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A research agenda for geographies of everyday intergenerational encounter

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This paper calls for a research agenda that attends to the geographies of everyday intergenerational encounter that occur informally in communities. Using the theoretical framing of social infrastructure and encounter, it argues that we need to better understand the potential of the everyday, mundane, and often fleeting social interactions we have in the everyday shared spaces of our neighbourhoods, and that it is these interactions that can have the biggest impact on intergenerational relations. This argument is made in response to a lack of research on "naturally occurring" intergenerational encounters when compared to a more well-established body of research on intentional intergenerational practice and design. To demonstrate the value of attending to encounters of the everyday, the paper draws on a body of research within social and cultural geography on intercultural encounters that points to the value of "everyday civics" in contributing to community cohesion in the context of cultural diversity.

KEYWORDS
community, encounter, intergenerational, social infrastructure

1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite Vanderbeck's plea over a decade ago for an intergenerational approach to geographies of ageing (2007), a divergence still exists between the robust area of children's and youth geographies on one hand and the somewhat more modest (yet growing) field of ageing scholarship on the other (Hopkins & Pain, 2007; Vanderbeck, 2007). Of course, there have been great advances within both areas of research. The work of child and youth geographies has been instrumental in establishing younger people as agents in their own lives rather than as being in a stepping stone stage towards becoming an adult (see Pain, 2019). This has been further realised through research emphasising young people as political agents, as growing political frustrations in both the Global North and South have mobilised a "youthquake" of political action. Meanwhile the field of ageing geographies has made significant inroads to consider more fully the affective and experiential dimensions of ageing, troubling associations of dependency, and in later life, while also recognising the diversity of experience (see Skinner et al., 2014). However, despite such advances being made at each end of the age spectrum, discussions have still tended to run in parallel to one another and focus on particular, discrete age cohorts.

Broader discussions within human geography have considered more general questions of age as a social category and suggested how it might be studied. Hopkins and Pain (2007) draw on the concept of intergenerationality (along with life course and intersectionality) in calling for a relational geography of ageing, one that allows us to think about age as being produced through our social interactions. The concept of intergenerationality, the relations and interactions between generational groups, "recognises the material effects on the experiences and quality of life of older and younger people" (Hopkins

& Pain, 2007, p. 289). The importance of intergenerational research can be seen in the study of many contemporary social issues. Vanderbeck and Worth (2014) point to the language of generational division, conflict, and separation that dominate discussions surrounding state welfare and climate change, for example. As generational inequality continues to be offered as an explanation for social and political unrest, we need research that can offer more nuanced insights into these relationships.

Conceptually, intergenerationality is also helpful in allowing us to consider age (and the experience of ageing) as socially constructed and reminds us that experience of age is relational and contingent on our interactions with others. For Vanderbeck (2007), the geographies of intergenerationality outside of the family remain substantially under researched. Therefore, this paper aims to set out what we already know about intergenerational relations and then to build a conceptual framework for how we might advance this area of research specifically by moving outside of the family and into the wider community. It does this by responding to Latham and Layton's (2019) call for infrastructural approaches to human geography.

2 | EXISTING AREAS OF INTERGENERATIONAL RESEARCH

Intergenerational research exists within several discrete pockets of geographic enquiry. Social geographers have considered how place-based identities can be transferred through generations (Richardson, 2015) and migration scholars have considered decisions, experience, and patterns of settlement through an intergenerational lens (Bailey et al., 2004; Cook & Waite, 2016). One of the larger bodies of intergenerational work outside the family unit is the appropriation and perception of public space by "younger" and "older" people. Pain's (2005) work, for example, stresses the fear of public space experienced by some older people based on their perceptions of how this was used by younger people in the community. Although appreciation of the tensions and conflicts that can arise from intergeneration encounter in public space is important, Hopkins and Pain (2007) observe that more positive community-based experiences are less well documented, leaving a gap in our understanding of the how more ambivalent and mundane interactions contribute to how different age groups see each other and themselves.

