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**Title:** The Intergenerational Help Desk: Encouraging ICT Use in Older Adults in England

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**INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter we focus on intergenerational geographies by critically reflecting on participation in research funded in the UK by the New Dynamics of Ageing research programme. The Sus-IT project (shorthand for Sustaining IT use by older people to promote autonomy and independence) was concerned with understanding the problems and circumstances which might cause people to ‘disengage’ or give up using information and communication technologies (ICTs),[[1]](#endnote-1) such as computers, the Internet or mobile phones. ICTs are fundamentally altering the spatial and temporal organization of economic and social life. A recent report on internet use and older adults in Ireland highlighted the utility of the internet as both a communication tool and an information resource (CARDI 2012). For older people, ICTs can be powerful assistive technologies, helping them to maintain their independence, social connectedness and sense of worth in the face of declining health or limited capabilities, but they can also offer new and empowering opportunities to improve an individual’s quality of life. Old age and space are entwined processes (Schwanen et al. 2012), and using ICTs can alter the spatial and temporal contours of everyday life, for example ICTs can be used to undertake tasks from home that once needed to be undertaken outside the home, such as online shopping and paying bills. ICTs offer people the possibility of keeping in touch with others via mobile phones while outside the home. Intergenerational support from family members and non-kin in the community play an important role in supporting older people building and maintaining ICT *savoir faire,* technologies increasingly used by older people to stay in touch with children and grandchildren (Hardill 2013). In order to understand the challenges of sustaining digital engagement this chapter examines the ways in which digital technologies are embedded and embodied into the practices of everyday life, highlighting the role of intergenerational linkages with particular reference to England. After this introduction, the chapter is divided in three parts. Section two examines older adults and ICT use. This is followed by a section highlighting the Sus-IT project, and the final section is the conclusion.

**OLDER ADULTS, OLD AGE AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY**

In this section we begin by examining older adults and public policy in the UK, with specific reference to England, and then turn to the use of digital technologies by older adults. In common with other advanced capitalist countries England is experiencing population ageing. Older adults in England[[2]](#endnote-2) are identified in public policy as being over 50 years of age, and they make up over 34 per cent of the population (ONS 2011), ranging in age from 50 to over 100 years.

Chronological age, therefore, is used as a public policy marker, and the over 50s have been the focus of research into demography and ageing by the UK Research Councils (Walker 2007). In 2001, New Labour published the national service framework for older people (DoH 2001) and in that report three broad groups of the ‘over 50s’ were identified:

• Entering old age: These are people who have completed their career in paid employment and/or child rearing. This is a socially-constructed definition of old age, which, according to different interpretations, includes people as young as 50, people who are active and independent and many remain so into late old age.

• Transitional phase:This group of older people are in transition between a healthy, active life and frailty. This transition often occurs in the seventh or eighth decades but can occur at any stage of older age.

• Frail Older People:These people are vulnerable as a result of health problems such as a stroke or dementia, social care needs or a combination of both. Frailty is often experienced only in late old age.

So we can see that within the framework of the modern lifecourse, old age is defined as one of a number of discrete phases each delineated by changes in social and economic roles (Cole 1992). Growing older according to the Department of Health (2001: 107) was seen as representing a period of increased dependency, as physical strength, stamina and suppleness decline, and the individual has to cope with chronic and long-term conditions. In the book *A* *Fresh Map of Life*, Peter Laslett (1989) portrayed four distinct ‘ages’ of a person’s lifecourse. He represented the ‘ First Age’ as the period of childhood dependency, the ‘Second Age’ as the time of independence, employment and maturity, the ‘Third Age’ as the period during which people are freed from work and family constraints and have time to pursue a good quality of life. Finally, he saw the ‘Fourth Age’ as characterized by dependence and declines in health. Peter Laslett offered a view of old age that was not just inactivity, declining health and mobility, loneliness and poverty. In some ways the Department of Health report resonates with Peter Laslett’s (1989) conceptualization of the life span, with old age divided into a third and fourth age.

