

Intergenerational learning in a changing world: Knitting generations together

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Abstract

In intergenerational projects, learning a craft is an activity that may be of interest to people of different ages. This paper focuses on knitting as a craft. In most Western societies, knitting is often considered a craft for women, but on Taquile Island, Peru, it is the men who knit. This paper discusses knitting from an intergenerational perspective whilst focusing on gender and culture. To this aim, we introduce an intrinsic case study to examine the role of gender and culture in intergenerational learning. The data used in this study was collected during a visit to Taquile Island. In summary, the study's findings reveal that (i) on Taquile, members of the community invest in maintaining cultural traditions in opposition to being swept along by (con)temporary social changes; (ii) knitting on Taquile is approached as a practical technique in contrast to Western culture where knitting is connected to the concept of 'well-being'; and (iii) whilst gender structures may set frames for performance, the Taquile case demonstrates that what is typically considered 'male' or 'female' may vary.

Nei progetti intergenerazionali, l'apprendimento di un lavoro artigianale è un'attività che può interessare persone di età diverse. Questo articolo si concentra sul lavoro a maglia come attività artigianale. Nella maggior parte delle società occidentali, il lavoro a maglia è spesso considerato un mestiere da donne, ma sull'isola di Taquile, in Perù, sono gli uomini a lavorare a maglia. Questo articolo affronta il lavoro a maglia da una prospettiva intergenerazionale, concentrandosi sul genere e sulla cultura in un caso di studio autentico. A questo scopo, introduciamo un caso di studio per esaminare il ruolo del genere e della cultura nell'apprendimento intergenerazionale. I dati utilizzati in questo studio sono stati raccolti durante una visita all'isola di Taquile. In sintesi, i risultati dello studio rivelano che (i) a Taquile, i membri della comunità investono nel mantenimento delle tradizioni culturali in opposizione all'essere trascinati dai (con)temporanei cambiamenti sociali; (ii) il lavoro a maglia a Taquile è affrontato come una tecnica pratica, in contrasto con la cultura occidentale in cui il lavoro a maglia è

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collegato al concetto di ‘benessere’; e (iii) mentre le strutture di genere possono definire le cornici per le prestazioni, il caso di Taquile dimostra che ciò che è tipicamente considerato ‘maschile’ o ‘femminile’ può variare.

Keywords: knitting; intergenerational learning; lifelong learning; culture; gender; case study

Parole chiave: lavoro a maglia; apprendimento intergenerazionale; apprendimento permanente; cultura; genere; studio di caso

1. Introduction

Theories of lifelong learning postulate that learning starts with and within the individual. Furthermore, such theories also state that learning emerges in interacting with our surroundings (Jarvis, 2007). In theories concerned with intergenerational learning, focus is placed on the social interaction between generations and, more specifically, what is generated in the interaction between people from different generations (Lüscher et al., 2017). Often, intergenerational learning has positive effects in terms of knowledge expansion, well-being, and strengthened intergenerational relationships. One example of this is when people from different generations meet to knit together. Such intergenerational meetings stimulate learning about patterns and knitting techniques and contribute to the well-being of the participants (Boström, 2022; Corkhill et al., 2014). Research has shown that specific cognitive activities, including computer activities, craft activities (such as knitting, quilting, etc.), playing games, and reading books, are associated with a statistical decrease in the probability of a person suffering mild cognitive impairment as they age (Geda et al., 2011).

Knitting is often categorised as a traditionally female craft. Consequently, this craft has been associated with women's subordination in the domestic sphere in patriarchal societies. However, this characterisation has been questioned, and knitting has been reclaimed as a positive feminine (and even feminist) activity with relevance to the development of society (Pentney, 2008; Bratich & Brush, 2011). However, if knitting is considered feminine and a feminist activity in Western societies, what does this perspective entail for cultures where knitting is regarded as a male activity and an integral part of intergenerational relationships? This question regarding intergenerational lifelong learning is addressed in the present study. We do so by examining the traditions on Taquile Island in Peru, where knitting is an activity that is performed by men as an expression of their masculinity. We apply an intrinsic case study to discuss knitting as an intergenerational activity, with a focus on gender and culture. The following questions inform the study:

1. What is the role of knitting in the culture on Taquile Island?
2. How is gender expressed through knitting on Taquile Island?

