EFFECT OF COMMUNICATION ON THE EMPOWERMENT IN A MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILY

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Abstract

The article sheds light on the effect of communication on family empowerment. Communication, verbal or non-verbal, is the exchange of information in a process of interaction between members of certain groups, such as a family or society in general, which importantly affects empowerment in such groups. Empowerment is a concept of social work as well as social gerontology, which gives people the ability of developing inner resources that facilitate a new life paradigm and improve the quality of life. By conducting qualitative research and semi-structured interviews with two multigenerational families, we analyze the effect of communication on empowerment in a multigenerational family and determine when communication can be destructive and take power away from the family and its members. The contribution of this article is relevant as it scientifically illuminates family relations based on communication as an important factor of empowerment and helps to better understand the improvement of the quality of life in families and consequently in society at large.
Key words: communication, empowerment, multigenerational family, quality of life

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1   Introduction

In this article, we present a case study addressing the effects of inter-generational communication on empowerment in families. The subject of our research interest is focuses on the questions of how communication occurs in a three-generational family, what affects the quality of communication, when communication empowers family members, and when can communication have a destructive effect on a family member and on generations within the family.

Firstly, we explain some facts (concepts, phenomena), suggested by the literature discussing communication and family empowerment. In the second part, we present the results of our qualitative research, namely a case study of two families with three generations. Last but not least, both the discussion and the conclusion attempt to answer the question of when communication can be productive and when is it destructive instead. Based on the results of the study, we demonstrate instances in which communication empowers and those in which it disempowers or destructively affects family members and generations within a family, as well as the family as a whole.

1.1   Family and the Significance of Communication in a Family

The UN defines family as a community of at least one adult or a group of people who take care of a child or more children, and is recognized as such by the law or customs of member countries (UN).

Satir (1995, p. 11) defines family as a social space where different functions, goals, habits, and roles take place. In this social space, individuals' identities are formed. Adults are responsible for the family, they are the creators of people.

Each family member is formed by patterns, habits and happenings that a family, wherein he lives, encounters. This gives certain weight to family, and is typical for it and it alone. Every family member sets his own starting points for later life, based precisely on the foundations of family patterns and values, which are manifested outside the family,

when that member leaves his family of origin and creates his own life or family (Tomori, 1994, p. 18-30).

Family perseveres as a seemingly independent psychosocial community, which can be described by inner connections of its members, its inner life and its inner world. The everyday family world is subjected to a series of pressures and conditionality, imposed on people by the "economy of everyday life". More and more, family members search for a place in their families for a daily regeneration of their physical and mental abilities, and a place to compensate for identity loss in other social activities (Ule, 2008, p. 81).

Arrangements of families are manifested in people's need for friendship, love, support and safety, as are changes in family life and the lives of individuals (Kristančič, 2005, p. 168). Therefore, it is necessary for generations - either bound to the same place or only related by blood and not living together - to cooperate and establish different ways of cohabitation and cooperation, as constructive cooperation between generations enriches and improves life.

For good intergenerational cooperation in families, communication is important. One of the definitions of communication defines it as a process with the help of which people create and manage social reality together (Trenholm, & Jensen, 2000, p. 5).

Ule (2009a, p. 16-18) defines communication as a means of changing people's behavior, especially through changing the information a recipient receives. Interpersonal communication is a complex social-psychological process, a special form of social interaction and social division of meanings. More often than not, what we think is real is in fact a product of communication. Thus, we constitute our realities with communication. Communication always occurs in a social context which establishes general rules and measures of the inter-subjective world. Communication is influenced by the social context, where we live and all the situational and cultural values of that environment. Moreover, communication depends on the fact that we all speak a

common language , but we need to give up "chauvinism" or the belief that others think, judge, and experience things the same way we do. Additionally, communication significantly depends on the ability to be aware of the differences among people as well as on the wish to understand each other regardless of those differences. This way, we create or, better yet, co-create the conditions for a common basis – for conversing.

