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# Tea and Conversation: The Importance of Life Celebrations

Intergenerational connections can help reduce isolation and marginalization.

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In early January of this year, my lovely cousin hosted an extended family gathering to celebrate the life of her ailing husband. To honor her husband, a physician who had dedicated his life to healing people, family members flew in from around the country. At the event, we heard beautiful poetry and listened to wonderful music. We danced, heard testimonials, laughed a lot, and ate good food. It was also an occasion for conversation and reminiscence. In these very hectic and trying times, it is always a welcome relief to spend some quality time catching up with extended family members and reconnecting.

That event compelled me to think about recent advertisements for Ancestry.com. One of these ads featured an adult who has suddenly learned about the accomplished lives of their grandparents. Sometimes, of course, it is not possible to reminisce with one's grandparents or other relatives. Even so, I sometimes wonder how many times these special moments present themselves and are ignored. How often do we miss the opportunity to talk with family elders about their lives, their past, which is also our past, and chose not to? Family reunions help to pass on customs and rituals that promote a sense of continuity, [identity](#), unity, and cohesion. They also provide a sense of stability during times of transition and [stress](#).

During these gatherings, the foods we consume, the music we listen to, the conversations we have, help create memories that establish values and reinforce cultural identities. In the past, the exchange of information between young and old—inter-generational sharing and learning—tended to occur within the family. The social processes of industrialized and post-industrialized societies which have produced the spread of social media and “fast” culture, have also often brought a decline in such authentic intergenerational contact. In the media-saturated world in which we live, there are fewer opportunities for authentic exchange, communication, and/or learning opportunities across generations. In the contemporary era, learning, and [education](#) tends to be relegated to educational or religious institutions.

In my psychology courses, I often have my students interview an elder about the stresses and strains of contemporary life, about their plans, [dreams](#), accomplishments, and life challenges. Students are frequently surprised by the fascinatingly rich stories they hear. Such conversations also help break down stereotypes and prejudices.

I have spent years researching and writing about how prejudices such as ageism develop. I have found that age segregation is one key factor linked to widespread ageism. Contemporary societies, especially technologically advanced societies, have become increasingly age-segregated. Research indicates that ageist visions of older adults as uninteresting and out of touch are widespread. Population mobility, changes in the traditional multigenerational family structure, and cultural changes have widened the generation gap and increased negative perceptions. For immigrant families, these gaps are even further expanded by cultural differences.

Celebrations and family reunions can serve as a way of reducing the culture and generation gap. Authentic intergenerational communication can help lead

to finding one's place in the world, they can help build continuity and a sense of community. For immigrants, especially, intergenerational contact has the potential to decrease cultural isolation and marginalization. Social media outlets serve important purposes in keeping dispersed families connected, however, they do not and should not serve as a substitute for in-person gatherings. Considering the impersonality of social media communication, gatherings like the one my cousin organized provide a face-to-face platform to connect the past with the present and shape our identity in an ethnically diverse society.

When my students take the time to listen to their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and community elders, they are frequently amazed at how vital, relevant, and exciting the life stories are. The contact hypothesis, a social psychological theory first proposed in the middle of the 20th century by social psychologist Gordon Allport, addresses stereotyping and conflict across groups (Allport, 1954). This theory suggests that face-to-face exchanges tend to reduce destructive prejudices like ageism and other forms of [prejudice](#).

Family reunions that lead to intergenerational conversations are an outlet to celebrate the valuable contribution made by adults of different ages and cultural backgrounds, particularly if the members of the groups are equal and have common [goals](#). Reunions like the one my cousin hosted strengthen family bonds, preserve traditions, and create a sense of connection and belonging. They bring together dispersed family members and lead to reinforcing the existential importance of “home” and “family.”

#### References

Allport, G. W. The Nature of Prejudice. Oxford, England: Addison-Wesley, 1954.

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