Outside human geography, research on intergenerational issues has also tended to be focused on rather particular and quite narrow concerns (Yarker, 2019). For example, much of the discussion is in relation to intergenerational relationships within the family and usually in the context of care of older people (Stewart et al., 2015). This body of work has offered insights into the domestic experiences and negotiations of ageing but tends to place the older person very much in a position of dependency, serving to remove agency from the older generation in this context. A small, but important, body of work exists around intergenerational friendships, emphasising the mutual benefit to physical and emotional wellbeing for all parties (see Elliot O'Dare et al., 2017). These discussions of intergenerational friendships are a useful reminder that older people are also the givers of care (in its broadest definition) as well as the receivers.

Research from social gerontology broadly agrees on the wider benefits of intergenerational contact for older people's mental and physical wellbeing (Thang, 2001). For younger people, benefits have been found to include increased resilience, an enhanced sense of social responsibility, and better school results (Hatton-Yeo & Batty, 2011; MacCallum & Palmer, 2006; MacCallum et al., 2010). Community-level benefits can also be gained through the building of mutual empathy between different age groups and the challenging of ageist attitudes (Vanderbeck, 2007). Buffel et al., (2013) argues that improved intergenerational relations in a place can contribute towards sustainable forms of development.

On this basis there has been a growing policy interest in intergenerational practice (IGP) and, to a lesser extent, intergenerational shared sites (IGSS). The Beth Johnson Foundation defines IGP as aiming to bring people from different generations together in purposeful, beneficial activities, building on the positive resources that different generations have to offer one another (Granville, 2002). Buffel et al. (2013) add that such activities are aimed at goals that benefit everyone, including the wider community. Commonly cited examples of IGP tend to be around young children visiting nursing homes, mentoring and tutoring schemes, or multigenerational oral history projects (Granville, 2002). Although the amount of documented assessment and evaluation of these interventions is limited, research has found the benefits to older people of being around increased social activity and ability to deal with vulnerabilities, a renewed sense of worth, reduced social isolation, and skill sharing (Hatton-Yeo & Batty, 2011; MacCallum & Palmer, 2006; MacCallum et al., 2010). As well as specific programmes and interventions designed to encourage intergenerational encounter, policy has also looked to the role of shared spaces of intergenerational encounter (Yarker, 2019). UK examples include co-locating libraries with children's centres, purposefully designing parks and outdoor space with intergenerational equipment, and co-locating different age-related activities in the same community centre (see Melville & Bernard, 2011).

In recent years, urban design and planning have increasingly turned to a more collaborative approach to facilitating intergenerational encounter (Fincher, 2003; Fincher & Iveson, 2008; Peattie, 1998; Sandercock, 2003). Ammann and Heckenroth (2012) surveyed a number of urban housing developments in Germany that purported to enable different generations to live alongside one another as well as promoting interaction between the generations. Their conclusions provide support for the importance of shared spaces of social interaction within the community. Specifically, they found that many models of best practice arose from cooperative efforts of actors from across the neighbourhood. However, these are examples of designated and intentional spaces of intergenerational interaction. They have an important role to play in reducing social isolation and promoting community cohesion, but there are contradictions and limits to conscious attempts to orchestrate meaningful encounters within institutional spaces (Thang, 2001). There remains a lack of research into the more mundane and fleeting types of intergenerational contact that can occur in everyday life (Yarker, 2019).

The relative lack of research into everyday interaction perhaps, as argued by Vanderbeck, reflects an assumption of the natural or inevitable division of age groups within a community. However, as demonstrated above, there are important benefits, as well as unintended consequences, of intergeneration encounter in public space and geographers are well placed to provide insight into how such spaces might be experienced from an intergenerational perspective. Vanderbeck writes (and I agree) that this lack of research into everyday intergenerational encounter is surprising given the wealth of geographical research that exists elsewhere in the discipline around everyday civics and intercultural encounter.

Based on the brief review of literature above, I wish to argue, first, that discussions of community-based intergenerational encounter would benefit from both a greater theorisation of the role that space plays in shaping such interactions and, second, that we need to pay much more attention to the mundane encounters that occur in everyday places. Drawing on the robust body of human geography research around everyday intercultural encounter, this paper demonstrates the need for a greater consideration of the informal intergenerational encounters that occur in everyday space. To further this understanding the paper also recommends a conceptual lens of social infrastructure to tease out a more detailed understanding of everyday intergenerational encounter in public space. In doing so, it sets out a future research agenda for the geographies of everyday intergenerational encounter, one that attends to how different spaces shape the types of intergenerational social connections experienced and allows space for understanding the work such connections do at both an individual and a community level.