The above facts are important for communication and cohabitation in families, and for communication between generations within families. Čačinovič Vogrinčič (1998, p. 195) defines communication as the exchange of information in a process of interaction, where each and every interaction is communication. Communication can be verbal or non-verbal, essential or relational, systematic or complementary, congruent or non-congruent. Communication verbalizes the non-verbalized.

On the whole, mentioned facts show how crucially important communication is in families and between generations and how it can improve the quality of cohabitation of all family members. The meaning of communication was nicely summarized by Brajša (1982, p. 62), who said that communication is a double-edged sword: it can unite as well as estrange, gather or disperse, it can enlighten or cloud even more, it can explain a lot or obscure it more, it can bring opposites together or drive them apart, it can make people happy or even more unhappy.

Communication is an important factor in determining the quality of life in an existential sense and creates the conditions for cohabitation of different generations in families (Liegle and Lüscher, 2004, p. 41).

1.2 Influence of "Empowerment" in a Family

We have to understand the concept of power and empowerment abstractly as well as concretely, as a means and a way of improving life of a certain individual or a group of people. Discussing empowerment is a postmodern concept of social work (Saleebey, 1997, p. 14). Empowerment is an important fact in life of every individual, family, and society.

To offer help means to forward power to an individual or to a group. We have to be able to activate inner resources which help individuals as well as groups to give meaning to life (Frankl, 1994, p. 43), and activate power which enables a good quality of life and facilitates the determination of a purpose for individuals, groups, or the society. Therefore, seeking out the sources of power is a must and should not be neglected at a complementary treatment of an individual, group or a society.

Additionally, it is important to consider another perspective, linked to the perspective of power, i.e. the Theory of control, described by the German psychiatrist William Glasser (2007). The author explains that we, in our own mind, create different mental images and life situations. Freud called these images and situations dreams. Problems occur when life is not in accordance with the images and situations we imagined. Then we are likely to become depressed or lose the ability to search for and activate the sources of power. Glasser states that we should observe others in order to search and analyze their images. In doing so, we slowly establish control over our own mental images and, consequently, control over our less than pleasant emotions (2007, p. 228-231). The theory of control, which is a holistic theory, can also be a way of searching for and triggering new sources of power, although, surely, that is not the only way; Sanja Rozman is of the same opinion in her book called In Love with Dreams (Rozman, 1995).

The perspective of power is very important and crucial for finding good solutions to a certain problem that occurs in a family or between generations within a family. Every family and generation member has to have a feeling that his power and respect are being strengthened, which enables them to search for new power sources and ultimately leads them to good results (Wise, 2005). Through empowerment, social workers and social gerontologists mobilize talents, knowledge, abilities and sources of family and generation members with the purpose of supporting their efforts in reaching their goals and visions (Saleebey, 1997).

1.3 Role of Productive Communication in Family Empowerment

Communication is the basis of every relationship. Without communication, whether it is a non-verbal exchange of information, electronic communication (e.g. e-mail, text messages), verbal (face to face) communication or over the phone, there is no connection between people, family members or generations (Juul, 2010, p. 35-42).

Čačinovič Vogrinčič (1998, p. 195) defines communication as the exchange of information in a process of interaction, wherein every single interaction is communication, too.

Weisinger (2001, p. 31) explains that through communication we reveal ourselves, show our decisiveness or indecisiveness. Communication also entails dynamic listening, the ability to hear interlocutors, knowing how to criticize constructively and be critical of ourselves as well. Group communication is greatly important in families and intergenerational relationships.

Through communication we establish work relationships; professionals have mastered social work language, which ensures an instrumental definition of a problem and joint research of possible solutions (Lüssi, 1991, p. 91). Everything that happens in a therapeutic system or a work relationship is a conversation with one's family. Social workers and social gerontologists are observers and participants of the work relationship whose task is to structure the conversation and steer it in a desired direction. A social worker has to discover and empower individuals, generations and families (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2006, p. 35).

For a healthy cohabitation of family members, generations within families and in society in general, healthy and respectful communication is required. That is the most reliable way to achieve human closeness and cooperation, and to enables the quality of cohabitation (Pogačnik-Toličič, 1993, p. 34).

