

# Rebuilding the Intergenerational Community in Northeastern Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

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## Abstract

*Older adults living in central city neighborhoods often find themselves in the midst of a rapidly changing mix of ethnicities and lifestyles. The neighborhoods in which they have aged have changed along with their support networks that are often challenged. This situation, in turn, leads to difficulties in their meeting daily needs. They are not enjoying the benefits of strong social capital that would be essential for them to thrive in their neighborhoods. This study looks at an example of community building in northeastern Minneapolis intended to rebuild inter-generational aspects and thereby enrich social support networks for older adults. Qualitative methods of research show that this effort was successful in many respects, with evidence of increased intergenerational interaction and support. Significant questions remain, however, as to the sustainability of this pattern once the process of intergenerational community building has ceased.*

## Introduction

Catholic Eldercare, a long-term care institution in northeastern Minneapolis, has attempted to build social capital to support and enhance the lives of older adults in this area of the city. Through extensive intergenerational programming, younger persons, older adults, and other community members are brought together to share stories, work on common projects, and produce interpretations of life in the Northeast. Social capital is linked to the ability of older adults to be active participants in their own neighborhoods and, thereby, be well enmeshed in networks of social support with improved lives. Can intergenerational community building strengthen and sustain social capital in urban neighborhoods?

## Review of the Literature

Society is defined by structured relationships and the institutions that are formed thereby. It is informed by a culture that provides a set of rules for behavior and interaction. The cultural rules governing interaction and the values that inform these rules constitute a social contract. A special case of the social contract, the intergenerational contract, links the three generations of children, adults, and older adults in such ways that the flow of goods is from adults downward to children and upward to older adults. The middle generation is the more generous giver of services

and goods to the other two. All three generations are affected by these decisions. The intergenerational contract is needed to sustain strong healthy communities and societies in which older persons are valued and supported.

Social scientists have long recognized that a *norm of reciprocity* is a cultural universal, so it is hard to understand why younger persons would use their resources to support older persons with nothing guaranteed to be given in return (Gouldner 1960). It is helpful to understand this situation as a process occurring over a lifetime. Since all persons in a society have the potential to live to old age and will eventually be in need of support, no group of persons would be called on to give resources that they would not expect to see reciprocated. The essential points are that everyone ages and that if the policies dictating the level of support for various ages are consistent, then all persons would be treated equally over a lifetime (Daniels 1988). This form of exchange is known as *delayed reciprocity* where a return of the gift is possible but not necessarily given directly by the person receiving the original gift (Honeycutt 1981; Williams 1995). As such, it is a community building process wherein communities are held together through reciprocal ties that occur over a long period of time and may be generalized so that there is not a direct return by the gift recipient to gift giver.

There are some in society who will be less

*productive* than others, and some will be more capable to provide services and support than others, but sometimes only for a season. The person may face an acute illness but expect to fully recover. The person may be older and reaching the end stages of a long and productive life. But he or she is now in the new and very uncomfortable role of a dependent finding it difficult to meet the demands of daily life without substantial assistance. Variations can be from small amounts of assistance to heavy demands for help and can for many reasons apply to people of any age. Acknowledging this reality is essential for constructing a just society.

Trust is essential for support that crosses generational lines, both informally where persons and community organizations respond to the needs of those who are facing difficulties, and formally with social policies and programs. Social exchange relies upon deep reservoirs of trust and wells of mercy. The intergenerational contract is built on these intangibles. Yet, today there are two significant challenges to building an intergenerational contract in the United States of America. Both are related to the changing demographic profile of the American population: (1) a growing imbalance of the number of older dependent persons compared to younger working persons and (2) the changing nature of cultural diversity in the United States.

Since the 1930s, this country has accepted a social policy that links working persons with dependents who cannot work because of age or disability. Demographic change is challenging this. While the over-65 population will grow 70 percent between 2010 and 2030, the labor force will only grow four percent. This means that instead of three workers supporting each retired person there will be only two (The Urban Institute 2001).

