Rebuilding "we ourselves" after the pandemic: Intergenerational dialogue as a protective factor against loneliness and social isolation in older adults

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Abstract

The compulsory measures implemented by governments to control the COVID-19 pandemic affected the global population's physical, psychological, and behavioural health. In particular, the pandemic further exacerbated social isolation and loneliness among older adults, and the interaction between ageism and the pandemic heightened the sense of loneliness and social disconnection among older adults, necessitating work to increase social cohesion. This paper aims to explore the impact of the pandemic on older people, focusing on the social dimension and intergenerational education as protective factors capable of mitigating the negative effects of the pandemic on social isolation in the elderly and thus preventing its consequences. Finally, several perspectives for rebuilding a democratic community alliance are reflected upon. The revision of community dynamics from an intergenerational perspective can give renewed value to the interweaving of biographies and social projects in an inclusive and participatory way.

Le misure obbligatorie attuate dai governi per contrastare la pandemia di Covid-19 hanno influito trasversalmente sulla salute della popolazione in termini di aspetti fisici, psicologici e comportamentali. In particolare, la pandemia di Covid-19 ha ulteriormente esacerbato l'isolamento sociale e la solitudine tra gli adulti più anziani, e l'interazione tra ageismo e pandemia ha accentuato il senso di solitudine e disconnessione sociale tra gli adulti più anziani, richiedendo un necessario lavoro in direzione di una maggiore coesione sociale. Il documento si propone di esplorare l'impatto della pandemia sugli anziani concentrandosi sulla dimensione sociale e sull'educazione intergenerazionale come fattori protettivi in grado di mitigare gli effetti negativi della pandemia di Covid-19 sull'isolamento sociale degli anziani e quindi di prevenirne le conseguenze. Infine, è stata condotta una

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riflessione su diverse prospettive per la ricostruzione di un'alleanza comunitaria democratica. La revisione delle dinamiche comunitarie da una prospettiva intergenerazionale può dare nuovo valore all'intreccio di biografie e progetti sociali in chiave inclusiva e partecipativa.

Keywords: loneliness; social isolation; intergenerational programmes; older adults; COVID -19 pandemic

Parole chiave: solitudine; isolamento sociale; educazione intergenerazionale; anziani; pandemia da Covid-19

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1. Introduction

In March 2020, a global pandemic was declared by the World Health Organisation. Due to the risk and fear of COVID-19 contagion, governments implemented compulsory measures such as travel restrictions, mass quarantine periods, and lockdowns, resulting in significant changes to the social habits of a large portion of the global population. Although the effectiveness of confinement and isolation is highly recognised for the control of infectious diseases in research (Nussbaumer-Streit et al., 2020), since the waves of the COVID-19 pandemic subsided, our society is facing another pandemic in the crumbling of social relations, which have the appearance of social isolation and loneliness. Before the pandemic, the UK (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2018) and Germany (CDU/CSU & SPD, 2018) had already increased political attention on the issue of loneliness, and Japan decided in 2020 to establish a Ministry of Loneliness caused a sensation in world media. The Japanese concern is consistent with current alarming European data regarding loneliness mapped by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (Berlingieri et al., 2023).

Although finding the causal direction is challenging (Murayama et al., 2015), dimensions of loneliness and social isolation are linked to a wide range of health risk factors, including physical, psychological, and behavioural aspects. In addition, it is known that societies characterised by social isolation also experience lower economic outcomes (Kung et al., 2021). In contrast, taking trust as a measure of social capital, it is observed that high levels of trust are associated with high levels of social cohesion (Bekkers et al., 2007; Langenkamp, 2023). Moreover, high trust is associated with low levels of crime and political instability, as well as economic productivity (Langenkamp, 2023). Therefore, considering the impact of COVID-19 on societies, it is necessary to work in the direction of increasing social cohesion.

