components of pro-learning family culture (communication, family climate, cohesion and learning) seen and evaluated by family members from different generations? What family learning models based on these components can be identified?

Research methodology

Data collection

A mixed research design, i.e., a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to sample selection, methods, data collection techniques, and data analysis were used. Using the criteria formulated by Creswell, and Plano Clark (2006), time-wise the research followed a sequential design. The data were combined both by interconnecting them at the level of research techniques (open questions in the questionnaire and analogical questions in the interviews) and in the analysis and interpretation of how people perceive what and how they learn or have learned in their families (response analysis). The triangulation model of the mixed research design allowed for an insight into the research questions interconnecting various perspectives.
The questionnaire survey was conducted among participants in non-formal education courses targeting adults of varying ages. The respondents included adult children (94; 34%; average age 27), parents (91; 33%; average age 41), and grandparents (90; 33%; average age 65) – 275 respondents in total. The respondents were assigned to generational groups based on two criteria: their reported ages and their self-classification regarding their role in the family (adult child, parent, and grandparent).

Then three-generation families were selected using the following criteria: the grandparent generation was required to have at least one member; the parent generation had to have both members, and the family had to include at least one adult child; the family members did not have to share a household but were required to keep in touch regularly and rather often in face-to-face encounters; they had to be sufficiently communicative and cohesive. The research sample included 8 families living in the country and urban areas, consisting of a total of 32 respondents.

The data were collected using the following qualitative research methods: group and individual administration of the Family System Test (FAST), group and individual interviews, a snapshot of a weekday and a weekend day of the family, a learning time axis at different life stages prepared by all members, participatory observation in the families, and repeated individual interviews to make the information more complete and accurate.

The group interviews were conducted following the informed consent of all family members; they took place in the households of the families and lasted 90–120 minutes; individual interviews took 70–120 minutes.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed by using standard statistic methods (indexes, association coefficients, coefficients of determination), and interview data were recorded, transcribed, and coded by means of open and thematic coding using Atlas.ti analytical software by all three authors.
**Research Results**

How are the principal components of pro-learning family culture seen and evaluated by family members from different generations?

In all the four areas that are the components of pro-learning family culture – communication\(^1\), climate\(^2\), cohesion\(^3\), and learning\(^4\) in the family – the oldest generation of respondents – grandparents, showed the greatest deal of agreement with the statements they were offered. It is thus the grandparent generation that perceives their family as a place of open communication, good climate, and great cohesion. On the other hand, the youngest generation thinks of their families as such a place less often\(^5\). The overview of the results is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Means of the indexes of communication, family climate, cohesion and learning from generational perspective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Climate</th>
<th>Cohesion</th>
<th>Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult children gen.</td>
<td>1.85(N = 92)</td>
<td>1.61(N = 91)</td>
<td>2.14(N=90)</td>
<td>1.91(N=90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents gen.</td>
<td>1.59(N =85)</td>
<td>1.37(N=86)</td>
<td>1.58(N=86)</td>
<td>1.65(N=86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparents gen.</td>
<td>1.42(N =70)</td>
<td>1.28(N=71)</td>
<td>1.55(N=69)</td>
<td>1.58(N=67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1.64(N=247)</td>
<td>1.43(N=248)</td>
<td>1.78(N=245)</td>
<td>1.73(N=243)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indexes range from 1.00 to 4.00. The lower the value of the mean is, the more positive the evaluation of communication, climate, cohesion, and learning in the family is.

\(^1\) The communication index consists of the following statements: *In our family, everyone is given enough scope to express their opinions; In our family, we speak about things openly; In our family, we often talk about different kinds of things; In our family, we do not keep secrets from one another.* The index may vary from 1.00 to 4.00. The lower the mean value is, the more positive the perception of communication in the family is.

\(^2\) The climate index consists of the following statements: *My family provides me with support; Being a part of my family makes me feel good; Members of my family respect one another; In our family, we share all joys and troubles.*

\(^3\) The cohesion index consists of the following statements: *In our family, we spend a lot of leisure time together; We regard the time spent together as an important value; Opinions of other members of the family are an important factor influencing my decisions; Family matters are always decided jointly.*

\(^4\) The learning-in-the-family index consists of the following statements: *In my family, we learn various things from one another; It is good to gain experience in your own family; An ongoing process of learning is characteristic of our family; I am a person who keeps learning all life.*

\(^5\) For communication the association is Eta = 0.28; for climate, Eta = 0.29; for cohesion, Eta = 0.47.
Our results are consistent with the “intergenerational stake” hypothesis as presented by Giarrusso, Stallings, and Bengtson (1995), according to which parents focus on developing family cohesion and close relations more frequently than their children do, giving the family more of their attention. This also manifests in a stronger sense of mutuality and togetherness among the older generations and more distance from the younger generations.