It is often argued that, since the worker-dependency ratio is challenging the continued acceptance of the intergenerational contract as a social policy, families need to get more involved in the care and support of older adults. Those calling for this often miss the fact that 80 percent to 90 percent of care now given older adults already comes from family and friends. Not only is the number of older persons growing rapidly in American society, but also, due to smaller

family sizes and the decision by a greater number of women and couples not to have children, the percent of children and younger persons in the population has declined. The percentage of older adults who are childless is expected to increase over the next few decades. This directly challenges the viability of an intergenerational contract that relies heavily on the contribution of family members to the support of older persons (Johnson and Troll 1996). In addition, changes in women's roles wherein women are more likely to be working out of the home result in fewer potential caregivers who will respond to the needs of older persons (Morrison 1990; Olson 1994)

Thus, family involvement in the support of older persons is being challenged by demographic and lifestyle changes that are affecting the abilities of families to respond to their needs. This, combined with a growing imbalance in the worker dependency ratio, challenges the intergenerational contract as a living, yet unwritten, document. At the present time, there is a structural lag in that the specifics of the intergenerational contract have not kept pace with demographic and cultural changes. An intergenerational contract in which younger generations are required to generously support a large and growing number of older adults can easily be seen to be problematic.

Another challenge is the growing cultural pluralism in the United States. America has always been a diverse nation. In the last decades of the twentieth century, however, there has been a movement toward a pluralistic society, not merely a diverse society. The strengthening voices and actions of minority cultures have challenged the power of the dominant culture. For example, African Americans, new immigrant groups, and subcultures defined by a host of factors, including lifestyle and sexuality, are more visible and active in social and cultural life. There is much to celebrate in terms of the great riches brought to the nation and victories over injustice and domination. However, it means that the intergenerational contract is challenged.

At times, it is hard to find common ground among the various cultures and subcultures in a pluralistic society. Sometimes there is competition exacerbated by the fact that the generational

fault lines are often ethnic fault lines. European Americans are greatly over represented among the ranks of older persons in the United States due to differences in longevity compared to other United States populations. It is increasingly likely that a poorer, younger, ethnically diverse population will be asked to support, through their tax dollars, a richer, older, mostly European American population (Angel and Angel 1997) as already shown in places like Southern California with higher rates of ethnic change. The younger population is predominantly Latino while the growing older population is mostly Anglo, leading to calls for a new social policy focusing on intergenerational and interethnic justice (Hayes-Bautista et al. 1988).

Generous forms of social exchange and trust are the basis for the intergenerational contract. A strong intergenerational contract is likely to exist where there is rich social capital available to a community. Social capital has been defined as social interaction and a common, shared set of cultural values. Social interaction as social networks allows one to gain access to valuable information and resources, providing real, tangible benefits that allow a person to meet his or her own needs more efficiently. Trust leads to the decision to work with another person because there is a possibility that the other person will be reliable and keep his or her end of a bargain. Social capital is important to consider because of its linkages with a variety of positive social and cultural outcomes, including helping the marginalized or vulnerable cope with change more successfully. In communities with rich social capital, it is more likely that support will be available to those in need (Putnam 2000).

The literature suggests that strong social capital helps to ensure that the vulnerable are supported. Activities that increase the extent of social interaction and help build a sense of shared values would likely enhance social capital in a community. Less is known about how it happens. My research focuses on one example in which intergenerational programming was used to try to strengthen social capital.

## My Research Methods

My research took place in northeastern Minneapolis, which houses a population of

approximately 63,000. *Northeast* was the birthplace of the city of Minneapolis in 1851.