Since trust between generations—a type of social capital—is increased by the intensification and duration of contact (Bekkers et al., 2007), one educational pathway to strengthen social cohesion may be intergenerational education. It should be noted that intergenerational distance was particularly emphasised during the pandemic because of the risk of older adults, who are considered more vulnerable, being infected by children and young people. As the elderly were portrayed as more fragile in their interpersonal interactions, this led to a reinforcement of ageism and an exacerbation of social isolation among the elderly (Donizzetti & Capone, 2023). For this reason, intergenerational programmes based on contact between generations have been identified as a potential tool by which to understand different generations and changing biases and stereotypes towards older adults.

The aim of this article is to explore the impact of the pandemic on older people through a review of studies conducted over the last four years. In particular, despite the fact that there is little empirical or theoretical evidence and the preconditions of intergenerational programmes have not received much attention in scientific publications, with the exception of a few studies (Kim & Chung, 2022), we intend to focus on intergenerational education as a protective factor capable of mitigating the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on social isolation in the elderly and thus preventing its consequences.

2. Social isolation, loneliness, and older adults

Although social isolation and loneliness are distinct concepts, they are related but do not necessarily co-occur. Social isolation refers to the objective lack or scarcity of social contact and infrequent interactions with others (Badcock et al., 2022; Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Donovan & Blazer, 2020); in contrast, loneliness is the subjective experience of inadequate meaningful connections due to a discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships (Prohaska et al., 2020). In particular, loneliness comprises an emotional component characterised by negative feelings and a social cognition component involving the perception of social disconnection and a

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desire for connection. Furthermore, loneliness can manifest as a transient normal experience or a chronic condition, both of which can have adverse physical and mental health outcomes (Akhter-Khan & Au, 2020); in parallel, individuals may possess a social network but still experience feelings of loneliness, while others with a limited network may not. There is evidence of a moderate correlation between loneliness and social isolation (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2006; Shankar et al., 2011). Within this relationship, quality and variety are factors of significant importance concerning objective social interactions and the experience of loneliness. Finally, research has indicated that the quality of social contacts plays a more significant role than the quantity of contacts in predicting loneliness (Hawkley et al., 2008).

While trying to shed light on the antecedents and impacts, there is no complete understanding of the impact of loneliness and social isolation. On the one side, social isolation and loneliness are associated with reduced social support and can be triggered by situational factors, including adversity and significant life changes or transitions, such as moving away from home, starting a new job, experiencing parenthood, illness, or the loss of a partner or parent (Lim et al., 2020). On the other side, according to Malcolm and colleagues (2019), limited research has explored the indirect pathways through which loneliness and social isolation contribute to ill health, with a predominant focus on direct biological or physiological mechanisms (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2003, 2010). Among the studies focused on health-related behaviours, some indicate that loneliness and social isolation are linked to reduced physical activity (Cené et al., 2022), alcohol abuse (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015) and smoking (Lauder et al., 2006). Furthermore, significant implications for health outcomes have emerged, including increased risks of anxiety and depression, cardiovascular disease, and premature mortality (Cené et al., 2022; Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017). The simultaneous presence of social isolation and loneliness increases the risk of mortality (Beller & Wagner, 2018). Finally, research has demonstrated that the adverse health consequences associated with social isolation and loneliness increase the utilisation of health and social care services (Cotterell et al., 2018). Moreover, these adverse effects are observed when individuals experience persistent contextual and risk factors that affect their social relationships and fail to employ effective coping strategies to mitigate these challenges (Akhter-Khan & Au, 2020).

Luhmann et al. (2022) provide a comprehensive summary of the antecedents of loneliness, categorising them into individual and contextual factors. In particular, among the latter, in addition to the indirect pathways already outlined, there are various factors that can impact the distribution of individual-level predictors of loneliness within a specific time frame or geographical location at a macro level. Cultural norms and values, societal welfare systems, and demographic composition are examples of such factors that explain geographical disparities in loneliness. These macro-level influences exert their effects on individual-level predictors, including the quality of living conditions and social integration. In contrast, the individual predictors identified are as follows. Firstly, low socioeconomic status and poor health can diminish opportunities for engagement in social activities. Secondly, identifying with a marginalised group due to ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity, for example, exposes individuals to a higher risk of discrimination and subsequent stress. Thirdly, personality traits, including extroversion and emotional stability, show a negative correlation with loneliness. Lastly, the influence of old age is a potential risk factor which will be further explored in subsequent discussions.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly exacerbated the issue of loneliness because of the compulsory social distancing, travel restrictions, mass quarantine period and lockdown measures implemented by governments. Studies have revealed that 25 per cent of citizens in the European Union experienced persistent feelings of loneliness for more than half of the time (Baarck et al., 2021; Berlingieri et al., 2023). In countries with an advanced communication system (e.g. Australia), people had opportunities to communicate without in-person contact, the effect of pandemic social restrictions being different from those on populations with low communication