2. Knitting and intergenerational relationships

Knitting (as a craft) is often portrayed as a system of knowledge that is traded between generations, a skill that is passed on from the older generation to the younger. In the past, knitting was a way of creating warm, beautiful clothes that could signal status. From a Western point of view, knitting is considered primarily a hobby and a craft that is practised merely for the fun of it. However, the hobby may still result in products that are beautiful and functional. Knitting, as a craft, has enjoyed a new lease on life, and the media has reported that the pandemic sparked a 'knitting revival' (BBC, 2021). Knitting is also an everyday activity which may allow people from different generations to unite based on their mutual interest in sharing knowledge and developing as knitters. For example, United Generations Ontario is an umbrella organisation for intergenerational programs, including the *Knitting Generations Together program*, which was particularly successful (Andrew, 2002). In this program, seniors taught youngsters how to knit, thereby improving their motor skills and patience. This type of program has also been shown to help in overcoming 'age stereotyping'. Although machines that can replicate yarn crafts exist, the manual skills needed for knitting occupy an important place in Western culture and history (ibid.). A large international study has revealed several reasons why people engage in knitting (Riley et al., 2013), including:

- The knitting process itself provides psychological benefits in the form of peace and quiet, and relaxation. It is experienced as 'de-stressing'.

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- People who knit feel productive whilst simultaneously being provided with an outlet for their creativity.
- Knitting is said to have both therapeutic and meditative elements. The sound of knitting, albeit monotonous and repetitive, is experienced as soothing.

Regardless of whether a knitting project is an advanced or beginner-level project, it is not only the finished result that is of importance. Individuals who knit also enjoy the process in itself (Rosner & Ryokai, 2008). By practising knitting, the individual learns more about the craft, but knitting in a group adds an additional dimension to the learning that takes place. In a group, knitters can learn from each other and develop skills in pattern construction, in terms of stitches and turns, but also their social skills (Corkhill et al., 2014).

In Western societies, knitting has become associated with women and thus has feminine connotations. However, some Western men knit. It is interesting to note that, because of this, several knitting handbooks for a male readership have been published, for example, *Knitting With Balls: A Hands-On Guide to Knitting for the Modern Man* (Michael Del Vecchio), *The Manly Art of Knitting* (David Fougner), *Guys Knit: The Instruction Manual* (Nathan Taylor), *The Knitting Man(ual)* (Kristin Spurland & John Valls), and *Real Knits for Real Men* (Mixed Media Resources). As indicated by their titles, these publications can be understood as expressing a need for men to separate themselves from women who knit or to suggest that they may have other interests, which justifies the publication of specific books in the field. Men who knit are, however, not unique in human history. If we examine the practice of knitting in the so-called ‘proto-industrial era’ (i.e., the pre-industrial period), knitting among men was very common. For example, in the Halland region in Sweden, the men did most of the knitting during the 18th and 19th centuries (Lundqvist, 2008; Johansson, 2001). The farmland in southern Sweden was mostly barren at the time, and in order to make ends meet with meagre agricultural activities, the men were forced to learn to knit. Their work consisted of producing socks for the armed forces, which subsequently became a large and secure customer and, thus, a stable source of income.

In the present study, knitting is discussed in relation to *gender* and *generation*. These two dimensions are analytically linked because both gender and generation refer to biological dimensions (‘sex’ and ‘age’) that are understood in terms of social, political, and cultural assumptions and constructions. We employ a theoretical framework that builds on intergenerational learning since this is expressed in the case study as a central dimension of the knitting practice under investigation. In the culture of Taquile, the transfer of knowledge of knitting between generations is a central feature. The fact that it is the men who knit will be discussed in some detail because it contrasts with the Western stereotype that it is women who knit. But this phenomenon is also worthy of discussion because it allows us to address gender as an aspect of intergenerational learning. In the next section, we describe a theoretical framework for intergenerational learning.

3. A theoretical framework for intergenerational learning

An examination of intergenerational learning forms part of a more general interest in intergenerational issues. Research in this field intersects several dimensions, including demographic changes, mutual support and reciprocal care in the family unit and in the community, active ageing, improving social cohesion, making communities more ‘livable’, ensuring cultural continuity, and strengthening our relational nature (Kaplan & Sánchez, 2014). Intergenerational contextual continuity is a question for every generation since they are intrinsically tied together in family units and in society (Donati, 2015). When the concept of ‘generation’ is invoked in the context of intergenerational relationships, we draw attention to the relationships between members of different generations and the dynamics of socialisation and generativity that exist in these relationships (Lüscher et al. 2017). Note that the prefix *inter-* refers to ‘that which is between’ (Sánchez & Díaz 2021). One framework for