3 | EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS ACROSS DIFFERENCE

Intergenerational encounter is about building bridging capital, i.e., developing social networks and connections between different age groups. However, these connections do not have to be strong ones for them to foster intergenerational relations. Granovetter's (1973) seminal work on the strength of weak ties is relevant here, especially if we are looking at the types of social connections that may develop from encounters during the course of everyday life that tend to be more fleeting and mundane. Granovetter distinguishes between strong ties (frequent contacts and deep emotional involvement) and weak ties (acquaintances with sporadic interactions and low emotional commitment) and makes the argument that it is the latter that provide essential links between different social networks. These weak ties are useful on an individual level in a number of ways. For older people in particular, Gardner (2011) has found weak ties can form the basis of informal networks of care that can provide support when needed but without obligation. Weak ties can also be used to circulate information from people in different networks; "removing a weak tie, therefore, could potentially cause far more damage to transmission of knowledge than the elimination of a strong tie" (Hauser et al., 2007, p. 77).

The importance of bridging capital at a community level is emphasised within the well-established area of literature from social and cultural geography concerned with encounter and spaces of encounter in the context of ethnic and cultural diversity. Scholars in this area emphasise the need for proximity but also stress the need for the regularity of encounter, even if fleeting, as part of the everyday experience of living in a place. In the context of diversity, or even super-diversity such encounters have been found to help break down prejudice, build tolerance, and contribute to community cohesion.

In identifying the types of social interactions at work here, many scholars point to the importance of "low-level" sociability that occurs in public places, such as opening doors for people, saying hello, and other mundane acts of friendliness that become meaningful when repeated over time. These interactions represent an important facet of mutual acknowledgement (Laurier & Philo, 2006; Thrift, 2005) and potentially shared feelings such as happiness, fear, frustration, and hope that can hold potential for more profound social relations (Askins, 2016). This has been referred to as "micro-publics" by Amin (2002), which, he argues, are better when allowed to emerge organically through everyday social encounter rather than at larger scale engineered events. Similarly, Jane Jacobs (1992) identifies such interactions as "incidental encounters and essential for developing an 'ethics of togetherness'" (Jacobs, 1992; Sennett, 2017) or social surplus (Amin, 2002), where a

common sense of trust and tolerance emerges out of pragmatic and practical social interactions in a shared space. It is the everyday interactions in everyday spaces that can provide important sites and practices of what Gibson-Graham refer to as the "unwitting, involvement in the practice of collectivity" (2003, p. 65). This becomes particularly important in highly individualised or segregated communities and therefore has an important role to play in intergenerational relations.

Concerns are often raised of communities from different ethnic groups living in parallel within cities. The spatial separation of different age groups may not be as stark but can still exist. There is evidence, for example, that different age groups use public space in cities in different ways and at different times (Warpole & Knox, 2007). Some older people may avoid city centres in the evening and some younger people may not feel welcome in shopping centres with very overt forms of privatised security (Minton, 2009). Some residential areas can also become age-segregated as housing developers focus attention of providing homes for families and young professionals. To add to this, ageism – which some fear may have increased due to the way older people have been positioned within the coronavirus pandemic – can influence how people of different generations interact with each other (Abrams et al., 2020). As ageing populations are becoming more diverse in relation to ethnic and cultural backgrounds, questions of intergenerational relations increasingly become interlinked with intercultural ones and cannot, and should not, remain in separate spheres.

Therefore, encounter becomes particularly important for intergenerational relations right now, and the types of interactions that can help foster an "ethics of togetherness" become helpful in thinking about what types of interactions are important for building up trust between those of different ages living in the same neighbourhood. As already noted in the introduction to this paper, there is often a narrative of intergenerational division and conflict around many societal issues premised on what separates different age cohorts rather than what they might have in common. This is similar to discussions of cultural diversity. Points of difference become magnified and extrapolated as sources of conflict and tension. Therefore even fleeting encounters can be vital for building the weak ties of association between individuals and groups from different backgrounds.