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system level (Gong et al., 2022). Furthermore, data from New Zealand showed that the higher the socioeconomic status and social participation, the lower the loneliness (Lay-Yee et al., 2021).

The literature lacks consensus regarding the age group that is predominantly affected by loneliness and social isolation. Several studies (Clair et al., 2021; Juvonen et al., 2021; Lay-Yee et al., 2021; Teater et al., 2021) have revealed that loneliness and social isolation are greatest among young adults, in particular younger men living in individualistic cultures (Barreto et al., 2021), while other studies (Hawkley et al., 2022; Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016) have reported a prevalence of these issues in older adults. Furthermore, a comprehensive meta-analysis of longitudinal studies by Mund et al. (2020) revealed no significant relationship between age and loneliness.

Despite these findings suggesting that loneliness is not solely confined to older adults and that individuals across various age groups can experience elevated levels of loneliness, older age is often associated with an increased risk of social isolation due to factors such as retirement, loss of loved ones, and limited mobility (WHO, 2021). Changing family structures and geographical dispersion can further contribute to social disconnection in this population (Smith & Victor, 2019; Victor et al., 2012). Loneliness in older adults is a multifaceted concept (Asante & Tuffour, 2022) influenced by subjective perceptions of social connectedness and the quality of relationships. Both social isolation and loneliness have been linked to increased risks of depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, and overall mortality in older adults (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Smith & Victor, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated social isolation and loneliness among older adults (MacLeod et al., 2021) in comparison with pre-lockdown data, and somewhat among younger adults (Lucchetti et al., 2020). Strict social distancing measures and lockdowns resulted in reduced opportunities for social interactions and increased feelings of loneliness. Older adults, especially those living alone or in long-term care facilities, faced heightened isolation due to limited visits from family and friends (Boamah et al., 2021). Studies (Cao et al., 2020; Killgore et al., 2020) reported a significant increase in loneliness and depressive symptoms among older adults during the pandemic. According to a recent systematic review (Sen et al., 2022) on the use of digital technology in reducing social isolation of older adults, the use of digital technologies and virtual communication platforms provided some relief, helping families to stay connected but also encouraging physical and mental wellbeing and linking older adults to resources in healthcare. However, not all older adults have access to or are proficient in using these tools, further exacerbating their social isolation.

Finally, ageism—defined as discrimination and/or positive or negative stereotyping against older people based on age (Iversen et al., 2009)—played a role in exacerbating loneliness among older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. Negative age stereotypes and assumptions about older adults' vulnerability to the virus resulted in social exclusion and increased feelings of loneliness (Fraser et al., 2020). Therefore, ageist attitudes influenced decisions regarding access to healthcare, social support, and the prioritisation of resources, further isolating older adults (Morrow-Howell et al., 2020). This interaction between ageism and the pandemic has contributed to a heightened sense of loneliness and social disconnection among older adults (Ayalon et al., 2021) and to lengthening the physical and psychosocial distances between generations.

3. The social dimension as protective factor against social isolation and loneliness

As we have seen in previous sections of this article, social cohesion suffered a major fracture during the COVID-19 pandemic. This raises strong questions about how intergenerational alliance can be reconstituted and consolidated after a distancing that has profoundly affected global lifestyles. The value of relational contacts and intergenerational experiences has become even more important in the face of the need to regenerate a post-

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pandemic social glue that will help young and old to escape the vortex of disconnection in presence and resignation to an online social existence.