analysing generations and the relationships between generations is described in *Generations, intergenerational relationships, generational policy: A multilingual compendium* (Lüscher et al., 2017). We refer to this framework and several concepts that are relevant to our analysis in the following discussion. The concept of ‘generation’ is implemented in the analysis of the identity-relevant interplay between actions and social relations linked to specific cohorts. Since the dynamics of intergenerational relationships are central to our analysis, our focus falls on the processes of socialisation and generativity. These processes are integrated with learning processes, which in intergenerational relationships may be linked to the joint implementation of tasks or efforts to maintain and develop relationships across generations. The structure and dynamics of intergenerational relationships are thus characterised by the performance of institutional tasks (to secure a livelihood and provide childcare) while concurrently being focused on preserving and developing the relationships themselves. This perspective differs from one that conceives ‘generations’ as social categories or cohorts. The assumption that there are identifiable generations also entails that each generation possesses a unique feature that distinguishes it from other generations. These differences are often shaped by formative experiences and changes in an individual’s life and a society’s history. The relationships that exist between generations are characterised by an ambivalence that accommodates conflicting and cohesive attitudes and behaviours. It is, therefore, possible for ‘conflicts between generations’ and ‘solidarity between generations’ to coexist at both the micro and macro levels. (Lüscher et al., 2017). The tension between *conflict* and *solidarity* may also exist in intergenerational learning. The notion of a transfer of knowledge through mentoring and coaching where an older person teaches a younger person or to understand learning as a reciprocal process wherein generations learn with and from each other can harbour conflict whilst also functioning as a platform for solidarity. In the following section, we use an intrinsic case study to discuss the duality of conflict and solidarity in the context of intergenerational learning.

4. Method: An intrinsic case study of a unique culture

On Taquile Island, the men who engage in knitting constitute a social arena where learning takes place. This case is intriguing since knitting is typically regarded as a female activity; thus, a group of men who knit challenges our stereotypes somewhat. The men of Taquile represent a lifestyle and a reproduction of cultural patterns that is, if not unique, at least different to many other cultures. The study of men who knit has the potential to reveal something new, and because of their special character, a study of the men of Taquile Island should be understood as an *intrinsic case study* (Stake, 1995). The case study represents a qualitative method that is frequently used in the social sciences (Eisenhardt, 1989) and can be defined as an exploratory approach to a phenomenon in a bounded system, for example, in a program, an event, an activity, or with respect to individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study can be performed in several different ways (Eisenhardt, 1991; Stake, 1995), but whatever way it is performed, the case study is aimed at increasing our understanding of social matters, thereby adding to our experience and understanding of the human condition (Stake, 1978). Starting from an experiential understanding of a phenomenon, a case study can be a method of exploration that is preliminary to theory development because a case study can broaden our understanding of the issue at hand. However, some scholars argue that a case study should lead to a generalisable theory (Eisenhardt, 1989, 1991; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Others argue that the traditional way of thinking about ‘generalisability’ in this context does not apply to case studies (Donmoyer, 2009). Instead of providing the researcher with theoretical generalisation, a case study can reveal phenomena that otherwise may have remained unobserved. Furthermore, the vicarious experience provided by the case study may actually be preferable to direct experience since a vicarious experience is less likely to produce defensiveness and resistance to learning (Donmoyer, 2009). This type of experience is

especially valuable for practitioners in research fields that are concerned with individuals, not aggregates. The combination of a unique case that is positioned in relation to theories about intergenerational learning and knitting may primarily add insight into the case at hand. In turn, such insight may have some impact on theory building, either directly by questioning existing theories or indirectly via future studies that wish to respond to the questions raised in this paper. The case description is also valuable if we accept that practical knowledge is of equal value to theoretical knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2007).

The data collection for this study was performed during a field trip to Taquile Island in 2017 by the third author. The third author stayed in Peru for two weeks and was on the island for two days. During these two days, he was able to follow the production process of the knitted products, from the raw materials, the processing and dyeing stages, the knitting process, and, finally, how cooperative sales were made. During his stay, the researcher interacted with people on the island, including people who worked with the knitted products, families who ran guest houses, and the island council. The conversations conducted with the locals were informal and took place in smaller groups of 2-3 people. About 25 people (males and females between the ages of 5 and 75) participated in these conversations. During these conversations, an interpreter translated between Quechua and Spanish.