Žorž (2010, p. 105) indicates that a quarter of Slovenian youth lives in constant conflicts with their parents and that a third of grandparents does not receive emotional support. However, the above fact can-

not be generalized, as situations and ways of communicating differ between families. Nevertheless, we can say that communication plays a crucial role in cohabitation of family members and generations within families.

Ule (2009a, p. 385) explains that negotiation depends on the ways of communication used by family and generation members to create new possibilities and ideas that result in satisfactory solutions for all involved in a given relationship.

In this respect, there are many consultations on what one can offer to a partner and to different generations, what one is willing to accept from them, what one sacrifices in order to gain something. In the process of negotiation, all involved have to consider common interests more than their own personal gains. Reflecting on different options means thinking about alternative possibilities before making a decision about a solution to a problem (Liminski, 2009).

Ule's explanation is important for understanding communication in social work and gerontology as well as for the research process, for co-creating good results that all the members of families and generations negotiate and for the search for good solutions.

The frequency of individual verbal communications depends on the status that an individual has in a group. More often than not, a higher status means more outgoing communications in a group. There is a higher possibility of encouraging or receiving a message, too. An individual directs most communications towards an individual with a status that is higher or at same level as his. The characteristics of communication are linked to the structure of power or hierarchy in a group with an affective structure. In groups of friends, the affective structure is almost entirely in accordance with the structure of communications (Selvini Palazzoli, 1984, p. 44-60).

Satir (1982, p. 45-52) describes communication as a measurement with which two people can measure the level of their self-value and is at the same time a tool which makes it possible to change that level. Satir

formed the concept of four patterns of communication which characterize a family as a group:
1) Appeasement – trying to prevent attack or anger,
2) Blaming – demonstration of power over interlocutors,
3) Rationalization – search for arguments,
4) Deterring attention.

Sometimes, one pattern dominates in families, meaning that members of that family use it and exercise it to function in life.

A family needs the aforementioned patterns that ensure safety or equality as long as there is no need for change. At that point, family needs congruent communication, a message about real experiences, a message of who I am and what I want and need. Congruent communication of individuals can differ and is not necessarily understood as congruent communication of a group or family (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 1998, p. 207).

Communication is of great value and is the main topic of research in families. Communications are meant to establish rules, shape roles, create relatively permanent structures and determine the conditions for change (Trenholm & Jensen, 2000).

It is equally important to note that communication is a valuable social process and social practice, a system of socially meaningful functioning of people, which has its own external and internal aims. The external aims of communication are very different: transfer of messages between people and generations within families, establishing and preserving social relations and relationships, coordinating the functioning of people with each other. Meanwhile, the internal aims of communication are a proper expression of communicational intentions, of successful communicating, construction and reproduction of symbolic gestures and meaningful signs or symbols. Communication occurs on different levels – from a dialogue between two people to global social interactions between groups (Ule, 2009a, p. 20-21).

Communication is the main tool in the field of practical social work. Conversation, counselling, research, open space — in short, work relationship and original work projects all occur on a communicational level. When family or generations within a family get help by seeing a social worker, the conversation with the family and the generations starts. At this point, a work relationship is established, a cooperation agreement is accepted, and research in the sense of instrumentalizing the problem and co-creating the starts. Stierlin and colleagues (1987, p. 34) describe professionals, i.e. social workers as directors, participants and observers.

Čačinovič Vogrinčič (2006, p. 62) describes the three phases of conversation with families and generations within families. The first phase includes establishing a work relationship. In the second phase, reality must be defined and clarified — in short, one must study and formulate what was discovered and define power sources. In the third phase, the conversation is concluded with an agreement and conclusions or by continuing the original work project.

In conclusion, communication is the most important tool that social workers and social gerontologists possess in the process of establishing work relationships and original work projects. Additionally, they have to have a knowledge of conduct. In the process of communication, good solutions are co-created that enable the cohabitation of generations within families and a good quality of life in families and between generations. Therefore, social work as a profession has to research different ways of communicating and ennoble its mission and problem solving with innovative methods. Moreover, it should introduce new approaches to solving destructive intergenerational conflicts in families.