Through the 1920s, it saw significant immigration from persons from Europe and, by World War II, took the form of thirteen well-defined neighborhoods largely based on ethnicity. Until recently, residents of *Northeast* were primarily of southern, eastern, and northern European stock with a smaller population of Lebanese. Beginning in the 1960s, many of the children of then current residents began to settle in other, more suburban parts of the city. The population of northeastern Minneapolis declined in number, and the people aged in place. After 1970, changes accelerated. Jobs were lost as factories moved away from the denser urban areas to the outskirts of the city as part of economic decline. *Northeast* was seen as an inexpensive place to live, and the number of renters, rather than homeowners, increased. Mostly, the newer immigrants were now coming from areas other than Europe. These changes have accelerated so that currently northeastern Minneapolis is more ethnically diverse than ever before. During the last decade, *Northeast* has witnessed a rebound concerning its attractiveness as a close-in, interesting place to live. Re-gentrification has been occurring with a new wave of more affluent people moving into *Northeast*. With numerous galleries and studios, it has become a center for artists. There is a growing population of gay men and lesbian women living in *Northeast*. Although signs are apparent of general economic improvement, tensions abound among the various groups of residents with unease about the future development and direction of northeastern Minneapolis.

In the community, Catholic Eldercare offers a full range of services to care for the elderly, including a nursing home. Established in 1980, Catholic Eldercare is well known in the area and has offered many programs designed to break down the walls between the institution and the community. Eldercare's intent is to help strengthen *Northeast* as a community and make it a better environment for aging in place for seniors. Eldercare has invested in programs that reach out, and it has invested in a three year program to help build intergenerational relationships. This paper focuses on one aspect, the

Discovery Cafe project, consisting of structured conversations among a diverse group of community members. The goal is to get to know one another, share life stories, and work toward meeting needs that have been identified in this process.

The research that informs this project is qualitative in nature and relies on content analysis of existing documents and participant observation in the Discovery Cafe process. Eldercare has produced a number of documents that were used for content analysis, including notes and reports of various intergenerational events, self-reports from the participants, and internal memos and reports that are linked to these events. Other documents of interest are materials sent out to advertise this work and guidelines that have been prepared for participants. Lastly, participants have created numerous products, written and in other forms, in various media, including drawings, murals, and so forth. These were analyzed to extract major themes related to intergenerational relationships.

Throughout the project, I was involved in participant observation, including program events, planning meetings, and other gatherings associated with Eldercare's overall program. I looked for statements and activities relating to an understanding of intergenerational relationships and their meanings for both older and younger participants.

### Building Community

Catholic Eldercare has worked with a number of churches, community and governmental organizations, and individuals to bring members of different groups together in Discovery Cafes to discuss issues about *Northeast*. Such discussions are to build relationships and work toward commonly designed projects to improve life in northeastern Minneapolis. Such goals were stated in the minutes of one meeting:

Working together, in a spirit of integrity, hope and honest dialogue, we serve NE [Northeast] as a model for moving together into the future for the well being of all. Nurtured and guided by our culturally diverse past and present, we know and use each one's gifts, weaving them together as

essential threads in the fabric of the community's life. Needs are recognized and responded to with joy, love, generosity and care. Open to the Spirit, we expect miracles.

A large number of projects resulted. They include art shows, community education events, and intergenerational programming connecting local students with older residents under Catholic Eldercare.

### Discovery Cafes

A primary focus of Eldercare's work with its Northeast partners is a series of Discovery Cafes, beginning in 2004 and continuing to this day. They are held in neutral spaces and at times that are thought to be convenient for the invitees. They last around two hours and are led by a facilitator. Food and drinks are provided and some music. The atmosphere is designed to be positive and as informal as possible.

The structured conversations aim to elicit perspectives on life in *Northeast* and then to ask the participants what they would desire in the future. There have been around 80 participants in Discovery Cafes including older persons and youths down to the high school years, professionals, and ordinary citizens. Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and the non-religious are represented. Stated goals and assumptions of Discovery Cafes are:

- [1] To create a network that could work through our existing organizations and would get its energy from the groups' clarity of purpose, creative ideas and strong personal relationships.
- [2] To create a conversation which provides participants with an opportunity to meet each other on a more personal basis, get to know one another's interests and needs and to plan how we might work together for the well being of the whole. The assumption is that we can do more together than we could ever do alone. Another assumption is that we are here to contribute to one another. As that happens, our knowledge grows. We want this to become a connector culture, which focuses on linking people, perspectives, and world views.