The de-standardization of the lifecourse in post-industrial societies means that lives are less predictable, less collectively determined, less orderly and more flexible, indeed working life is considered to be more precarious (Featherstone 1991). Retirement, for example, is identified as less of an event and more as a ‘zone’ through which people pass, making adjustments over time to their commitment to paid work, including adjusting the amount of paid work undertaken, against a changing policy context with the abolition of the default retirement age in the UK (Stockdale 2013). Everyday life for the over 50s is now more complex in the current economic downturn, concerns about pensions appears to be resulting in rising levels of economic activity, and ‘unretirement’ (Kanabar 2012).

In a recent review article (Schwanen et al. 2013) argued for a more nuanced understanding of growing older pointing to a blurring of lifecourse identities which increasingly characterizes life in advanced liberal democracies. Such blurring makes it increasingly difficult to compartmentalize childhood, adulthood and old age into distinct life stages or to use chronological age indicators (i.e. age in years) to identify people as ‘young’ or ‘old’. Schwanen et al. (2013) also highlighted that independence, mobility and experimentation have become the ideals for later life under neoliberalism in advanced liberal democracies, which has, in many ways, refracted and complicated – but not undone – industrial era connotations of old age with dependency, decline, passivity and obsolescence. Neoliberal discourses of ‘active ageing’, according to which older people are to enhance their well-being through participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs (WHO 2002).

In terms of intergenerational relations the growing importance in western countries of grandparenting as an identity construction in later life has been highlighted (Tarrant 2010, see also Tarrant, this volume). Tarrant (2010), for example points to the increase in the number of children growing up in single or dual parent families with complex employment and care-giving arrangements. Care giving roles of grandparents to grandchildren appears to be increasing in the current economic downturn (Kanabar 2012).

Today it is common place to say that ageing is embodied, emplaced, as well as relational. These ideas are heavily indebted to the writings of Graham Rowles in his 1978 book *Prisoners in Space*, and to the writings of the late Glenda Laws (1993; 1995). In Sus-IT we have focused not the body one has but the body *one is***,** the body through which one participates in the world and that emerges from the interactions between the physiological body and the people, artefacts and other forms of materiality it encounters. Bodies are seen as objects onto which values, ideas and discourses can be inscribed and as material entities representing and reproducing those values, ideas and discourses.

In our work we have focused on the ways in which digital technologies – computers, the Internet, mobile phones – have become embedded and embodied into the practices of everyday life, and the challenges people encounter in staying engaged (Hardill and Olphert 2012; Hardill and Mills 2013). We have been concerned with the context of digital technologies, and how the spatial and temporal patterns of everyday life are changed by the use of ICTs, as digital technologies become spatially and temporally embedded in everyday relational practices. Folding together places and people separated by time and space via a ‘connected presence’, digital technologies, for example, can help reduce social isolation by linking people together.

Older people did not learn about ICTs when at school, nor did all use ICTs when in paid employment, ICT skills have been acquired in later life, some as part of paid work, or through accessing support in the community. As a result the nature and quality of ICT training and support is critical in supporting older people’s development of ‘Internet self-efficacy’ (Hardill and Olphert 2012; Hargattai 2008). As part of the ESRC E-Society programme in the UK Lindsay et al (2008) worked with 108 older adults who were provided with free home computers and a one year broadband subscription. Half the sample received ICT support in the form of ‘facilitated learning’ while the other half received no support. Lindsay et al. (2008) found that many of their participants first needed to overcome their fear of the technology before they could learn how to use it effectively. Significant differences were recorded between those who received ICT support and those who did not six months after being involved in the project. Over half of those who received ICT help subsequently searched for information online on public authority websites, compared with 28% of those who had not received help (Ibid: 326). They concluded that older adults first needed some form of encouragement and then a compelling proposition linked to their own lives to help overcome their fear of turning a computer on and going online (Ibid: 323). In summary, once older people have access to, and acquire the skills to use ICTs, ICTs can become part of everyday life, as is illustrated by US research that shows that 70% of people aged 65 or over who had started using the internet stated that they typically use it every day (Zickuhr & Madden 2012).