It is worth noting, however, that literature around intergenerational relations in social gerontology and associated social sciences often does not engage directly with the concept of encounter, instead referring to intergenerational contact or interactions. This may, in part, be due to the fact that what is being discussed is often the interaction as a result of direct intervention through intergenerational programmes wherein the language of activities, projects, or practices is more common. However, there is a specific genre of contact that encounter refers to and the conceptual connotations it carries are useful to understanding intergenerational connections. As Wilson (2017) explains, "encounter" is historically coded as a meeting of those with difference or in opposition. There is an understanding, continues Wilson, that encounters are about disturbance, ruptures, or surprise. This becomes central to the conceptualisation of encounters as something transformational, as they offer something unexpected or destabilising. This paper therefore suggests that the concept of encounter might be a useful one in understanding intergenerational interaction precisely because of the transformational potential offered by encounter. It moves social engagement between people of different ages past a point of individual interaction, and allows us to think about the implications for intergenerational relations more widely.

In addition, as a critical concept encounter also remains open to the possibility that such engagements with difference may not always be positive and, at the very least, may have unintended consequences. While arguing for a greater theoretical engagement with encounter in intergenerational work, this does not also assume that intergenerational encounters in themselves are always positive or productive. Indeed, it would be naive and irresponsible not to recognise the potentially negative form that intergenerational connections can take. Valentine reminds us of the inability to separate social encounters and the spaces in which they occur from "the knotty issue of inequalities" (2008, p. 333). We must remain mindful that that encounters across difference of any type need to be *meaningful* and can only be so if they actually change values for the people involved in a positive and progressive way (Valentine, 2008).

The next stage in developing a conceptual framework for intergenerational encounter is to consider the types of spaces in a community that can facilitate these types of interactions. For this we turn to a recent, and growing, policy and academic interest in the concept of social infrastructure.

4 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

In his book, *Palaces for the people*, Eric Klinenberg defines social infrastructure as "the physical places and organisations that shape the way people interact" (2018, p. 5). He takes an expansive interpretation that includes community spaces such as village halls and community hubs, public services such as public libraries and health services, public spaces such as parks and squares, as well as commercial spaces such as shops, shopping centres, coffee shops, and banks. Such spaces are often referred to as third places, referencing Ray Olderburg's influential book *The great good place* (1989). This defines

third places as being any space that has the capacity to facilitate social interaction with others and therefore has the potential to support the building of social capital. It distinguishes these places as being outside of the home (first place), and our place of employment (second place), and so they are third places.

In their 2019 paper, Latham and Layton provide a useful and detailed overview of the diversity of ways in which shared spaces have been studied, demonstrating a breadth of disciplines and empirical foci. However, among this disparate collection of research, the conceptual framing of social infrastructure is almost entirely absent. It is in this context that Latham and Layton advocate taking an infrastructural approach to research on communities and urban life. By thinking infrastructurally, they argue, social scientists would be better placed to "consider the kinds and qualities of facilities that allow social life to happen, the kind of sociality that is afforded by them, and how this can be recognised as a public life" (Latham & Layton, 2019, p. 4). This paper responds to this by demonstrating the need for an infrastructural approach to intergenerational encounter.

A conceptual framing of social infrastructure allows us to focus more directly on what types of spaces we need to create and to invest in that can support social interactions between community members of different ages in a way that is organic and informal. It encourages us to take a broad interpretation of what social infrastructure is and to think beyond the types of social spaces that typically come to mind. Specifically, it encourages us to think about the "naturally occurring" mundane interactions that take place in community third places that may not have a primary social remit as well as thinking beyond spaces that are typically associated with one age group, such as child care centres and accommodation for older people. Here we are thinking of places such as shops, cafes, public transport, and green spaces, spaces that all age groups use, although perhaps in different ways. They are places that are defined by their ordinariness and unassuming nature (Finlay et al., 2019).