1.4 Meaning of a Family as a Work Group

Bion (1983) notes that a family functions as a working group when it is guided by the principle of reality. It represents a conscious division of labor, individualization and differentiation between family members in terms of doing what needs to be done in and for the family. By having a

function within a working group, an individual's conditions for their autonomy are created and established. The concept of a working group entails involvement, exposure, action and the creation of productive communication.

Similarly, Čačinovič Vogrinčič (1998, p. 220) says that being part of a working group means being responsive, active, communicative, operative; in short, it means being alive. Perceiving a family as a working group encourages all its members and generations to co-create different work projects, which enable the family to function and progress, so that generations learn from each other, respect one another and realize the importance of personal (individual) as well as collective value.

Constructive intergenerational cohabitation shows counterbalance between family and society. The values have an important role in the process of creating positive forms of intergenerational cooperation and connectedness (Knopf, 1997, p. 9-19). Social community, based on communication, must create the conditions for the possibility of all generations to be creatively included, learn from each other and consolidate connectedness, which is the basis for a quality cohabitation in a family and society. None of the generations should be stigmatized, instead all have to be socially important, active and considered.

Social work can transfer good experience and positive practice of support and help of generational cohabitation into the processes of informing, social actions and lawmaking in order to create the conditions for a dignified life in cohabitation of all generations.

2 Methodology

The case study includes two three-generational families. The first one is a traditional family, which functions mainly harmonically and complies with the democratic principles. It consists of three generations, the first generation is the daughter or granddaughter with her life partner (average

age is 24), the second generation is a married couple (average age is 51), and the third is a grandmother (aged 83). The second family does not observe tradition or hierarchy much, and we therefore characterize it as an arbitrary or free family. First generation consists of two children (average age is 23), the second generation is represented by a divorced mother of two (aged 47), and the third generation a grandmother (aged 71).

We obtained the research data with semi-structured interviews, which we conducted to identify opinions of members of the families on the effect of communication on empowerment. We allowed the possibility of expanding the subject, as the interviewees are specialists in practice and were steering the conversation their way during the interview. With both families, we strove to find out how communication affects empowerment within the family, how family members empower each other based on communication and how they create sources of power. We conducted an interview with each member of the two families.

With this study, we set out to determine when communication empowers families and when it disempowers them, when it is productive and when destructive.

Based on empirical data and the above discussion of communication and empowerment, we state the following theses:

- Communication importantly influences empowerment in families.
- Family that functions as a working group co-creates productive communication more easily, which creates sources of power and empowers the family.
- Poor or even destructive communication between family members weakens the family and disempowers it.

3 Findings and Discussion

We present the results or codes, which we attributed based on statements and claims of the studied families in Table 1 below, containing

the answers to the question of what empowers the family members, and Table 2 that contains the answers about what disempowers them.

F1 – researched traditional family

F2 – researched arbitrary or free family

3.1 Empowerment in F1 and F2 and Effect of Communication on Empowerment

Table 1: Empowerment in the families

Researched family	F1	F2
What empowers the family	Work	Feelings
	Conversation	Money
	Help	Reward
	Counselling	Attention
	Common table	

The studied families are quite different. The first family (F1) is a traditional, partly hierarchical family that functions mostly harmonically and democratically, where individuals' roles are decided beforehand. The family functions as a working group. In contrast, the second family (F2) functions in a free-spirited, arbitrary way, wherein individual roles are not decided in advance.

In the researched family F1, connecting links or sources that empower are work, conversation, interpersonal help, counselling and common table. Work, conversation and interpersonal help are the most commonly expressed codes. Thus, we conclude that work, conversation and interpersonal cooperation are the main factors of empowerment of family members. All mentioned codes show that there is very strong communication present between members of researched family F1, as codes such as work, interpersonal help, counselling and common table are all consequences of good and productive communication.