## Perceptions of Northeast as a Neighborhood

As northeastern Minneapolis is undergoing rapid change, questions arise: What is a good community? What are desirable directions for future development? Who really lives in *North-east*? Who really is a *Northeaster*? Who should live in *Northeast*?

The latter question was answered in a number of ways. First, northeastern Minneapolis is a place and to be a real *Northeaster* requires one to be connected to that place. When new persons are getting to know one another, it is common to ask if a person "lives Northeast." The proper response is to give an approximate location of where that might be, done in terms of specific neighborhood or street names. If not actually living there now, one may indicate affiliation by saying that one used to live there but moved away, that one was born there, works there, or attends a church in the area.

Another way to answer the question as to the true identity of a real *Northeaster* is in terms of who should and who should not live *Northeast*. This area has long been diverse and is often mentioned as a point of pride. It was frequently stated that *Northeast* should be a place that celebrates diversity. Yet, participants spoke of challenges concerning northeastern Minneapolis involving newly arrived immigrants of different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

It was often noted that acceptance and celebration of newer forms of diversity would entail changes in *Northeast*. Participants at Discovery Cafes reported that many "new Americans" felt uncomfortable with the open style of meetings and community forums in *Northeast*. Conversations often led to the question of how *Northeast* as a community can effectively welcome newcomers to the area of different ethnic and racial backgrounds and help them be more successful in their lives in the area.

Yet, these conversations also took another direction. Outsiders were sometimes described as dangerous or likely to be responsible for a perceived rise in crime. Many persons spoke of *Northeast* as a formerly safe neighborhood whose residents were home owners and families. They implied that newer residents, many of whom are culturally different than most of the long-term

residents, were more often renters often living in non-traditional family forms, such as cohabiting singles or homosexual couples. This was also the cultural and social profile of persons who were thought to be more likely to be responsible for crime or other community problems.

One way that *Northeasters* described themselves was to say who they were not. At this point, persons from northern Minneapolis, a neighborhood with a much higher percentage of African American residents, were said to be unwelcome in *Northeast*. It was noted that when the Lowry Street bridge, a primary crossing point from northeastern Minneapolis to northern Minneapolis, was closed, crime (as was perceived) went down because, it was argued, it was harder for persons from *North* to come into *Northeast*. This perception of *North* as a dangerous, foreign place has long existed in northeastern Minneapolis. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the unwelcome outsiders were Jews. Later in the century, they were African Americans.

Racial references in these statements are clear as when participants pointed out persons moving to *Northeast* from other parts of the United States, with Gary, Indiana, and Chicago, Illinois, being mentioned most often. Both of these are seen as places where many poorer, African Americans have lived and do live. Such persons were seen as not "legitimate" residents of northeastern Minneapolis.

Not only do residents of northeastern Minneapolis have images of who should and should not live in *Northeast*, they also have ideas of what *Northeast* should be like in terms of an *ideal community*. Participants spoke of desiring *Northeast* to be family friendly. This place is one where children can safely play outside, where families know other families as neighbors, and where families are involved in community programs and institutions. There was much concern about public safety and crime in *Northeast*. Although, stranger-on-stranger crime was rare, a few well-known muggings and robberies were often cited to indicate existing problems. Participants spoke of wanting a neighborhood where it was safe to walk to stores, restaurants, or other destinations. They stated that the elderly were often victimized and seen as easy targets. They pointed to examples, albeit rare, of stores being robbed. Lastly,

they pointed to graffiti and the presence of persons who seemed dangerous to them.