Turning firstly to data derived from the special Eurobarometer (Eurostat 2012b) on ICT infrastructure (computer, Internet and broadband) and ICT use across the member states of the EU, 76 per cent of UK households owned a computer in 2011, but the proportion is less, at 41% for households with people aged 60+ years. When it comes to access to the Internet, 74% of UK households have access, but the proportion is only 38% of households with adults aged 60+ years (Ibid). For older people the most common reasons for using the Internet were searching for information and emailing (Hardill 2013). Turning to mobile phone use, in 2011 91 per cent of individuals in the UK possessed one, but only 51% of people over 75 years did so (Ofcom 2012) As with ICT infrastructure, mobile phone ownership levels varied by income group, with 92% of the highest decile owning a mobile phone in 2009, compared with 67% of households in the lowest decile (ONS 2011). Mobile phones are generally rated as the most vital digital technology (Pfaff 2010), equally as vital as landlines (Crang et al. 2006: 2562), and are no longer merely devices for sending and receiving telephone calls; rather, they now embody different communication technologies (text, visual, video, web browsing as well as audio) (Kwan 2007).

Shove and Pantzar (2005) argue that artefacts and forms of competence only have meaning and effect when integrated into practice, and thus that it is through the integrative work of ‘doing’ that elements are made animate, sustained and reproduced. When that stops fossilization sets in. In their study of ICT use (mobile phone and the Internet) in two contrasting communities in Newcastle upon Tyne, Crang and Graham (2005) found that for some people using the Internet and mobile phone was episodic while for others use was pervasive, the Internet and mobile phones had become an integral part of everyday life.

Even within households with a networked computer not all household members may value the technology or be proficient users. There must be a compelling reason to make people use them. Among retired people in the UK, ‘just not interested’ was cited as the main reason for not using the Internet and giving up using it; ‘do not know how to use’ was the second most common reason for non-use, while for retired people ‘not for people my age’, ‘computer not available’ and ‘too expensive’ were also presented as reasons for non-use (Dutton and Blank 2011). In recent academic work it has been reported that providing ICT access alone is not always enough to bridge the digital divide as social capital (such as skills and education) is also needed to engage with technology (Lindsay et al. 2007). This view is echoed by Sinclair and Bramley (2011) whose work emphasized the ways in which technology is socially embedded in the tasks of everyday life. In the following section we turn to the Sus-IT project.

**CONTEXT AND APPROACH TO THE RESEARCH**

In the remaining part of this chapter we draw on data collected as part of Sus-IT, which as we mentioned above was funded in the UK as part of the British New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) Research Programme (2009-12). In 2010 a team based at Memorial University, Canada secured funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) to undertake related work on sustaining digital engagement in Canada. As a result Sus-IT has undertaken cross-national comparative work into the challenges of sustaining digital engagement. In this chapter I draw on the work undertaken in the UK.

The New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) Research Programme was established by five of the UK Research Councils - ESRC, EPSRC, BBSRC, MRC and AHRC - to fund multidisciplinary research to better understand the way in which older people’s lives may be changing as a result of social, economic and technical developments (Walker 2007). In common with the other research programmes NDA identified people over 50 years as older people, and placed their involvement high on its agenda (Hennessey and Walker 2011; Walker 2007).

Sus-IT was scoped to address the lacuna identified in the NDA call on ICT use (Damodaran and Olphert, 2010). Indeed the fundamental research question Sus-IT posed was inspired by lived reality, the challenges the late father (an elderly widower, who lived alone) of a member of the UK project team was facing as he struggled to remain digitally engaged in the face of declining eyesight. He relied on his children and grandchildren to sustain his digital engagement . So at the heart of the Sus-IT project was a research problem being experienced at first hand. Sus-IT aimed to understand the challenges faced by older people using digital technologies, to identify ways to help older people to be confident and competent users of computers and other digital products, and to explore how older people’s use of these technologies could be maintained in the event of declining capability and/or changed circumstances, events fused with emotion. Much previous research has focused on the differences between those who have access to the internet and those who do not (Light 2001; Warf 2001; Selwyn 2004). While long-term adoption of internet use provides an important indicator of online engagement, however, little is known about the factors that support sustained use and those that discourage it.

