

# AN INTER-GROUP EXPLORATION OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN YOUNG AND OLDER PEOPLE

Report of an OPUS Workshop  
held on Wednesday 25th April 2007  
at  
Lewisham College, Lewisham Campus,  
Lewisham Way, London SE4 1UT

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### 1. INTRODUCTION.

We live in a rapidly changing world that presents problems for all members of society in adjusting to the changing circumstances. A problem that is talked about a lot is the role of young people in society. Politicians, sociologists and the media have also identified a split between young and older people. This split is seen in different ways but it is mostly based on a general sense that all is not right, suspicion and assumption. There are many indications that young people are being used by society as both scapegoats and as saviours. At one level, it seems clear that a split has developed; at another level, it is far from clear what the nature of the split is and what are the underlying causes.

The view taken by OPUS is that young people cannot be seen in isolation from the wider society. Consequently, we need to work together with young and older people to begin to gain an understanding of what is happening.

#### *(a) Purpose of Workshop*

The overall purpose of the Workshop was to test the hypothesis that there are differences that are causing a split between young and older people; and to try to understand the nature of the differences and something of the underlying causes.

In addition, members had the opportunity of learning from their experiences of giving and taking authority and learning how the group dynamics that arose during the day had an affect on relationships between young and older people.

#### *(b) Methodology*

The Workshop was organised as a mainly experiential Inter-group event whereby young and older people were able to engage in an exploration of differences between young and older people. They did this by forming groups of young and older people and then organising meetings of:

- individual group representatives,
- sub-group representatives, or
- meetings between whole groups.

#### *(c) Members*

The Membership consisted of forty students from Lewisham College. Twenty were young people and twenty older people.

## 2. AN OVERVIEW

The young people dominated the workshop in being the subject matter most discussed. There was almost no exploration of older people and of how they were different. This can be seen to mirror societal concerns about young people.

However, the older people dominated in respect of controlling conversations, frequently making assumptions about and talking over contributions from younger people. They were frequently accused of not listening to the young people. At the same time, young people were seen as threatening by the older people.

There are considerable differences between young and older people. Some of these arise from environmental influences; especially law and government policies which can be linked to cultural experience that is often that of another country. Another factor is the role of the media and the constant denigration and stereotyping of young black people.

Parenting is seen as an issue. Mothers are experienced as important and influential role models who are respected and highly regarded. However, there appears to be an absence of male role models in the shape of fathers who barely get a mention which may be symptomatic of family experience. This may also be linked to cultural experience.

The differences largely arose out of assumptions, mainly but not exclusively, by older people about the way young people behaved. For example, young people have got time whereas older people have no time. And young people are unreliable. This latter having the qualities of self fulfilling prophecies whereby the young people become what that are assumed to be.

The biggest problem seemed to exist around issues of respect that arose out of young people pleading for older people to talk to them and for them to listen to them. The experience of the workshop was that this seemed a difficult thing for older people to do. At the same time, young people seemed to over react in their responses which caused them to be disliked and even feared by older people.

The following extracts from the notes taken on the day are intended to give a flavour of the dynamics that were occurring.

### 3. ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES

#### *(a) Housing*

Housing was seen as a factor that may influence young people's behaviour.

**YP:** "The Council Estates are just not good enough for children to grow up in."

**YP:** "Facilities are not the major thing. It's a personal thing, about individual young people."

**YP discussion:** "Council housing that looks like a prison so no wonder young people end up in prison if that is all they have known."

#### *(b) Law and Government policy*

Law and Government policy was also seen as a considerable factor that had an effect on young people's behaviour.

**YP discussion** - Most thought the law was too lenient and that young people needed a bit more fear.

**OP discussion** - A high level of agreement that physical chastisement was necessary, even though they had resented it as children.

**OP's** - Law too lax in UK. But acceptance that sometimes parenting in Africa too harsh.

#### *(c) Peer Pressure*

Peer pressure was referred to but in a minimal way.

**YP discussion** - Babies have babies.

**YP discussion** - Pressure from peers to behave in certain ways and how they didn't want to be all the same but sometimes didn't know when they were being influenced by their peers.

#### *(d) Media*

The Media was seen as a factor that influenced societal views of young people's behaviour.

**OP:** "Media to blame – hoodies – fear for your life. Communication broken because of one story blown up."

**YP:** "The media can sometimes demonise young people, especially black children." The issue of hoodies was cited as an example where the media has created a lot of anxiety

about young people.

**YP discussion** - Crime amongst young people and the influence of the media.

**YP discussion** - They felt demonised by the media as young black people and seen as a problem so stereotyping was an issue.

#### *(e) Culture*

The experience of being raised in a different country was seen as a factor that affected behaviour of young people growing up.

**OP discussion** - More than 50% brought up in different country.

**OP discussion** - Those growing up in other cultures thought YP's were able to get away with unacceptable behaviour. There was much more respect of family and community in other cultures. An atmosphere of impotence in the face of threat of violence.