Communication is also perceived as an important aspect of family life by Olson within his circumplex model of matrimonial and family operation (Olson, 2000), a widely acknowledged model of family life structuring. This model characterized healthy family operation as being based on balanced cohesion and flexibility among the family members. Cohesion is understood as emotional closeness, developing a bond; flexibility indicates an ability to cope with changes that the family and its members are undergoing. A third dimension of the model is communication, which plays the role of a mechanism supporting the other two dimensions. Communication should support family cohesion and facilitate the acceptance of potential change. Families with positive communication cultures are better equipped for developing sharing, coping with change they need to face, and better responding to emerging developmental and situational needs.

Our findings concerning family cohesion may be interpreted with the use of the core and balance model (Smith, Freeman & Zabriskie, 2009), which suggests that families whose members are involved in spending time together show signs of higher cohesion and intra-family flexibility.

Our results show that these facts concern the parent generation and, even more markedly, the grandparent generation. In parallel to the “intergenerational stake” hypothesis, providing a clue to interpreting relations between parents and children, there is the “age differentiation and changing needs” hypothesis (Hoff, 2007), concerning relations between adult grandchildren and their grandparents. According to this theory, grandparents tend to be closer to their younger grandchildren than to the older ones. Gradually, as both grandchildren’s and grandparents’ age and needs change, grandchildren start supporting their grandparents.

The lower level of agreement among the youngest generation in all areas under examination may be explained using the above-mentioned “intergenerational stake” hypothesis, according to which the tendency among children to cultivate their sense of themselves, autonomy, and independence is much more marked than strengthening the cohesion of their family (Hoff, 2007). It is for this reason that they tend to reject the values and traditions of older generations (Scabini & Marta, 2006). In this theoretical framework, conflict is associated mainly with phenomena observed among the younger generation. The situation is the opposite
Milada Rabušicová, Lenka Kamanová, Kateřina Pevná

with parents: parents tend to underestimate intergenerational conflict and overestimate intergenerational solidarity.

Our data shows that learning in the family – when family is regarded as a dependent variable – correlates well with all of the components of family culture, i.e., communication, climate, and cohesion. If the members of the family communicate openly about various areas of interest and provide one another with enough scope to express their views, there is a climate in the family which is characterized by mutual respect. Individual members feel good about their family and perceive it as supportive, view the family as cohesive, spend leisure time together and view this fact as an important value, and make joint decisions about family issues – then, in summary, good conditions for learning in the family are available.

What family learning models based on the components of pro-learning family culture can be identified?

Four models of family learning contexts can be distinguished, i.e., four different models of conditions for learning in the family. They are basically four ideal types of family functioning. No family can unequivocally be classified as representing a specific model but each family shows prevailing typical signs of one of them. All these models have been derived from our research data and not from already existing theories.

(1) The first model is the open sharing family model. It is a model where family members are in ample contact with all others. Family members often share their problems, joys, and worries. Their communication is relatively intensive. Each member is themselves while being open towards the others. All generations are regarded as autonomous and active. All family members are regarded as equal partners, and have enough scope to express their opinions. Both sexes are regarded as equal. Features of the postmodern family prevail. Learning in these families is bi-directional, from older to younger and vice versa.

They are wiser, more knowledgeable and I wonder how I can intervene at all. I know how unpleasant it was when someone intervened with my stuff. So I’m trying to avoid that (F2, grandmother). It’s kind of a result of how we kept meeting, we have been...