The decreased opportunities for relationships highlighted the distance and difficulty of mutual understanding. The transition to a predominantly online life revealed heterogeneity of paths of inclusion and exclusion that marked differences and inequalities. Social proximity—a preventive factor to the diminution of the various autonomies of the elderly—was replaced by remoteness, the search for a 'safe' distance that caused significant decay and involution with respect to the maintenance of residual capacities, exacerbating a state of distress in which the paradigm of bio-psycho-social fragility clearly emerged (Gobbens et al., 2010). The weakening or loss of self-sufficiency in the absence of significant established supportive relationships further defined frailty as a transit towards decay and dependency in a loneliness that placed the elderly population in a state of deprivation and weakening (Das et al., 2021; Pinazo-Hernandis et al., 2022).

Keeping relationality active despite the absence of the spatio-temporal co-presence of bodies is a priority that opens up pedagogical questions on dimensions of caring in which the body, as a container of stories, events and experiences, becomes a tangible trace of memory, of transits, of ongoing labours and crossings, in a spiral of discovery of the transient being between revolt and resignation (Améry, 2013). From the wisdom of the elderly to the nobility of resignation, the silences and absences of relationships caused by COVID-19 have been filled by a media communication devoid of spaces of hope. The lack of contacts, bonds and high-touch gestures of care increased the fragilities materialised in hospitalisation and institutionalisation that, where not directly experienced, invaded the media with the 'infodemic' on COVID-19 (WHO, 2020), favouring the circulation of an excessive amount of information, sometimes not sifted accurately. The story of lonely, isolated and distant bodies sheds light on the last stretch of existence, the Agony (Pennac, 2012), in which life becomes only memory—a regret of one's own story that inhabits faded memories, capable of describing ancient details that fill the days of present life. This is an unstable and pitiless time which, through physicality, marks a biologically determined existence, but which calls to a tension to life that needs attention.

Rebuilding relational bridges with significant ties and with the broader social sphere is without doubt a contemporary urgency that strains individual and collective identities. The pandemic was not just an emergency in itself: it brought out multiple challenges of complexity. We can refer to the possibility of increasing awareness that we all belong to a community of destiny immersed in an era of great uncertainties towards an unpredictable future (Morin, 2015). If the human community does not strive for political regeneration, protection of the planet and a humanisation of society, we will not be able to cross increasingly complicated crises. In this regard, according to Morin, the crisis we are experiencing is made up of three dimensions: the biological one of the pandemic that indiscriminately threatens our lives (with an extension of fragilities); the economic one born of restrictive measures (and the consequent effect of global impoverishment); and the civilisation one, with the abrupt shift from a civilisation of mobility to the obligation of immobility (with the need to rethink ourselves in plural environments of reciprocity and learning). In order to cope with such complexities, without any pretence of control, it is necessary to move towards a regenerated and planetary humanism that draws on the sources of ethics—namely solidarity and responsibility—present in every human society (Morin & Abouessalam, 2020).

Community paradigms need to be rethought from a problematising perspective, moving towards indications of resilience, interdependence, responsivity, care and pro-tension as responses to the criticality to the society of risk, connection, freedom, power and uncertainty (Giaccardi & Magatti, 2020). The pandemic crisis can become a lens through which to read the present time with other priorities. It was an occasion to observe closely a phenomenon that collectively affect humankind; a rift that reveals new boundaries and therefore new areas to

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be explored; an opportunity to open ourselves up to the unprecedented with more equitable collective trajectories. Ageing, understood as a continuous process that inhabits the variable heterogeneity of social phenomena, cannot be reduced to a static phase of life, as this would inexorably lead to withdrawal and exclusion (Deluigi, 2014). It is necessary to initiate and consolidate regenerative participations that intercept the desire to be always and profoundly human. The experience of loneliness and the traces of abandonment in recent years have made way for an uncertainty that has left the elderly suspended, in a total absence of planning and with other representations and narratives of death, in solitude and distant from the embraces of loved ones though subjected to the media gaze that has transfigured it, with no possibility of exit.