**OP** Spoke of expectations in his country and respect.

## 4. FAMILY INFLUENCES

### *(a) Parents*

Comment was made about parents as a couple but by far the most frequent comments were about Mothers.

One parent families were seen to be having an effect on parenting.

**YP discussion** - They understood how the way they spoke provoked great anxiety in their parents.

**OP discussion** - A strong belief in the influence of parents in caring for, talking to, loving and disciplining children.

**OP discussion** - Parenting to lax, not enough discipline or punishment.

**YP discussion** - They felt parents somehow need to know what to do. Being busy was an issue for parents but was not seen as the sufficient reason for the issues between generations.

### *(b) Mothers*

Mothers were in the main highly regarded and respected by young and old people alike. They had considerable influence over young people.

**YP discussion** - In talking about their Mums they talked of a fear that they might lose us.

**YP discussion** - They realised that their mothers were anxious and disappointed that their efforts were being spurned so there was also a sympathy for them.

**YP discussion** - There was a touching concern for their mothers.

**YP discussion** - Lot of talk about their mums. The need for encouragement from adults without overdoing it.

**Observation of YP's** - All the YP's had close relationships with their mothers although some said it was too difficult to talk to them and others that they would tell them anything.

*(c) Fathers*

Fathers were seldom referred to in isolation from the notion of parents as a pair. This appears a cultural issue.

**YP women** - "We can't talk to our Dad he's too abrupt." **Observation** - This seemed to be tied to a cultural issue.

## 5. OLDER and YOUNG PEOPLE

*(a) Young People*

Young people were experienced as dependent on the consultants for guidance and support in carrying out their task.

**YP discussion** - The image that surrounds young people and the fear old people – have of them ñ misunderstood.

**YP discussion** - Hopeless and sadness at state of things and a sense of being helpless to change anything.

**YP discussion** - They felt the resort to knives was getting worse and they were quite pessimistic. They thought the next generation would be worse as there was so much anger.

**YP discussion** - Fears of failure and disappointment linked to expectations of adults.

*(b) Young people's views and experiences of older people*

**Observation of YP** - The young people return really disgruntled saying the parents (OP's) hadn't listened to them. They are pissed off.

**YP:** "We don't know what old people think".

**YP:** "Older people are weaker".

**YP:** "Old people don't give young people the chance to be independent".

**YP:** "Old people boss young people around".

**YP:** "Old people are opinionated". "Old people won't try to make friends with young people". "Old people are creating barriers between old and young people". "There is intimidation between young and older people".

**Observation of YP** - Bossing in YP view; instruction in OP view.

**YP:** "Older people tend to stereotype and don't know what they are talking about".

**YP:** "Older people are more experienced they have achieved loads of things. But there is a lack of communication by older people, They are closed off".

**YP:** "Older people should talk to younger people – that's where the respect comes in".

**YP:** "Older people are not patient enough". "Older people want respect. "Older people are afraid of receiving disrespect from young people". "Respect should be reciprocal". "If you don't respect me, I won't respect you".

*(c) Older People*

Older people also experienced a dependent at outset but quickly became organised and developed a structure for addressing the task. OP's were experienced as 'talking over' YP's on many occasions.

**OP discussion** - Young people experienced as badly behaved, irresponsible, and rude or lacking respect.

**YP discussion** - There was a recognition that adults had been there and knew things.

**OP discussion** - The majority of this OP group were mothers. This life transition seemed an important demarcation between young and old rather than age alone.

**OP discussion** - Negative view of young people – having children like fashion accessories, disrespect for parents, rude on buses, loud, threatening, crime.

**YP discussion** - Adults don't understand us. Why don't they trust us? Why do they judge us when they don't know us? We need respect.

*(d) Older people's views and experiences of young people*

**OP discussion** - Points for discussion with YP's: Drugs, alcohol, youth culture, maturity, lack of respect, police, school, government policy, media, and environment.

**OP discussion** - Outrage at YP's assertion that they were 'unsuccessful' for returning to college at a later age.

**OP:** "I wouldn't want to chip in their chat – don't go near them."

**OP:** "Giving it all that – inviting us to talk and then saying 'case closed'".

**OP discussion** - "They don't give a toss, they are rude, they take things personally, they are too loud, they are intrusive and irritating".

**Observation of OP discussion** - OP's threatened by YP potential violence. Fear of happy slapping or other retaliation.

**OP discussion** - Young people had a point, they are not respected by OP's. OP's just shut the door and don't listen to them.

**OP observation** - OP's model disrespect by continually talking over and introjecting when YP's are speaking.

**OP discussion** - Concern about YP stabbing YP, not having self respect, calling selves bitches, niggers.

**OP discussion** - Wanting to be like their mums and grand mums and other OP's they looked up to. A developed model of control and discipline

**OP:** "I would be scared of the young group". "Is your mother asking you to go to school, is that bossing?" Young people don't know their boundaries". "We don't have time to sit down with our children to discuss drugs etc. There is no time – no communication".

**OP:** "Young people have to adjust themselves to fit in with older people". "Society is now more difficult for young people. Old people were brought up in a stricter way". "Young people have no temperament. They think they can start at the top. They are disrespectful".