Information relevant to the case study was collected through dialogue, written and observational data, and visits to several web pages before and after the visit. In this paper, the case study represents a framing of a culture in terms of its typical traits. The presentation of the case study is inspired by the ethnographic approach, with a focus on the story (as experienced by the researcher) as a central process of the research process. Whilst researchers may employ different ways to engage in a storytelling practice, the narrative that is presented in this paper is inspired by Lingham and colleagues (2016), who produced three literary short stories to portray and convey a number of embodied experiences about being a man in a context that is dominated by women (see Lingham et al., 2016). What is characteristic of these stories is that the empirical material was combined with the researchers' imagination and knowledge to communicate specific experiences to the reader. The story presented in this paper combines the case in question and the researcher's experience of being on-site as a visitor.

Ethical considerations are an integral part of the research process when performing research with human participants. This study was conducted before the use of consent forms became mandatory in our national context. Consequently, no individuals are referred to in this paper. Furthermore, the cultural practice under investigation is 'public' because a great deal has been written about it, some of which can be found online. The primary ethical consideration relevant to the present study is the study's potential impact on the participants and the wider community, especially with regard to remarks made in the results and discussion sections of the paper. One ethical risk we are exposed to is if the people of Taquile Island regard the representation of their culture as incorrect or misleading. In addition, they might also object to the discussion and conclusions that we make. Since we address the gender system on the island (a system that, in most cultures, is viewed as a sensitive topic), we acknowledge that divergent opinions and alternative interpretations concerning this system may exist. The risk posed by this study must be balanced with its possible benefits. Thus, this study is not limited to observations and remarks about the culture practised on Taquile Island but should be related to culture and gender in intergenerational learning contexts in general.

Another ethical aspect that we have considered is our representation of another culture. Although the researcher's experience and story are presented here, we note that the story told in this paper is aligned with how the culture is presented to visitors of the island in official publications. This means that the 'official' story, for different reasons, may be constructed in ways that are problematic in terms of how it suggests the existence of stereotypes or when it is used to construct a scientific theory. Consequently, we have refrained from composing stories that glamorise, pathologise, and/or neutralise the lives of the people who are represented in our case study

(see Cunsolo Willox et al., 2013). Furthermore, we acknowledge that a particular theoretical framework will scaffold a discussion about different dimensions in a story in a particular way. In the discussion, we return to what we can observe in the case in relation to theoretical frameworks.

5. A story about the Knitting Men of Taquile Island

The road winds its way up through the hilly landscape and provides the traveller with a dizzying view of valleys and mountain peaks, some of which are snow-covered. We pass villages and communities and spot women wearing red robes, textile hats and some of them carry their handicraft products on their backs to the market. Occasionally, we spot people offering the national dish of grilled guinea pig along the roadside. We are in Peru, in the heartland of Inca country, having left the old capital of Cusco behind. Our trip takes us towards the city of Puno and Lake Titicaca. A distance of 40 miles. The bus makes regular stops to allow our fellow passengers to stretch their legs and renew their energy by means of the food and drink available at the roadside restaurants. The driver kindly reminds the foreign passengers not to run or move quickly when we disembark. The thin air at over 3,000 meters above sea level is an unpleasant surprise for the uninitiated. The panic of not getting enough air into one's lungs is a terrifying experience and can strike without warning.

In the evening, into the setting sun, our bus rolls into the city of Puno next to the shores of Lake Titicaca. The city is located at an altitude of nearly 4,000 meters. That night, sleep is disturbed by the unpleasant feeling of not being able to breathe enough air; a feeling which is accompanied by a headache and throbbing temples. Altitude sickness has struck. In the event of an emergency, bottled oxygen is available at the reception desk of the guesthouse.

The following day, we head down to the port to confirm whether we can visit our two intended destinations on Lake Titicaca: the ninety-eight so-called 'Reed Islands' and the island of Taquile. One must be granted special permission from the island council to visit Taquile Island. Our reason for visiting the island is to study the social structure that exists on the island. One feature of interest in this social structure is that knitting is associated with an unconditional high status among men. Our reconnaissance in the harbour results in the decision to visit the Reed Islands on one day and Taquile on the other day.

The Reed Islands – a matriarchy

The history of the Reed Islands stretches back to the time of the Inca Empire in the 14th century. The Urosindians went out into Lake Titicaca to escape the persecution of the Incas. The Urosindians constructed artificial reed islands on the lake, including houses made of reeds. The floating reed islands are anchored to the lake floor with heavy stones at a depth of 18 meters. Each island is 50 x 50 meters in size and can float for 25 years before it is replaced by a new island. The society that lives there is a matriarchy since each island has a female president. The women engage in traditional female work, such as taking care of the children and cooking, but primarily they work in the advanced weaving of textiles and knitting. Note that both of these jobs are performed exclusively by women.