Klinenberg (2018) stresses social infrastructure is necessary for nurturing public life, but also for addressing and preventing some of the most pressing concerns of contemporary urban life: countering social isolation, negotiating difference, and creating places for all:

> When social infrastructure is robust, it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbours; when it is degraded, it inhibits social activity, leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves. (2018, p. 5)

Klinenberg demonstrated this most clearly in his analysis of the differences in neighbourhood death rates during the 1995 Chicago heat wave. Studying two low-income neighbourhoods, Klinenberg concluded that the significantly lower death rates in one of those neighbourhoods could be attributed to the presence of diverse, good quality, and accessible social infrastructure. He argued this was because the more opportunities community members had to bump into one another, exchange pleasantries, and become, to some degree, familiar with each other, the more likely people were to check on neighbours during a crisis, offer help and assistance, and to receive help if it was offered. For Klinenberg, the sociality supported by social infrastructure in this case saved lives. Conversely, the neighbourhood with higher heat-attributed deaths had very few accessible public spaces or amenities, meaning residents were more likely to stay in their homes and succumb to the heat, and less likely to be aware of the wellbeing of neighbours and to act on any concerns.

Bringing the framing of social infrastructure into dialogue with multigenerational relationships, McQuaid et al. (2019) use such a framing to develop their concept of "transgenerational infrastructures" in their study of sibling care practices in Uganda. As a concept, infrastructure, they argue, affords the ability to capture the "complex webs of people, practices and resources and situate them within their spatial and socio-economic context" (2019, p. 3). Drawing on McFarlane and Silver (2017), this use of infrastructure recognises it "not just as a context or a noun, but as a verb" (p. 6), it brings together practices, individuals, and material conditions, which is particularly useful in the study of the complex and sometimes ambiguous nature of multigenerational relations.

One of the most important, yet undervalued, examples of social infrastructure in western societies for Klinenberg, and one that has particular possibilities for intergenerational use, is public libraries. Libraries provide a free, safe, and inclusive space that has the potential to draw in a diversity of users of all ages. Klinenberg praises libraries, and in particular their programmed events and activities, for providing the opportunity for social contact for potentially lonely and isolated people within a community, but also points to the important socialisation role they play for the wider community:

> After all, places like libraries are saturated with strangers, people whose bodies are different, who make different sounds, speak different languages, give off different, sometimes noxious smells. Spending time in public social infrastructure requires learning to deal with these differences in a civil manner. (Klinenberg 2018, p. 45)

Therefore libraries are important spaces of socialisation. For the study of intergenerational relationships, they allow an ambivalent space for people of different ages to be around each other but also to learn from the subtle cues of each other's behaviour in a way where no one group is the "host." Different age groups are able to interact with each other in a unidirectional, non-orchestrated way. Examples such as libraries demonstrate the contribution of social infrastructure to providing informal spaces of intergenerational encounter and the need to consider how different spaces of social infrastructure contribute to intergenerational relations.

5 | CONCLUSION

Although research on intergenerational issues has been developing within human geography, it still lags behind geographic enquiry into both youth and ageing, which continue to grow as strong yet discrete areas of interest. Research outside of geography (mainly in sociology and social gerontology) has a greater foothold in intergenerational enquiry and although some of this work has shifted its focus outside of the family and into the community, it exists largely without a clear spatial framework for understanding the role of space in shaping such relations. In addition, much of the empirical work on intergenerational interactions in public space tends to be case-study focused on intentional and designed interventions, with little investigation into the more organic and everyday interactions that occur between people of different generations in community spaces.

Therefore, this paper has offered a framework for intergenerational geographies that responds to these gaps. First, this would mean the study of intergenerational relations engaging fully with the concept of encounter. This would allow us to tease out the importance of the mundane and fleeting intergeneration encounters that occur on a daily basis while remaining open to recognising the full emotional register that these experiences can bring. Second the paper recommends responding to Latham and Layton (2019) in taking an infrastructural approach to intergenerational research to understand how the everyday and the ordinary spaces in our communities shape such encounters, thereby providing a spatial framework to the analysis.

Cuts in public funding, and the resulting disinvestment in the types of community assets that provide social functions, make it even more pressing to investigate how everyday third spaces might be best supported. In this context it is prudent to also invest time and energy in the social infrastructure that already exists in our neighbourhoods and we may have to look more and more to commercial spaces and services to take on a greater social infrastructure role. This might mean being more creative with green and open spaces, ensuring they are accessible with well-maintained paths and benches, for example, and commercial premises providing space for community use. Considering this context of spatial inequalities in many of our communities, the need for a critical and holistic view of social infrastructure becomes even more important.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this paper as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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