Public safety implies knowing and trusting one's neighbors. Participants often spoke of what they desired in terms of the quality of relationships among residents. They wanted to know their neighbors and fellow *Northeasters*. Many persons argued that this was hard due to a high rate of turnover of the population. Participants stated that there are more renters in northeastern Minneapolis than previously. They worried about neighbors who seem to have less commitment to *Northeast* and who make less of an effort to get to know other residents. This situation leads to difficulties in finding common ground. Participants also stated that newer arrivals, many of whom were thought to be renters, had less respect for others and were less likely to be as honest or trustworthy as long-term residents. In an apparent contradiction, participants also spoke about desiring a place where all persons are treated equally and where differences in culture are celebrated.

Residents were clear about challenges to this vision. They spoke of a sense of disconnectedness and lack of communication that all too often characterized present day Northeast Minneapolis. One person described Northeast Minneapolis as a place where people did not know, listen to, or notice her. She noted that there seemed to be more public disrespect of others than in the past. Indeed, a major theme apparent at various meetings was a perception that crime had been increasing in *Northeast*. At a meeting held at Northeast Park, which the mayor of Minneapolis attended, participants called for more police, a clearer focus on problem properties, and pressure on absentee landlords to take more responsibility for their renters. Residents also spoke of a need for more citizen awareness of crime and support of citizen attempts to control crime through more active block clubs, the recently formed Northeast Citizen Patrols, and the efforts of Guardian Angels, who were organizing in northeastern Minneapolis.

As can be seen, Discovery Cafe conversations uncovered a common interest in making northeastern Minneapolis a place where there are shared values, respect for one's neighbors, interaction with and awareness of neighbors, and

vibrant community and economic life. Yet, challenges meant barriers to interaction with and knowledge of others, sometimes along the lines of ethnicity, age differences, or how long a person had lived in the neighborhood. Participants not only talked about how they saw *Northeast*, but they also talked about what should be done to build a stronger community there. Sometimes they called for institutional action, but a number of the suggestions had to do with what citizens could or should do to effect desired change.

### Participants' Suggestions to Create Community

Participants spoke often of diversity and change in northeastern Minneapolis with the need to see persons of all ages and cultural patterns as blessings to the community. They spoke of a *Northeast* where cultural and lifestyle differences were accepted. It should be a mixture of different cultures and lifestyles in which distinctiveness would be appreciated. But there should be a strong foundation as a common core on which to build community. To achieve that end, they spoke of a need for more forums, such as the Discovery Cafes, to bring persons of various ages and cultures together. This effort would be for learning more about each other and to bring children, young adults, those of middle age, elders, and recent immigrants more towards the center of community life. One leader stated that "Youth are the future of the community, [we need to] get them involved."

There were a number of specific suggestions, which pointed to three groups – artists, recent immigrants, and older persons – offering distinct perspectives on building community that needed to be brought forward. Artists are well represented in *Northeast* as exemplified by its designation as an official *Arts District* due to its many commercial art galleries and practicing artists in residence. Artists could help all those living in *Northeast* see things more creatively. Immigrants bring in different views of life and could help all see things in new and interesting ways. Meanwhile, older persons possess long histories and wisdom about *community* that need to be shared with others because *history* is part of *identity*.

To achieve goals of *community*, it was argued that there needed to be places with forum events for residents to meet, interact, and work with each other. Discovery Cafes serve these functions, it was pointed out, so they needed to be extended with more events incorporating food, music, and art to better connect the community. The process needed to begin with celebrating community history through walking tours led by elders to introduce newcomers to the history and human-interest stories of northeastern Minneapolis. And the process needed community-education programs providing basic exposure to the nature of the languages and cultural backgrounds of new arrivals.

Regarding social policies in northeastern Minneapolis, participants argued that there should be more patronage by residents of local businesses and that "Mom and Pop stores" should be encouraged as opposed to chain stores. They wanted Central Avenue, the primary commercial street in *Northeast*, to be a place with more establishments offering safe, family-friendly "nightlife." They talked about the need to provide jobs locally so more residents could work in *Northeast*.