Sus-IT was designed to fill this gap in the literature. Sustainability of internet use we argue represents another disparity, since there are barriers to its use that go beyond issues of access. The methodological approach we applied in Sus-IT was interactive rather than extractive, undertaking research *with* older people, rather than *on* them (Damodaran and Olphert 2010; Hardill and Olphert 2012). In reaching out to diverse groups of older adults a range of methods were employed through interactive sessions using images, producing a participatory video, photo diaries, and personal stories of digital engagement to stimulate discussion and debate on ICT usage from a life course perspective (Hardill and Olphert 2012). As a concept, a life course is defined as ‘a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time’ (Giele and Elder 1998: 22). A life course approach affords researchers the possibility to examine an individual's life history using a variety of data gathering tools. Engaging qualitatively or quantitatively with time enables a more finely grained understanding of everyday life, and the uncovering of how the personal is interlinked with the immediate and wider social context.

We worked through ‘gate-keepers’ responsible, for example, for the provision of computer support, formal computer classes, University of the Third Age (U3A), Older People’s Fora and community groups across England. We first approached gatekeepers to explain the purpose of Sus-IT, the *modus operandi* of the project team and to invite participation of the groups they represented in Sus-IT. The gatekeepers offered advice as to the most suitable methods of engaging with their members, and some involved intergenerational working. A key theme to emerge from these discussions was the importance older people attached to a relational approach for sustaining digital engagement, this centred on accessing one-to–one support, either formally through IT clinics, or less formally by calling upon support from kin and friends, or at IT drop in centres. Our Sus-IT events offered participants new linkages especially for those older adults unable to access IT support from grandchildren or children.

Each interactive event was therefore planned with a specific group of older adults in mind; their needs were foremost, throughout. This led to a variety of events at which presentations about Sus-IT were given, other speakers invited (e.g. from digital outreach teams, local authorities and older people’s charities), and a variety of methods (described above) for capturing ICT use were employed. Moreover in response to demand from different groups we hosted special events (e.g. Festival of Social Science 2010 and 2012, Silver Surfer Day 2010), and delivered IT taster sessions, mobile phone clinics, and held joint events with Youth Assemblies and Older People’s Assemblies. Our participatory research approach also encouraged some groups to be very proactive and engage in actively co-creating a research agenda with us (Hardill and Olphert 2012).

About 750 older adults participated in Sus-IT events in England and Scotland, and completed a questionnaire based survey of Digital Engagement, which included quantitative data about factors such as extent, frequency and scope of use of digital technologies, and qualitative data about attitudes and experiences with technology. Within what seemed to be digitally engaged households, there was a spectrum of onlineness with one partner, often the male partner in heterosexual households, being the most intensive internet user. We noticed, therefore, the importance of coupledom in supporting ICT use within households, and the consequential impact of its cessation through bereavement. The widowed partner in such households often struggled to sustain ICT use. We also found that the degree to which digital technologies were integrated into everyday life did not correlate smoothly with chronological age. A recurring theme was the importance of kin (children and grandchildren) in supporting and encouraging older adults to engage with digital technologies (cf Tarrant 2010). Finally, ICT support also came from non kin in the community, with young and older volunteers offering one-to-one ICT support via classes and ICT drop-in clinics provided by community groups (Hardill 2013). A number of the Older People’s Assemblies we worked with had previously undertaken projects whereby members of young people’s groups (local schools or youth assemblies) provided one-to-one help and support with computers and mobile phones. Such intergenerational work was highly valued by the groups, and older people reciprocated by visiting local schools and giving talks about the local community.

With a subset of participants life history interviews were conducted to explore ICT use, and we analysed these data using a framework based on competency of use, which looked at the ways in which computers, the internet and mobile phones are spatially and temporarily embedded in everyday relational practices. Shove and Pantzar (2005) argue that artefacts and forms of competence only have meaning and effect when integrated into practice, and thus that it is through the integrative work of ‘doing’ that elements are made animate, sustained and reproduced. When that stops fossilization sets in. In their study of ICT use (mobile phone and the internet) in two contrasting communities in Newcastle upon Tyne, Crang and Graham (2005) found that for some people mobile phone use was episodic while for others use was pervasive, ICTs had become an integral part of everyday life. We have built on the work of Shove and Pantzar (2005) and Crang and Graham (2005) to develop our framework, which captures a spectrum of onlineness and includes:

* *Pervasive use*: confident ICT users who have developed‘internet self-efficacy’ (Hargattai 2008) ; ICTs used daily forming an integral part of the architecture of everyday life; networked PCs/lap tops used with confidence to undertake a wide range of everyday tasks; such as for communicating with other people, including children and grandchildren [via Skype/email]; as a source of information; for organizing everyday life, including searching for information and services; in some cases mobile phones are used to access the internet. Upgrading ICTs does not pose a challenge indeed it is enjoyed, choosing new ICTs is almost a hobby;
* *Episodic use* : sporadic use of ICTs, while some said they ‘coped’ using them, others were ‘scared’ of using them; ICTs not ‘always on’; limited range of applications used, and not confidently ;
* *Fossilization*: episodic ICT usage declines to complete cessation.

As the particular focus of Sus-IT was on understanding the problems and circumstances which might cause people to ‘disengage’ or give up using the internet and ICTs, *fossilization* captures the process by which ICT usage, for a variety of reasons - social, health-related, economic - declines, to the point of complete cessation. In the following section the focus shifts to ICTs and intergenerational linkages.

**ICTS AND INTERGENERATIONALITY**

In this section we use indicative case studies to illustrate five dimensions of ICTs and intergenerationality. As reported earlier, in their study of older people and ICTs, Lindsay et al. (2008:323) concluded that older adults first needed some form of encouragement and then a compelling proposition linked to their own lives to help overcome their fear of turning a computer on and going online (Ibid:323). A second UK study by Sykes et al. (2008) found that older adults tend to access information through personal contacts, especially their social networks. While some of our Sus-IT participants received ICT support from family members, not all felt that their children were the best teachers, because of limited patience and/or not explaining things simply, which is examined in more detail below.

A number of participants had attended computer classes; in some cases more than one as they had forgotten what they had learned on previous courses. There were mixed views on the merits of courses, generally those who had been using computers longer had no interest in a course, while novice users did express some interest in a tailored course that would help them, but there was a clear preference for one to one learning, especially task/problem-based to deal with a specific issue. The preference was, therefore, for task-related classes, with a focus on everyday applications of ICT functions, and for informal support from family and friends to supplement the one-to-one training. There was a feeling that group settings re-enforced previous poor learning experiences, and tutees can end up feeling left behind. ICT drop in classes were popular, where people receive one-to-one help to solve a particular problem. Turning now to ICTs and intergenerationality, a recurring theme in the in-depth interviews was that new linkages occurred through the use of Skype and email, and mobile phones, for example. An indicative example is provided by Judy (divorced, early 60s, working part-time). Judy is a confident ICT user. Most of her family live nearby, and she is in close touch with her children and grandchildren. Digital technologies have been an integral part of both her home and work life for some time. Indeed, she still works part-time in a job that requires the daily use of a computer. She told us that she helps work colleagues with their computer tasks, and when at home she loves using her networked lap top, especially for surfing the internet, and checking up on her daughters via Facebook. Judy told us that the only way she can keep in touch with her adult daughters is via text messaging. They never reply to her phone calls or answer her phone messages, but they respond immediately to her text messages. So text messaging enables Judy to communicate with her children. She also follows them on Facebook, so she knows what is happening in their lives. The issues Judy raised were repeated by other research participants, if they wanted to keep in regular touch with children and grandchildren they had to engage with the digital technologies younger people use to communicate with others, young or old.

A second dimension of ICTs and intergenerationality is through the provision of ICT equipment. A number of our research participants indicated that they had acquired ICT equipment (mobile phones and computers) from their children, in some cases it was their old equipment, in other cases new equipment was bought with the parent’s needs in mind, but the older user may not necessarily have been included in the decision making. While the artefacts were provided, this did not necessarily extend to giving older people the support they needed to sustain usage. The members of a number of community groups we worked with asked us to run mobile phone clinics and IT help desks to help their members get to grips with the artefact they had been given. We now examine the case of Bally, a widow who is in her mid 50s. Her three children bought her a networked computer and they continue to offer Bally the help and support she needs to sustain her ICT usage, they are her ‘help desk’. Bally cited the example of Skype, her children helped her to learn how to use Skype so she can keep in touch with them. ‘My daughter lives in Nottingham, my son lives in Bristol and my eldest son is coming and going to Holland all the time. So it is nice for me to use my Skype and I can see them when we talk’. Unlike other participants Bally’s children really help her to sustain her ICT usage, they ‘troubleshoot’ her problems, at the end of a telephone rather than face-to-face as they live some distance from her.