In this critical transit, apparently without end, we are called upon to search for possible paradigms not of inertial adaptation but of proactive response, and it is clear that this revision requires community ties capable of welcoming change and paying attention to the challenges that, as humans, concern everyone—first and foremost, the seeking of spaces and times of dignity that permanently cross the processes of ageing (Deluigi & Trotta, 2022).

The WHO (2020) emphasises how the correlation between social participation and physical functions in the elderly population strongly impacts quality of life and the maintenance of cortical functions, which in turn affect physical wellbeing, motor activity, self-esteem, and emotional and psychological support. We have to consider that "not only physical activity is affected during quarantine, but also mental health. Several studies have described the mental health consequences in previous quarantines, such as higher risk of depression, emotional disturbances, stress, low mood, irritability, or insomnia, also being associated with higher rates of suicide in the elderly population" (Sepúlveda-Loyola et al., 2020, p. 2).

It has been scientifically proven that maintaining a healthy lifestyle and an intact relational network can prevent many forms of stress, anxiety, and bad habits, since mental and physical wellbeing are strongly correlated if we consider humans as a bio-psycho-physical units (Bhandari & Paswan, 2021; Braveman & Gottlieb, 2017; Steptoe et al., 2013). In spite of this awareness, according to ISTAT (Italian National Statistics Institute) data:

> Satisfaction with family relationships is expressed in a similar way by men and women; it is highest between the ages of 14 and 34 (where the share of very satisfied reaches 37%), it declines in later ages, up to 64, and then rises again in the oldest age group (just over 30%). The lowest levels of satisfaction are found among single persons (28.6%) and especially among men (24.5%). [...] Unlike satisfaction with family relationships, levels of satisfaction with the friendship network decrease steadily as age increases, reaching their lowest value in the oldest population (13.7% in the 75+ age group) (ISTAT, 2021, pp. 110–111).

It is therefore necessary to focus more attention on the preventive design of extended social and community support modalities across the population. Thus, we will elaborate on the main axes of intergenerational dialogue below.

4. Intergenerational education

Intergenerational dialogue constitutes a space of reciprocity between people belonging to different generations who choose to get to know each other, knowing that they are the bearers of peculiar identity elements, rooted in spaces and times that are not entirely familiar to those to whom they are relating. The logic behind intergenerational dialogue is nourished by the sharing of ideas, experiences, memories and projects. Activating intergenerational networks and alliances means overcoming the idea of age and generation being forcefully linked to

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certain roles or capacities, initiating paths of interaction and mutual learning, especially in experience (Baschiera et al., 2014; Deluigi, 2016; Kaplan et. al, 2020; Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008). Belongings and cultural, family, social, political, spatio-temporal references become specific traits in which people recognise themselves as protagonists of projects. It is in the encounter with diversity that life stories can be interwoven, opening up to new perspectives and initiating processes of self-revision.

Intergenerational dynamics and practices cover a wide field of action and reflection and solicit transformative and learning opportunities between generations (Boström & Schmidt-Hertha, 2017; Sánchez & Kaplan, 2014; Schmidt Hertha et al., 2014).

The link between memories and projects is to be understood from a perspective of sharing personal heritages that become relational and create intergenerational bridges, fostering a sense of understanding and respect that positively impacts community life. Mutual learning, subjective growth and co-creation of knowledge in a dynamic and enriching educational environment can give rise to a broader transformation of society (Luppi, 2015). Designing intergenerational dialogue opens the door to participation and co-construction of integrated systems of care for the self, others and living contexts (Gecchele & Meneghin, 2016). In this way, the relational and generative welfare paradigm (Fondazione Emanuela Zancan, 2014, 2015) is urged towards the development of community and participatory approaches, promoting sustainable goals for increasing quality of life and social innovation.