Taquile Island – where the men knit

Taquile Island is located on the Peruvian side of Lake Titicaca, 45 km from the city of Puno. It is 5.5 x 1.6 kilometres in size, and the island's highest point is 4050 meters above sea level. The island's population is 2200 inhabitants. The island's inhabitants speak Quechua, the same language spoken in Puno and by the other Inca

people in Peru. When the Spanish came to Lake Titicaca, they converted the island into a prison island. The island's inhabitants are of the Catholic faith, but they have incorporated aspects of the traditional Inca faith where *Pachammas* ['Mother Earth'] is central to harvest and fertility beliefs. Notwithstanding its modest size, the island is divided into six districts. There is no police force or other law enforcement agency on the island; civil life is managed as a form of cooperative, and, for example, guesthouses and restaurants are run exclusively by families. Visitors who spend the night on the island will stay with a host family and participate in their meals. Visitors are expected to live by the moral code of the Inca people, which postulates: "Do not steal, do not lie, do not be lazy." Once ashore, we are invited to partake of a lentil soup. The production of textile arts and the inhabitants' lifestyle on the island have prompted UNESCO to include the island on its World Natural Heritage list with the justification that the island is a 'masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity.' Note that no export of handicrafts from the island takes place; all sales are conducted on the island. The island's restaurants are owned and run by families serving local delicacies such as trout and quinoa soup. Potatoes, corn, beans, and quinoa are grown on the terraced farmlands that visitors to the island pass on their way up to the main town.

The division of labour between men and women

Women and girls take care of and shear the flocks of sheep that are found on the island. They collect the wool and dye it using local vegetable dyes and minerals. Then they spin and weave the yarn. For example, the women weave the colourful belts worn by everyone on the island, called *chumpis*. These are wide belts that are decorated with woven patterns. In addition to belts, the women and girls weave bags, shawls, and blankets on fixed looms. The men weave all the cloth used to make skirts, shirts, and waistcoats. Instead of fixed looms, the men use treadle looms. What distinguishes the men's work from the women's work is that the men knit relentlessly. Along the slopes that run down to the water, you can see men walking along the paths, knitting as they go. Their production includes the beautiful hats that are used by everyone on the island, from babies to the oldest members of society. In recent decades, increasing numbers of tourists have visited the island, which is why the men now also knit simpler hats for visitors without overly detailed patterns.

The knitting technique

The men use a knitting method first introduced by the Spanish during their arrival in Peru in the 16th century. Knowledge of knitting did not exist among the Incas before the arrival of the Spanish colonists. However, the local people have shown great skill in the art of weaving and sewing. Their technique is based on knitting 'in the round' with five needles. They knit from the 'wrong' side of the finished product by placing the yarn around the 'neck' to maintain the correct tension and thus prevent the different colours and patterns from getting tangled up with each other. Technically, this entails twenty-two stitches per inch, corresponding to approximately nine stitches per centimetre, resulting in extremely detailed motifs in each piece. The motifs represent birds, butterflies, cattle, sheep, and flowers. In addition, one can find the so-called 'six-segment circle' that represents the division of Taquile into six different districts. The caps that they produce are all edged with a red border. Long ago, the men wore caps with a wide patterned brim and a white upper part. Previously, when a man entered into marriage, they would knit a hat that was solid red with a pattern all the way to the top. Nowadays, these time-consuming knitted pieces are quite rare since animal husbandry and agriculture also occupy the men's time, leaving somewhat less time for knitting. A further consequence of time pressure is that the patterns that the men knit have been somewhat simplified, and the hats that they produce nowadays have five rows,

which limits the number of decorative details that can be included on each hat. The raw material used in making these items comes from the island's sheep, but in recent times acrylic yarn from the mainland has also been used.

The craft and the training

At the age of seven, the boys learn to weave on a treadle loom, a skill that is imparted to the boy by his father. Some years later, the boys learn the basics of knitting. At the age of fourteen, they will have developed their knitting skills to the extent that they can pass their apprenticeship test of producing approximately ten very advanced knitted hats. Knitting a single hat takes two months to complete. A man on Taquile Island will continue with his craft throughout his lifetime for as long as he is able to knit.

