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Session: **Sociology at the Frontiers of Psychology**

## **Transgressing Borders between Sociology and Psychology:**

### **The Case of Intergenerational Solidarity.**

Social relationships are crucial among family members by providing a social network and support. Due to longevity, (adult) children will experience 50 years or more of their lives together with their parents and about ten to twenty years with their grandparents (Krause & Haverkamp, 1996). Therefore the study of intergenerational solidarity, within the family, becomes more and more important, not only in an academic but also in a social and political context, as caring for older people will become a great task in the future. The case of social relations and intergenerational solidarity is intensely discussed in both disciplines *sociology* (Durkheim, 1933; Bengtson et al., 2002) and *psychology* (Bowlby, 1984; Ainsworth, 1973; Cassidy, 1999). The perspective of the attachment theory on intergenerational relations could contribute to sharpening the solidarity concept to make it more solid, accessible and usable for the social sciences and policy-making.

Solidarity was coined by Durkheim (1933) as a sociological concept. According to Durkheim solidarity indicates a form of societal integration, in other words the formation of over-individual cohesion against anomic and egoistic tendencies of the single members of the society (Künzler & Walter, 2001). At that time solidarity was a strongly positively connotated term, for which cohesion often is used synonymously. According to sociologists today, family solidarity is a fluid concept that might strongly be associated to life course events; it can have different directions (asymmetric or well-balanced) and deals with perceptions of social support, social cohesion, and relationship among family members and in kinship (Bengtson et al., 2002; Komter & Vollebergh, 2002) which can also include negative forms of solidarity or ambivalences. Those findings of family relations not only being positive but also including ambivalences and hostilities, however, were never integrated into an extended theoretical concept of family solidarity in a satisfying way. Due to Durkheimian *\_positivism\_*, negative as well as positive relations within the family context can not easily be integrated by sociologists.

Intergenerational solidarity is thus not defined in a theoretically conclusive way, which makes it an elusive concept for building and testing theories. A solution to that problem may be to examine existing theories that cover certain areas of intergenerational solidarity, to explore whether they yield useable definitions and propositions to build testable theoretical models on. One obvious candidate from psychology is attachment theory (Bowlby, 1984; Ainsworth, 1973) for several reasons. First, attachment refers to individual intrapsychic processes as well as to dyadic processes, so it can explain phenomena both within the individually psychological as well as within the socio logical domain. Second, attachment theory can explain processes within intimate relationships across the life span and explains both positive

and negative feelings and emotions toward family members or other close persons. Third, attachment theory characterizes universal components of human relationships and how these universal components interact with the environment, producing unique experiences for individuals, families, and societies (van IJzendoorn & Sagi, 1999). Furthermore attachment theory can help to explain the impact of intergenerational solidarity on health and wellbeing (cf. Carpenter, 2001) as it clarifies the deep biologically and experientially rooted affective basis of human relationship. For example, it may be hypothesized that individuals who are insecurely attached suffer from caring for their old and weak parents whereas securely attached adult children experience satisfaction and joy from providing support to their parents.

The psychological attachment theory and the sociological theory of intergenerational solidarity refer to processes within intimate interpersonal relationships mostly occurring within families. The common family domain provides these relationships with an exclusive and irreversible quality. This paper outlines a new conceptualization of central dimensions of attachment, which would enable a fruitful integration of attachment theoretical propositions and empirical findings with sociological research into intergenerational solidarity. The results should further the understanding of family relations and transactions between family processes and political, policy-related, social, psychic, care giving, and cultural processes.

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