The themes of solidarity and intergenerational dialogue that support ageing processes (Nussbaum & Levmore, 2019) open up towards social logics of empowerment in which each individual and collective subject learns the skills to become an active part of quality relational contexts. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of intergenerational education and learning in old age is needed, rethinking the enhancement of different educational and training approaches between young and old, in formal and non-formal places, researching and evaluating local interventions and community practices capable of moving on the axis of educational gerontology as an element of challenge and resource for the whole community (Formosa, 2019). Lifelong learning and the lifespan perspective (Baltes et al., 1980; Elder, 1984) provide the background for the key role of intergenerationality and become the basis for the development of learning cities (Chianese & Cornacchia, 2022). Thus, the emphasis is on development as a constant process, overcoming views centred on roles and expectations linked to rigidly described life stages.

Opening up to new co-constructed, re-signified and transformative learning (Mezirow, 2009) makes it possible to deconstruct the somewhat too static image of the young person who learns and the elderly person who teaches, provided there is a genuine desire for discovery among the interlocutors. Although exhausting, nourishing the desire to co-construct something new together, starting from interpersonal relationships and inclusive forms of organisation of contexts, can guarantee a renewed desire to be a community and an active member of the living context. This will support the virtuous circle of solidarity and caring, tracing its leading characteristics in the specificity of the contexts of intervention.

It is essential to initiate analyses and design considerations that critically re-read the complexity and peculiarities that characterise different social, relational and organisational scenarios with a global and intercultural gaze (Findsen & Formosa, 2015). In this regard, it is interesting to take into account plural perceptions and representations in the world and to be open to role and value attributions in highly complex contexts. This requires deconstructing univocal lines of interpretation and turning one's gaze to differences in ways of generating encounters and the difficulties manifested when it is the distances and not the elements of transversality and commonality that are most pronounced. In these cases, pedagogic attention can dwell on intergenerational dialogue

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as the constitutive hinge of a human cohesion that passes through multiple languages, multiple codes and representations, and diverse references and educational roles (Fusco & Zoletto, 2022).

5. Intergenerational intervention for preventing social isolation and loneliness among older adults

Several systematic reviews have examined interventions to address social isolation and loneliness, but conflicting findings and the need for higher-quality research have been noted (Masi et al., 2011; Welch et al., 2023). While interventions targeting older adults have been explored, it is important to recognise that social isolation and loneliness affect individuals of all ages, including young people, who may require specific interventions (Eccles & Quarter, 2021; Qualter et al., 2015; Surkalim et al., 2022). Furthermore, literature has been interested in reducing loneliness, focusing on interventions explicitly classified as addressing social skills, social support, opportunities for social interaction, or impairments in social cognition (McWhirter, 1990; Perese & Wolf, 2005; Rook, 1984). In three further reviews, this classification was implicit, although not all reviews included studies that addressed impaired social cognition (Cattan & White, 1998; Cattan et al., 2005; Findlay, 2003).

According to Welch et al. (2023), intervention outcomes vary according to population characteristics including coping skills, needs, degree of loneliness, and contextual factors like age, socioeconomic status, health condition, and place of residence (Fakoya et al., 2020). As a result, a universal approach cannot be applied, emphasising the significance of customising interventions to meet individuals' specific needs and contexts (Akhter-Khan et al., 2020; Fakoya et al., 2020; Mann et al., 2017). Moreover, intergenerational interventions typically involve structured activities such as shared learning experiences, mentoring relationships, and collaborative projects which promote interaction and relationship-building between older adults and younger generations.

Considering a specific type of intervention like intergenerational interventions, interesting results emerge regarding the impact on social isolation and loneliness. For instance, a systematic review by Zhong et al. (2020) revealed that intergenerational interventions positively influence social isolation and loneliness outcomes. In parallel, a realist review by Phang et al. (2023) highlights the importance of tailoring strategies to address the specific needs of different groups of older adults, including those who are lonely, reside in long-term residential care facilities, or live independently in the community. In particular, while providing training in and access to digital technology may be effective in reducing loneliness among community-dwelling older adults, it may not yield the same benefits for older adults who are already experiencing loneliness or social isolation. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the unique circumstances and characteristics of each group when designing intergenerational programmes. In addition to tailoring strategies, Phang et al. (2023) suggest that the duration of intergenerational programmes should be considered during the design and implementation phases. In fact, the length of these programmes can significantly impact their effectiveness and outcomes. Short-term interventions may be suitable to address immediate social needs and to promote initial connections between generations. However, longer-term programmes can provide more sustained benefits, allowing the development of deeper relationships and the cultivation of mutual understanding and support between older adults and younger generations.