Communication is a basis for quality family relations, however, each family develops it in its own way (Welbourne, 2012, p. 35-40). Ule (2009b, p. 141) says that by communicating we announce, cooperate or even manipulate with interlocutors, which is true for managing relations inside of families and in generations as well.

The researched family F1 can be characterized as a working group, according to Bion (1983). Family members cooperate with each other, develop constructive communication, and feel responsible for each other. In that kind of a family, everyone co-creates the future and the quality of family life. In conclusion, communication is fundamental for creating sources of power, which are based on work, cooperation, counselling and connectedness on all levels of life.

The researched family F2 can be characterized as arbitrary or free. Čačinovič Vogrinčič (1998, p. 207) explains that arbitrary families experiment with unstable structures, using them as reference points for order and for change, where space is unlimited, time irregular, and energy fluctuating. In family F2, rules are not fixed and can be quickly changed or redefined.

As a source of power, family F2 stated the code love or positive emotions. Emotions are very important in a family, as they are a means of expression, which can enrich or impoverish relationships between family members. Moreover, they are either a source of power for families or a means of disempowerment. Every family is an emotional group.

Pages (1986, as cited in Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 1998, p. 209) discuss that at some point in every group a dominant emotion exists, which involves all members of the family. Of course, each member of the group expresses the dominant emotion in his own way. Individual emotions are linked with group emotions and are, therefore, dependent on them.

Positive emotions are very important for family empowerment. The researched family F2 ranks them as the most important. It considers them a connecting power as well as a source of power. Evidently, positive emotions are connected with productive communication. If the

members of a family are able to co-create it, the family holds a lot of power and can, based on that, create new power sources.

Besides the mentioned codes of sources of power, the members of the F2 family also listed money, rewards and attention. These codes show family members are stimulated by rewarding and attention. Hence, productive communication in family F2 is concentrated on emotions, rewards, and attention.

Čačinovič Vogrinčič (1998, p. 194) indicates that communication in a family is in a seemingly contradictory function. Through communication, individualization and restriction of individuals occur. At the same time, though, integration or the creation of a whole happens. Family members communicate on a symbolic as well as a concrete level. In family F2, symbolic communication, when compared to verbal communication, prevails. This is positive if all members of the family understand symbolic communication. Otherwise, it may lead to disagreements and disempowerment of certain individuals or certain generations within the family.

3.2 Disempowerment in F1 and F2 and Effect of Communication on Disempowerment

Table 2: Disempowerment in the families

Researched family	F1	F2
	Not listening each other	Not cooperating
	Disagreement	Disagreement
What disempowers the family	Criticizing each other	Ignorance
	Difference of views	Work
	Work	Helping terminally ill family member (grandmother)

The members of researched families stated a number of arguments which disempower family members. Certain codes, such as work and disagreements, are common to both families.

It is interesting that in family F1, the concept of work appears as both a very strong source of power as well as a trigger of conflict and factor of disempowering family members as well as the whole family. This proves the definition of F1 functioning as a working group, wherein poor communication and fluency of information leads to conflicts that disempower individuals and the family as a whole. Admittedly, said fact is a reflection of democracy as well, where in a group, or in this case a family, communication occurs that has a productive influence. On the other hand, it generates conflict when family members are unable to hear each other, to verify information or to co-create good solutions. Triggering conflict situations is an important aspect in families. If family members confront conflicts and, in the research process, search for solutions which are a product of compromise and co-creating, this will trigger or enable added value and progress. At this point we can argue that a conflict is a driving force for progress if a family and its members are capable of developing productive communication and of searching for good solutions as well as co-creating them. The latter is, in the doctrine of social work, called work relationship. Based on work relationship, every family co-creates an original work project, specific for each family. The role of social workers and gerontologists have in this is to enter during a crisis situation, when families and its members are not capable of productive confrontation,, to encourage productive communication that enables individuals as well as the family as a whole to research and co-create good results.