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6 The index of learning is significantly influenced by communication in the family (correlation 0.72; determination coefficient = 0.52), by family climate (0.68; determination coefficient = 0.46); and cohesion (0.73; determination coefficient = 0.53).
meeting this frequently since I came to Brno, so it goes on, I go there with my wife too, quite regularly... and this feels somehow natural to meet. There is nothing planned about it, and there is no practical purpose to it... (F2, grandson)

(2) The second model is the respect-based top-down family model. All generations respect one another and have consideration for the others, including their needs and interests. Older generations feel respect for the younger ones and do not feel competent to pass on anything without having been asked. Family attention and activity is markedly focused on the younger generation, which assumes the central role. This is where the care of the older generations is directed. The mother and grandmother elements are significant features of the family constellation. Features of the modern family prevail. Bi-directional learning prevails; when uni-directional learning occurs in selected areas of learning, the flow from the older generations to the younger ones, i.e., to the children and grandchildren, prevails.

There’s swimming, sports... I wanted to attend a university of the third age, to prevent my brain cells from being totally idle, but because there’s the phone, which is a kind of obligation, when I’m needed, I tend to make sure I don’t have to say “No”. (F1, grandmother)

(3) The third family model is the respect-based bottom-up family model. All three generations meet frequently, often living in a three-generation house. In this type of learning family, the grandparent generation has an exclusive position and plays an important role in decision-making processes and family issues. Activity and attention in the family tend to be directed towards the older generation and satisfying its needs. This also defines the significant role of the middle – “sandwich” generation of parents. The dominant role of the father and the grandfather is another feature. Features of the traditional family prevail. Uni-directional learning, from older to younger generation, is relatively strong.

Father used to tell us... how things used to be and so on. Well, and we listened to it like a fairy tale and I tell the same things to my kids today. (R5, grandfather)

(4) The fourth model is the open non-sharing family model. Contacts between the family members are scarcer, and meeting one another and communicating are less frequent. This is because the family members are strong individuals guided mainly by their own needs and interests, choosing their life paths independent of
others, or due to poor family relations caused by interpersonal conflict. As with the first model, features of the postmodern family prevail. It can be inferred that intentional and reflected learning is only limited within families of this type. The research sample was dominated by the families of the second and third type, i.e., the respect-based top-down and bottom-up models.

![Figure 1. Schematic representation of family learning models](image)

The results show that intergenerational learning, especially its direction, is positively associated with family characteristics such as communication, cohesion, and family climate. In addition, there is a parallel with family typology distinguishing traditional, modern, and postmodern families (Možný, 2006), especially at the level of features such as family structure, roles within the family, and intergenerational transfer.

**Discussion and conclusions**

In this paper, we presented insights into intergenerational learning in selected Czech families, concerning conditions in the family shaping intergenerational learning. Family and social changes lead to challenging extreme individualism
and taking individuals out of family relations that are currently characterized by plurality, fluidity, and diversification (Popenoe, 1993), although they increasingly often signal a detour from the narrow perception of a nuclear family. There are indications, as Sýkorová (2009) says, that the nuclear family coexists closely with the extended family, i.e., the family where the presence of grandparents is an important feature. These transformations, alongside the need for lifelong and life-wide learning, provide a basis for processes of intergenerational learning in the family.

Intergenerational learning in the family is characterized by changes connected to the ages of family members, their gaining independence and maturity, their relations, and topics dominating the life of the family and its members at specific life stages. There is a need to redefine the transfer of information within the family towards greater reciprocity, and to broaden the generational interaction basis. This redefinition also concerns the meaning of learning for its participants.

Our results confirm other empirical studies accentuating the positive dimensions of multigenerational cohabitation. They suggest that intergenerational relations within families concern sharing of activities among relatives who keep in touch intensively and provide help to one another – both the younger generation to the older one and vice versa, also evidence a high degree of family closeness, mutuality, and contacts among members of three-generation families (Antonucci, Jackson & Biggs, 2007). The parent and grandparent generations report providing and accepting help and support; these generations are also happy about the amount of contact they have. If intergenerational relations stay stable in the long run and are positive in nature, they are also highly beneficial to the members of the family in terms of mutual learning.

Research orientation on the positive aspects of living together, without a compensating focus on conflict and negative phenomena in the family, could be open to criticism (Bengston, Giarusso, Mabry & Silverstein, 2002). We, nevertheless, believe that intergenerational learning may yield a new positive view of the family, which may play a role in the now-frequently emphasized processes of family weakening. If family members share learning without insisting on dominance, if knowledge and experience are passed in both directions, family members can benefit each other while strengthening the cohesion of the family as a whole.

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