A recent meta-analysis by Petersen (2022) on the effectiveness of intergenerational interventions on young and old adults that took into account 23 independent studies showed that the interventions have a significant, albeit small, impact on the improvement of young people's attitudes towards the elderly; it also revealed a similarly small but significant impact on the reduction of depressive symptoms and increased generativity, quality of life, and physical health in the older adults. On the other hand, interesting results are revealed by Krzeczkowska et al. (2021). In particular, their systematic review evaluated the impact of intergenerational interventions on

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loneliness in four quantitative studies, including one non-randomised controlled trial, two mixed-method studies, and one pre- and post-intervention study. Among these studies, Lee and Kim (2019) found a significant decrease in loneliness after completion of the programme when loneliness was considered as a component of the social isolation measure. Gaggioli et al. (2014) reported significant post-programme reductions in general and emotional loneliness, although social loneliness did not show significant changes. Finally, Barbosa et al. (2020) and Xu et al. (2016) did not find significant main effects in relation to loneliness in their respective studies.

6. Perspectives for rebuilding a democratic community alliance

The dialogue between generations, particularly observed between young and old, inside and outside family logics, is oriented towards promoting and enhancing growth processes throughout life with particular attention to the collective dynamics connected to the relational modes and possibilities of individuality. The primary reference on which to orient policies, welfare systems and educational interventions relates to the European year dedicated to active ageing and solidarity between generations (UN, 2012) in which the essential guidelines were defined and shared in order to develop and spread active citizenship practices, learning logics, participation and co-responsibility strategies. Intergenerational cooperation is described as a function of mutual and constant learning and a renewed construction of the concept of active and social citizenship. It therefore becomes essential to foster communication, establish and maintain social relations, and support the mutual recognition of skills and knowledge between generations to work towards an improvement in quality of life for everybody and a more conscious citizenship. Greater democratic participation calls for solidarity as the foundation of the paradigm of inclusive societies for all ages (UN, 2002). The political role outlined by the choice of proximity welfare is thus evident: in fact, an active community is presupposed to need a co-participating system with which to dialogue and design socio-educational interventions in the best possible way.

Intergenerational educational paradigms are based on the possibility of creating circumstances to nurture exchanges, relations and reciprocity, especially when perceived distance seems to be the insurmountable limit for proximity. Getting out of age and generation stereotypes and paying attention to the meanings of experience requires an idea of citizenship and participation that triggers projects aimed at promoting a social fabric made up of relevant spaces and times and that does not renounce inclusive processes and actions aimed at rediscovering and recreating a deep bond between those who belong to micro-macro contexts, between the local and the global (Deluigi, 2015). The debate on digital skills and the digital divide also emphasises trajectories of inclusion and exclusion, depending on the accessibility of resources and the language used to convey communications. This perspective was most evident during the COVID -19 pandemic emergency (Gao & Zhou, 2022).

Interpreting social dynamics as a moving and evolving system means grasping the different meanings that people ascribe to experiences; in this sense, intergenerational dialogue becomes an inclusive and regenerative setting for local contexts. Thinking together makes it possible to share and amplify resources and possibilities, and to recognise fragilities and criticalities; being more in contact with the context and its inhabitants, it is easier to experience oneself as an active protagonist, including the elderly (Ripamonti, 2005). The initiation of welfare logics and practices, strengthened by community and reciprocal ties, represents the true substance of social innovation and participation. In order to foster intergenerational dialogue, mediations must be found, creative solutions and divergent strategies must be hypothesised, and accessible languages must be used. In the reconstruction of widespread co-responsibility, it is essential to weave networks of meaningful relationships, starting from the

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proximity that already exists between people, in order to extend community logics oriented towards 'living well' and widespread wellbeing at the level of the community (Tramma, 2017).