A man's skill at knitting has social significance on the island since his eligibility for marriage improves as his skill in knitting improves. His level of craftsmanship determines how a man is judged from a business perspective and is thus directly relevant to his livelihood. If a man can produce knitting products that are sought-after, the probability that he will secure a sound financial future is significantly higher. At the same time, a man's skill level also exerts a powerful attractive force on the opposite sex. Knitting is a way of meeting and socialising across gender lines, allowing men and women to come together, and perhaps the natural excitement and physical contact associated with knitting in a group may lead to a young couple falling in love. It is a somewhat nervous dating scene, where the direct attention of the young people involved in a highly skilled knitting practice requires that they interpret and decode any romantic signals in a de-dramatised contact. For example, their fingers might naturally touch the person they are attracted to in a close demonstration of a specific knitting skill. Once two people have taken a liking to each other and are about to get married, the young man must pass a matrimonial test before his prospective father-in-law. The young bachelor must produce the finest hat he can knit and hand it over to the father-in-law, who judges whether it meets his exacting standards. These hats are judged based on accuracy, pattern, and creativity. Several basic requirements must be met for this hat; for example, it must be knitted so tightly that it is waterproof. If the father-in-law agrees that the hat is of a suitable standard, then the young man is allowed to marry his chosen one.

Knitting symbols of marital status

The colours displayed in the handmade clothing that a person wears show from afar the person's marital status. This symbolism is similar to the rings a person might wear in many Western societies to indicate the wearer's marital status. If you are interested in who is married on Taquile Island, the answer to this question can be found in the patterns and colours of the textiles that are worn by the adults. If a man is married, he will wear a red patterned cap. If a man is 'engaged to be married', he will carry a very heavily embroidered bag decorated with colourful pom-poms. Young men who are single will wear a red cap with a white top. The island's women also wear brightly coloured textiles to signal their marital status. The local women all wear colourful embroidered black shawls with pom-poms attached to the shawl. If the shawl has small pom-poms, it indicates that the woman is single. If a woman's shawl is decorated with large pom-poms, this indicates that she is married. Only baby hats may have ruffles, whilst the island's rulers can be recognised by their particularly colourful hats that always feature earflaps.

The continued life of knitting

The knitted products are housed in a craft cooperative on the island. The cooperative has a shop on the island's main village square. The men's knitted hats and mittens and the women's woven products are sold here. The cooperative decides how many items each person can put forward for sale in the store, where each item is judged based on its quality and design. Assessment of the items that are put up for sale usually takes place every year. Although an increasing number of tourists have found their way to the island, they are still limited in number. This is because Taquile Island lacks an airport, and there is no post office or access to the Internet. Consequently, the marketing and distribution of the items produced on the island remain severely limited. Note that there are no roads on the island, and thus there are no cars in use. In fact, there are no bicycles on the island either.

The island council has chosen to protect the islanders from influences from the outside world and refrain from importing materials in an effort to preserve the island's self-sufficiency. The council also does not wish to export the products that the islanders make but, instead, allows tourists who wish to visit the remote island to purchase the exclusively manufactured products. Items that do not follow the traditional symbolism of marital status are manufactured for tourists. Apart from this small change, life continues as usual on the island, where the women spin yarn and weave, and the men weave and knit in the same way they have done for centuries.

6. Results: Intergenerational learning, culture, and gender

The case of the knitting men on Taquile Island is an example of intergenerational learning, which we will discuss in relation to culture and gender. The unique way that the knitting and weaving crafts are practised on Taquile Island is an integrated part of their culture and has been so for hundreds of years. As artefacts, textiles and clothing are prominent symbols and are also connected to practices and norms in the culture of Taquile. The knitted products display the level of the men's craft skills, but they also display who is married or not. They are thus crucial to understanding the island's social structure. While knitting is usually viewed as an activity that is performed by women in Western countries, one particularity of the culture on Taquile Island is that it is the men who knit. One reason why the men on Taquile Island knit is because of their isolated existence on the island. There are very few other ways in which they can make a livelihood. We may well ask why this particular division of labour has been chosen on the island? Historical documentation shows that men have engaged in knitting in many cultures. One similarity between Taquile Island and Halland in Sweden (mentioned above) is the connection of the practice of knitting to the military world, which is traditionally a masculine arena. When knitting was introduced to Taquile Island by the Spanish conquistadors, knitting embodied a system of knowledge that held practical value for human life. However, a difference between Halland and Taquile Island is that, on the island, it is only the men who knit, while in the region of Halland, both men and women are engaged in knitting. The introduction of knitting (as a technology) by the military to manufacture clothes permeated the culture and became a task for the men, which, in turn, was associated with the men's social status. We argue that this historical example can be used to discuss the implications for intergenerational learning on a general level since new technologies are regularly introduced to societies. When a new technology is introduced to a society, the technology will influence the existing culture in terms of how people interact with each other and with respect to their social positions. New technology requires the development of specific skills but also can be used to produce artefacts that symbolise status. It is usually the case that the older generation teaches the younger generation how to use a technology, as what takes place on Taquile Island. However, if we examine the example of digital technology, rapid changes in this field have sometimes entailed that the younger generation possesses the