A third intergenerational linkage is through the ICT support provided by grandchildren, which was highly valued. Indeed some participants preferred to ask their grandchildren as they were more patient. An illustrative example is provided by Ruth, a 75 year old married, retired grandmother who told us about Bradley, her 11 year old grandson, who lives nearby, who is her ‘ICT help desk’ for both her mobile phone and computer. Bradley also helps his Grandpa too. He sits and explains things slowly and so clearly, much better than Ruth’s daughter, Bradley is very patient, and he doesn’t make Ruth feel stupid. Some were supported by wider kin, such as Betty, an 83 year old widow, whose only daughter lives abroad. Betty has enlisted the help of her niece, whom she meets weekly, who has provided the one-to-one help that Betty needed to learn how to use her mobile phone. She has written down simple instructions and practices every day, and now Betty has the confidence to turn to mastering an IPad which her daughter bought her so they can email each other! Again Betty’s niece is providing the one-to-one support she needs.

A fourth intergenerational linkage involves non-kin within neighbourhoods and communities. The gatekeepers of two Older People’s Assemblies, for example, told us of digital engagement work they had successfully undertaken with local schools and a Youth Assembly. This included running mobile phone and internet clinics. These two groups requested we help organize more intergenerational events. One group specifically wanted us to run mobile phone clinics; most of their members possessed one, often given to them by their children, and a number were not confident mobile phone users. So at four consecutive meetings (August 2010-June 2011) we worked together to develop a programme of activities, which included mobile phone ‘clinics’ offering one-to-one help (Hardill and Olphert 2012).

Another group asked us to enlist the help of the Youth Assembly for an internet workshop (Hardill and Mills 2013).We also involved the local library, which has a ‘community hub’ as part of the GO ON UK network (<http://www.go-on.co.uk/>). Go ON UK is a network of community based UK online centres that amongst other things help people get online and make the most of online life; they have a local focus, and rely on the commitment of volunteers to help others integrate technology into their lives. The GO ON UK hub we worked with has a suite of networked computers and undertakes community development work to improve the use of digital technologies. Staff at the hub were keen to develop intergenerational linkages to support older people’s skills development. Members of the Youth Assembly worked with staff at the Hub to produce a guided work programme to improve older people’s access to three key public service websites. This was then delivered by members of the Youth Assembly, who worked one-to-one at a speed dictated by the older person offering him/her the help and support required to access information from the key websites.

**CONCLUSION**

In this chapter we have explored intergenerational geographies by focusing on research undertaken in the UK, which was funded by the New Dynamics of Ageing research programme. The Sus-IT project was concerned with understanding the problems and circumstances which might cause people to ‘disengage’ or give up using ICTs such as computers, the internet or mobile phones. We found no correlation between age and the propensity to engage with ICTs. Indeed people embedded digital artefacts into the tasks of everyday life, acquiring a specific skill set for internet use, ‘internet self-efficacy’ (Hargattai 2008), when they had a specific reason to use such technologies. The compelling reason to invest time and effort into learning how to use them was often to keep in touch with children and grandchildren. Sustaining digital engagement is linked to the significant, indispensable and crucial ICT support role of (extended) family members, who provide intergenerational support, along with motivational factors, acting as drivers for digital engagement. Through ICTs new linkages and connections between the generations can be formed (cf Tarrant 2010). But not all older adults received the help and support needed to become confident users from family members, and for such older adults support from the community, often involving young people, organized formally by neighbourhood and community groups is providing a vital resource supporting older people sustain their use of digital technologies.

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**NOTES**

1. ICTs include telecommunications technologies, such as telephony, cable, satellite and radio, as well as digital technologies such as computers, information networks and software (Damodaran and Olphert, 2006, p.6) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In England older adults are identified as people over 50 years of age by policy makers (Department of Health 2001) and in recent research programmes on demography and ageing, such as the New Dynamics of Ageing research programme (Walker 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)