Participants expressed the need for more, better-supported community centers. They lamented the decline in numbers of young persons involved in the Boy and Girl Scouts and other community-service organizations. Schools and churches were often mentioned as crucial to the success of the area. Participants stressed that the schools should be neighborhood schools, with efforts made to connect schools with communities. They argued that all too often churches were exclusively focused on a subpopulation of *Northeast* or on persons with a specific ethnic background. Churches were often unaware of neighborhood dynamics and unconnected to the larger community.

Through Discovery Cafes three concrete projects were identified that could be developed to encourage a process of change. One is an interviewing project to link youth with older adults to capture life histories and to use these to help tell the story of *Northeast*. The second is a sewing project to produce a community quilt to capture many stories and perceptions of *Northeast*. And the third is a *Thanksgiving Celebration*

designed to unite the neighborhood of *Northeast* in a single service of thanksgiving. The first of these has not, but the second two have materialized. Thus, the *Quilting Project* is underway, and two *Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebrations* have been already held in northeastern Minneapolis. The efforts of Catholic Eldercare and of the many partners in the scheduled events of Discovery Cafes have been extensive and have produced concrete results in terms of programs designed to foster unity among the diverse populations of *Northeast*.

## Discussion

I investigated an example of intergenerational programming to discover its impact on social capital in northeastern Minneapolis. Clearly, the programming engendered much discussion and stimulated work toward projects proposed through such consensus. However, has it helped to build social capital?

Increased social interaction that leads to sharing information and resources would be one measure of increased social capital. Through the Discovery Cafes many participants met and interacted with persons with whom they had no previous contact. Older persons sat with younger persons. Persons of different ethnicities met together. Many other differences were bridged in the conversations. During the Discovery Cafes, rich and meaningful interactions took place, which participants appreciated. One older person said, "I grow talking to young people, I can be a better person and, therefore, a better part of the community."

Participants found how the Discovery Cafes were arranged and organized to be conducive to interacting with new people. The experience was safe, neutral, and productive. One person so stated:

I like being part of a community where people are good to each other rather than being rude. I want a better sense of community because it seems more likely to succeed here in *Northeast* than in other communities I've been in.

Participants called for even wider inclusion in the process and voiced a renewed awareness of the need to personally reach out and cross barri-



ers in northeastern Minneapolis. This increased awareness of and actual participation in interaction is a sign of social capital growing in *Northeast* as a result of intergenerational programming.

Similar results were found in the area of trust. The Thanksgiving celebration had the stated goal of building trust through involving a broad array of organizations in northeastern Minneapolis to plan and carry out the celebration, which had never been done before and was a demonstration of a willingness to trust one another.

It was recognized that trust is something that is an action and needs to be built over time. In planning the proposed interview project the recognition of this clearly came through. One person made a distinction between gathering history and having a conversation, saying that, "History is a word that divides, [but] the visit is the thing." In other words, a visit with a conversation is more than an interview. It goes further to have a conversation that is reciprocal and works toward developing mutuality and trust in participants.

## Conclusion

Catholic Eldercare's work through Discovery Cafes has had a positive effect on social capital. The key question is sustainability. Will this work be broadly instituted enough so that it surpasses the promise of Discovery Cafes? One promising development comes in the form of projects that have been initiated through conversations by participants in this process. As they take the message back to their own churches, schools, families, and neighbors, they invite others into the process. For example, the *Quilt Project* has grown into a wider community process of conversation and work.

The process could grow, but it will most likely need further investment of energy, time, and money to bring diverse elements of the community closer together to continue these conversations. It will need a reordering on the part of churches and other institutions to support and work toward expanding the conversations that take place within their walls to include

others in northeastern Minneapolis. The Discovery Cafes have shown that building social capital is possible with results rich in promise. Building stronger "cafe communities" can indeed help support older persons who are facing new challenges and crises as they age in place. ○

## Notes

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