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most current knowledge, at least in certain areas. On Taquile Island, the different generations of the island's inhabitants are linked by family connections, and the society as a whole has a shared interest in intergenerational contextual continuity (Donati, 2015). The dynamics of socialisation that takes place via intergenerational relationships (Lüscher et al. 2017) can be viewed as ensuring the continuation of the culture whilst simultaneously preparing younger generations for the responsibility of living and caring for this culture via the learning that takes place. What takes place on the island can be described as a traditional transfer of knowledge from the older to the younger generations, where young boys start their learning journey by sitting and watching the more senior men knit. Step by step, the younger generation learns to master the art of knitting. The uniqueness of the culture can, however, be both a blessing and a curse. The fact that the culture is connected to the provision of a livelihood for the island's inhabitants may pose an unsurmountable obstacle to change since change may well result in the loss of a person's livelihood. For example, if the island's inhabitants wished to learn about digital technology, would such a change align with the existing culture, or would this change have to be managed surreptitiously? And what if a girl wanted to learn how to knit or a boy did not? In such a circumstance, does the culture become an inflexible costume into which people are demanded to fit? Learning between generations would then be reduced to merely adjusting to a prevailing tradition and prevent deviations from the norm. We note, too, how the prevailing gender structures are a characteristic feature of the case of Taquile Island.

Knitting, as a gendered activity, is worthy of closer examination. The gendering of an activity may have implications for who can act and how acts are performed. In descriptions of the island's culture, knitting is connected to high status among men. On several informational websites, the men of Taquile are presented as 'exotic' by virtue of the fact that they engage in knitting. For example, Taquile Island and its textile arts are included on the 'Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity'¹. In our discussion of the theoretical framework for the present study, we mentioned that what the concepts of 'gender' and 'generation' have in common is that they are ascribed social identities. Given this perspective, our interest is directed towards actions that can be observed empirically (Lüscher et al., 2017). An example of this is how gender systems and generation systems affect the distribution of everyday tasks. In Taquile, knitting is gender- and generation-coded and is part of the island's tradition and local history. However, the preservation of a culture is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is honourable to maintain a tradition and transfer traditional knowledge to new generations so that such knowledge is not forgotten. On the other hand, although it might be performed with the best intentions, the preservation of a culture may lead to cultural stagnation. To preserve a culture, it needs to be defined. However, by creating boundaries that are too sharply delineated, one may exclude people from other cultures and even members of one's own community from participating in that culture if they fail to identify or fit within a set of narrowly defined ideas about what it means to be a part of a specific culture. An overly rigorous interpretation and practice of a culture can stifle it and deny its status as something 'living', thereby turning it into a dead object where continuous development is hindered. An alternative to such a dire scenario would be to recognise culture as a living and changing dimension of a society. Such a perspective would also align with how intergenerational learning has developed elsewhere. We suggest that future studies of intergenerational activities for culture preservation, in combination with cultural renewal, would be of value for the inhabitants of Taquile Island and for other cultures that are at risk of drowning under the seemingly irresistible pressure of the Western world's cultural wave.

7. Discussion: Knitting now and then

What can we learn from the knitting culture on Taquile Island? Including historical knowledge in our analysis enables us to adopt a broad perspective and observe manifest patterns of human development. The craft of knitting, which represents a traditional ‘technology’, undoubtedly brought benefits to society when it was introduced by the Spaniards in Peru in the 16th century. Knitting made it possible for the locals to produce goods that added something positive to the community. Today, these products have, to some extent, lost their original survival function because many cheaper alternative products exist in today’s global commercial marketplace. On Taquile Island, however, the inhabitants have decided that the old traditions should be preserved and not be subject to the changes that are taking place in other parts of the world. Preserving the old traditions has allowed the island’s inhabitants to sell their products and make a living. Notwithstanding this success, the preservation of a traditional culture raises several questions concerning the cultural and economic changes that are currently taking place in the world. For example, we ask: How do the people living on Taquile Island deal with the rapid development of digitalisation and its integration into people’s everyday lives? The introduction of knitting as a new technology was a driver of change in Taquile society several hundred years ago, but how will digital technology as a driver of change affect contemporary cultures and prevailing gender systems? And how will it influence intergenerational learning and intergenerational relationships?