The working tool of social gerontologists and social workers is their knowledge of conduct, which allows each individual to express his opinion and for those involved to know how to hear each other and search for good solutions. We must not however neglect the ethics of social gerontology and in social work. Nowadays, the field of ethics, sadly, falls by the wayside, which weakens the credibility of scientific disciplines and professions. As professions, social work and gerontology have to pay special attention to the principles of ethics. In addition, we must

build and justify scientific disciplines based on philosophy, ideological-ethical views, tradition and practice. This is only briefly mentioned, as detailed research on the topic is wide-ranging.

Besides the mentioned concepts, the researched family F1 listed bad listening, critique and difference of opinions. This is a reflection of a lack of communication or poor communicating and powerlessness in confronting conflicts. The solution is not in removing conflicts, but in confronting conflicts and establishing productive communication in work relationship and original work project. More often than not, family F1 is successful in that and manages to establish harmonic relationships.

The researched family F2, along with the common concepts, lists not cooperating, ignorance and helping the ill grandmother. Not cooperating and ignorance are a reflection of poor communication between family members. The members of the F2 family are unable to establish work relationships which would trigger the process of research and co-creation of good solutions and productive communication. An important fact or concept, disempowering the family, is helping the old and ill grandmother. In this case, we again are dealing with poor communication, as family members do not hear each other and are not capable of searching for good solutions. The ill grandmother is a burden for the middle generation and they wish to place her in a nursing home, but the grandmother is against it. This field of work is typical for a social gerontologist, who should join F2, establish a work relationship, allow everyone involved to express their views and opinions and, by establishing productive communication, stimulate the involved to co-create good solutions. To perform this, a social gerontologist has to possess knowledge of conduct, so he can, in a research process, share his experience. He must not impose solutions, but lead the work relationship in a way that everyone involved can co-create agreements and solutions on their own. Afterwards, he encourages everyone to abide by the agreements and execute them. At this point, we again must remember the ethical conduct of social gerontologists, who have to ensure that everyone ob-

serve the ethical principles of interpersonal respect and accept value systems of individuals.

4 Conclusion

Productive communication is an instrument of empowerment for family members and the whole family. It can be nonverbal, symbolic, or verbal. The course of communication is specific for every family. It depends on different factors, such as:
- the type of a family or the way in which a family functions,
- the ability of family members to establish a work relationship and an original work project
- the knowhow of family members to create a space where each individual is heard and can express his opinions,
- the ability of family members to deal with conflicts and co-create good solutions.

A family and its members, who know how to create conditions for a productive communication, create sources of power and empower themselves and other family members. Through combined effort they empower the whole family, which then is homogeneous and resistant to disruptive factors and disempowering influences.

Our study shows that productive communication is a factor in the empowerment of a family and its members. On the other hand, poor communication or the absence thereof is a destructive factor that disempowers family members and the family as a whole as well. If family members are not able to co-create productive communication themselves, they should seek professional help. The absence of productive communication and dealing with conflicts weakens or even destroys the quality of life and makes life in that kind of a family very difficult. Moreover, it can lead the family to dissolution, which is the only option left

as the family is not producing sources of power anymore and is making life unbearable for itself.

It is important to note that family functions as a working group, where roles are divided between the members and everyone contributes within his own abilities to the function and the progress of the group, in this case a family. With this study, we confirm the hypothesis that communication importantly affects empowerment. Secondly, we prove that a family functioning as a working group co-creates productive communication more easily, which then in turn produces sources of power and empowers family members and the whole family as well. Thirdly, we affirm that poor communication between family members weakens and disempowers the family.

Based on empirical facts and research, we formulate the answer to our research question: communication empowers family members and the whole family. When family members are able to establish a working relationship, when they enable a place for every member to express their opinion and be heard, and when they know how to deal with conflicts and solve them productively, then and only then they create sources of power which improve the quality of life and stimulate family members to find ways to progress and to achieve satisfaction.

This article is scientifically relevant because it illuminates and emphasizes the fact that communication is the basic tool for creating sources of power and for the empowerment of each individual family member as well as the family as a whole. In the article, we shed light on a small part of the work and the research field of social gerontology as a scientific discipline and the mission of social gerontologists to consider the principles of ethics as well as to develop communicational processes as an important means in social problem-solving.

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