Between practices of solidarity and logics of care, intergenerational dialogue can become a propulsive community engine (Deluigi, 2014), enabling citizenship as a whole to initiate logics of cooperation. It is not the dynamic of power and knowledge dependency that orients such an approach but the movement of exchange between the parties in which one grows old living, re-appropriating oneself in interaction with others and revealing oneself as a social resource to be understood as a protagonist of a life worthy of quality and representativeness at a collective level. An interesting strategy concerns the detection and design of formal, non-formal and informal channels of listening and experiential learning, with a strong investment in participatory models and the building of trust and reciprocity. Fostering intergenerational dialogue nurtures the effective the power of thinking and acting of individuals and ensures that there are movements of reciprocity and participation capable of filling the bonding gaps to which unbridled individualism constantly subjects us. Consciously engaging in the social contexts of life, understood as community spaces, can prompt the implementation of forms of cooperation based on the recognition and enhancement of personal and social resources. If co-responsibility orients collective action, caring for the community and the territory in which one lives can generate participatory ferment and transformative acts, favouring the passage from the "I myself" to "we ourselves", from the individual to citizenship, consolidating cohesion between social partners.

Moving towards logics of proximity not only supports approaches to combat isolation and stereotypical common sense (between young and old), but also strengthens solidarity, generating places and times of hope and trust in which to become active participants (Cruz-Saco & Zelenev, 2010; Hayes et al., 2022) and find communicative ways in which to redefine new narratives (Demetrio, 2012). In this way, generational confinements can be prevented and countered by offering spaces for sharing and discovery in which life is considered a relational continuum (Musi, 2014). Facilitating and mediating intergenerational projects means investing in the initiation and consolidation of connections that are ready to transform thanks to an in-depth knowledge of otherness and, therefore, always in motion. Being ready to welcome the unprecedented, the unforeseen, the divergent from what was expected is an invitation to keep relationships open, grasping the value derived for the parties involved and for the community of reference. It requires the ability to look to the future in a climate of trust and activeness between generations. Dedicating time to getting to know others, slowing down and respecting each person's ways and needs, taking into account the fragilities in the existential continuity, denotes an intentionality aimed at getting to know and recognise each other, strengthening ties and feeling mutually accepted, even in the identity and generational nuances not immediately perceived or declared.

Meeting the other person, understanding his or her needs and requirements in all their complexity, means accepting his or her weaknesses, frailties, fears and, at the same time, understanding what interests, abilities, skills he or she is cultivating and has cultivated. This redefines not only interpersonal ties but the accessibility of social life spaces in which to choose to be active subjects, taking into account the changes that the processes of ageing and longevity inevitably bring with them. Creating proximity means generating the premises for solidarity. The other is no longer a category, an age, a stage of development, but the person to whom one relates. Planning jointly in a participative way therefore requires the will to initiate common paths that revive the sense of understanding, alliance, and solidarity towards the future. It is necessary to share intentionality and thus to strengthen the cohesion that has been generated so as not to dissipate potential energies or withdraw into oneself. The dialogue between young and old can be a moment of rediscovery and relaunch of identity and relationships in which the joint crossing of ideas and experiences leads to a knowledge that goes beyond prejudice because it becomes concrete self-experimentation and orientation towards common goals (Kuball et al., 2023).

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Living experiences together and discussing topics of perceived urgency and relevance can trigger the desire to reflect on collective issues and interests, even to the point of supporting joint decision-making (Hayes et al, 2022; Peacock et al., 2020). The interweaving of people born in encounters that have been sufficiently extended to allow effective participation can constitute opportunities to regenerate social networks that need to be taken care of so that subjects continue to discover themselves and others and to build movements and itineraries of learning, socialisation and affectivity. Taking an interest in the other and, with the other, taking an interest in common issues are trajectories in which intergenerationality can authentically grow. In this way, the collective heritages become vast, heterogeneous, articulated, and rich in nuances and elements of originality and change with which to be confronted in a spiral of dynamic discovery and repositioning of the self that, even as it reflects and lives joint experiences, unceasingly ages. This is an awareness that, if fully experienced, opens up the possibility and the need to invest in time that leaves ample room for the human and their relational becoming.

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