The craft of knitting is strongly connected to gender systems, whether it be with women practitioners in the Western world or with the men on Taquile Island. A significant difference between Taquile Island and knitting in the West is that, on Taquile Island, knitting and knitted products are regarded as symbols of status, power, and social position. In contrast, in the West, the knitting craft has lost its importance with respect to these social dimensions. This loss of status [in the West] is partly due to the development of alternative methods in manufacturing clothes and partly since it is mainly women who have kept on knitting whilst other artefacts have become expressions of status for men in society. Given the role of knitting in the Western world, the men of Taquile Island and their knitting craft thus stand out as a unique cultural phenomenon. But one might also ask why the weaving craft performed by the women of Taquile is also not brought to the forefront in presentations of the Taquile Island culture? They are also highly skilled workers with a specific responsibility for their families. Furthermore, they are also engaged in a traditionally male task, namely shepherding. When we look at other research on the topic of knitting, the physical benefits of knitting, such as reduced stress, an avenue for creativity, and other therapeutic and meditative elements, are highlighted (Riley et al., 2013). Nevertheless, in the case study of the knitting craft on Taquile, knitting is regularly connected to concepts of ‘status’ and ‘an elevated skill’. These differences in descriptions of the craft can be understood as representing gendered ways of describing and framing activities (in the West and on Taquile Island, respectively). In the literature on intergenerational relationships, the reproduction of gender systems is rarely discussed, although the reproduction of gender systems has the potential to bring a new understanding of specific cultural phenomena. Given this, we ask: What is learnt when people socialise across generations? What is explicitly articulated, and what remains tacit? To what extent is intergenerational learning a reciprocal process that combines traditional knowledge with emergent knowledge? And, finally, we ask: How is intergenerational learning framed as a cultural activity that is embedded in frames of reference that influence such learning? These questions emerge as an important outcome of our intrinsic case study since we have explored a phenomenon and raised new research questions for future studies. In the following section, we provide a summary of our observations and encourage further exploration of the topics discussed in this paper.

8. Conclusion: comments and questions

An intrinsic case study of men who engage in a knitting craft was introduced to discuss intergenerational learning in a specific cultural setting. We conclude by providing the reader with three summary comments and questions that should be addressed to support intergenerational relationships and learning between generations:

1. In the case of Taquile Island, the community has made a great deal of effort to maintain cultural traditions as a form of opposition to (con)temporary social changes. The maintenance of their traditions is viewed as valuable because it connects to previous generations, to local history, and to prevailing value systems. Furthermore, it is considered an important dimension in intergenerational learning. However, there exists a risk for a ‘lock-in’ effect where future development of the culture may be hindered. How can intergenerational learning comprise local and family history whilst simultaneously involving new elements and remaining open to change?
2. The knitting craft on Taquile Island is approached as a technique for providing a family’s livelihood, in contrast to Western societies where knitting is seen as a hobby and connected to a sense of well-being. From a historical point of view, the knitting craft can be understood as a technology. When a new technology is introduced to a society, it will influence the society’s culture in terms of a re-adjustment of social positions and how people interact with each other. Previously, the older generation taught the younger generation how to use a new technology. However, nowadays, with the introduction of digital technology, certain changes have taken place in this respect. This raises the question about how such changes in the transfer of knowledge between generations might influence intergenerational interaction, intergenerational learning, and traditional status hierarchies.
3. The gendering of particular activities has implications for *who is expected to act* and *how acts are performed*. Gender stereotypes can be an obstacle preventing people from performing tasks they must or wish to do. The men of Taquile Island are presented in a way that focuses on their cultural heritage and unique skills. But we may ask: What about the young men who do not wish to knit or the young women who do? This raises questions on a general level about the space that is provided to these individuals should they wish to break from prevailing norms in intergenerational relationships and the learning that takes place on Taquile Island.

Notes

1. Taquile and its textile art, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/taquile-and-its-textile-art-00166> November 15, 2022

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