## 6. ANALYSIS

The day was rich with many themes coming up; social issues, race, class, parenting styles, culture, education, housing, government policy, media, peer pressure, crime and so forth.

Within this, the students did an excellent job of bringing to life a familiar and timeless, dynamic between young and older people. Even though the older people were not "old" they inhabited the role well and the frustrations, grudges and assumptions between the two "generations" flowed

feely. The transition from one to the other seemed to be marked by parenthood and the responsibilities that this brought.

Youth cultures – separation from parental influence and identification (conformity) with peers – brought familiar responses of disapproval and attempts to control. This response appeared stronger amongst students who came from countries outside the UK where youth culture might not be so pronounced and there was a greater expectation that young people would follow their parents' wishes.

At the same time, we were struck by the longing expressed by young persons for encouragement, approval, to be talked to and listened to, respect and of wanting to hear and learn about older people's experience. It was largely the young people that initiated the dialogue between the groups.

This need was not always "heard" by older people who thought young people were loud, threatening, disrespectful, unreliable, irresponsible, out of control and even violent potentially. They expressed a fear of young people and at times withdrew into the safety and solidarity of their own groups. At other times they talked over young people. As the day went on the different positions between young and older people seemed to grow further apart to the extent that one young person who politely requested a meeting was seen as an exception, as if not a real young person!

It was not clear what it was that older people didn't want to hear or look back at.

Was it the recognition of their own anger, hope, destructiveness, joy, creativity, social rebellion, political statement and other such strong feelings that had since given way to conformity, responsibility and facing reality?

Was it, for some, the sexual provocation of youth culture, hemlines, hairstyles, exposed bodies and so forth, because now, as parents, they lived with the consequences of their own youthful discovery of sexuality?

Was it the envy of the freedom and lack of responsibility that YP had and the fact they were given money to attend college when OP had to work hard to manage training, family and earning a living?

What is lost, as one generation becomes the next?

It was very interesting that older people remembered their own "youth" and their dislike of parental strictness when now as parents they embraced "the rules" and almost idealised their parents' values. Older people talked about wanting younger people to listen and learn from their mistakes rather than make their own. However, whatever their good intention, young people seemed to see them as more controlling and blaming than protecting and educating. Young people said they responded well to teachers, for example, those who were strict but who really engaged with them as people. Often they just felt demonised.

Is there a fear of what these young people might express as the voice of the UK in 2007; and of what this might uniquely say about life and society today? Young people and older people talked about feelings of powerlessness and the frustration and anger of not being listened to. This seemed very relevant to one of the issues raised which is very much in the news: young people killing young people, even children killing children.

Is this the unheard anger and frustration of young people that has no creative expression so it is turned inwards? Should young people be heard or feared? It seems that the voyeuristic media looks on, whipping up fear, waiting for the next beating or murder. Governments get into power promising to control the uprising. Who really listens?

What was very encouraging during the day was the sense of confidence that grew as people took up leadership roles, initiated dialogues and expressed their views. There was lots of generosity in listening and helpful delegation as well as the willingness to disagree and bring this dynamic to life. In this respect we need to remember that the older people in many ways are still young people struggling for a voice and to achieve their education.

In the final session a member asked, "What is the purpose of this workshop?" A member of staff replied, "Trying to find a better understanding of young people and older people".

It is suggested that more such endeavours would be beneficial in gaining the necessary understanding that might lead to positive approaches for engaging young people; rather than the familiar negative approaches concerning anti-social behaviour.

## 7. CONSULTING STAFF

### DIRECTOR

The Workshop was directed by Dr Lionel Stapley, the Director of OPUS and an organisational consultant.

### CONSULTANTS

**Jane Clarkson MSc.** Jane is a Learning and Development professional. She completed her MSc in 2005 where she specialised in organisational consultancy. Most recently she has worked for the BBC in a number of Learning and Development roles and is currently Learning and Development Manager for an international insurance company.

**Chrissie Rickman.** Chrissie is a psychotherapist living and working in Brighton. She has worked with children, young people and families since 1982 in the youth service, youth justice and child protection.

**Dr Ursula Murray.** Ursula has worked in both local government and the voluntary sector and now teaches gender and management and public sector studies at Birkbeck, University of London. She has an MSc in 'Group relations organisations and society' and a PhD in narrative studies. She is an OPUS Associate and a member of the Group Relations Network: University of West of England.

**Augustine Sagoe.** Augustine is a Nurse Consultant in Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health (CAMHS) in South Essex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. He has several years Clinical, leadership and management experience in Mental Health and has worked in both Inpatient and Community settings in the NHS as well as the voluntary and private sectors.

## 8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We should wish to express our gratitude to Dame Ruth Silver, and to staff at Lewisham College for her ready cooperation in this workshop. Special thanks are due to Dith Banbury and Trina Laws for their organising and assistance in making this workshop possible. And, not least, a big thank you to all students who participated, their time and commitment is greatly appreciated.