

Promoting community engagement in an intergenerational program: An exploratory study

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The purpose of this qualitative study, conducted with seven elderly people attending a Respite Centre, was to explore the experience of older people who attend a respite centre that is visited by adolescent students from a local secondary school as part of an intergenerational program that has a community engagement focus. Data were collected in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis yielded three interrelated themes: "Experience of Self and Life" contributes to understanding how the participants perceived themselves and the world around them; "Experience of the Respite Centre" contributes to explaining how the visits to the Centre fit into participants' lives; "Experience of the intergenerational interaction" describes a positive albeit incomplete encounter with the young people. The overall impression gained was one of a positive and remarkable group of elderly people who defied many ageing stereotypes. It is submitted that the article makes a contribution to theory and practice in community psychology, and specifically addresses the focus areas of the special issue by exploring community engagement and citizenship enhancement in a setting which brings together two cohorts of participants, respectively at the beginning and end of the world of work. Suggestions are made for improving the community engagement aspect of the intergenerational program.

The world is currently facing unprecedented demographic changes. The number of people throughout the world over the age of 60 years will nearly triple in the next 30 years (United National Population Division, 2005) and in contrast, the percentage of those under 14 years of age will decline from 28 per cent to 20 per cent by 2050. These trends are evident too in Australia where life expectancy has increased significantly, from around 57 years in 1900 to 79.5 years for males and 84 years for females in 2009 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2008). This demographic change is driven mainly by increases in life expectancy and a decreasing fertility rate (Australian Government Treasury, 2010). These changes will have profound implications for society. From an economic perspective, significantly increased burdens will be placed on a diminishing workforce to maintain productivity and pay taxes to fund the greater demand for the Aged Pension and health and aged care spending (Australian Government, 2004). From a social perspective, the increment in the proportion of older people in our society has contributed to make more visible the issue of stereotypes

associated with old age and ageing (Achenbaum, 2005).

The intolerance and prejudice based on a person's age, or *ageism*, is one of the most enduring and widespread forms of prejudice along with racism and sexism (Packer & Chasteen, 2006), with the important difference that while most people will not change race or gender, many may be on the receiving end of ageism. As old age is often associated with physical decline (because of inevitable gradual biological decay) and perceived social isolation, older age becomes a less attractive or even an unattractive characteristic (Weiss & Freund, 2011). Even though ageist stereotypes of older people vary amongst cultures, these can often involve inaccurate ideas about mental and physical decay, preconceptions about financial and social problems, and the expectation that older people should retire from public and social life (Pain, 2005). It has been argued that children and adolescents have more negative views concerning older persons than other age cohorts of the population (Cottle & Glover, 2007) and that a contributing factor to this lack of understanding seems to be the

absence of contact between younger and older people (Thomas, 2003). Conversely, older adults' mental representations of and judgments about adolescents appear to be neither strongly negative nor strongly positive, but rather neutral and balanced (Matheson, Collins, & Kuehne, 2000; Pinguart, Wenzel, & Sörensen, 2000).

Historically, ties between younger and older age-groups within Western societies were much stronger and positive compared to what they are at present. Current family lifestyles have reduced the opportunities for significant relationships between younger and older generations and this in turn has contributed to the negative attitudes toward older adults that prevail in modern western society (Kessler & Stausinger, 2007). Generations are becoming increasingly separated from one another because of changes in traditional family structures, increased family mobility and frequent changes in living arrangements (Springate, Atkinson, & Martin, 2008). The increasing number of fragmented families and non-traditional family units have decreased the number of opportunities many children have to come into contact with relationships previously offered by contact with extended family (Feldman, Mahoney, & Seedsman, 2001), with a large proportion of young people not having this previously available intergenerational contact within their family. The consequences of these social trends have touched the lives of older and younger people. For older people, there has been a decrease in self-confidence, and a rise in sense of loneliness, and for younger people, there has been a loss of traditional elder/child nurturing, and a rise in the fear of ageing (Achenbaum, 2005). Intergenerational programs can help to deal with the isolation of the elderly and misunderstandings of youth by bringing both generations together (Slaght & Stampely, 2006). Participants not only learn new things about each other but research also suggests that this interchange contributes to participants (particularly older people) experiencing positive outcomes in physical and mental health (MacCallum, Palmer, Wright, Cumming-Potvin, Brooker

& Tero, 2010). Weintraub and Killian (2009) suggest that a number of physical and mental afflictions related to old-age could be reduced by the social interaction, mental stimulation, and increased movement that is created as a result of intergenerational contact. Intergenerational programs are often centred on helping the developmental needs of young people; those programs with a community engagement focus provide opportunities for interaction with older people, and are particularly relevant for students who do not have regular contact with older relatives. Appropriately trained members of the school counselling or pastoral care team may utilise the students' experience to facilitate insight and personal growth of the students. Most of the research on intergenerational contact focuses on the young person and how it can benefit them or how these encounters can change negative stereotypes the young people may have about the elderly in our society (Feldman, 2001; Gray, 2008; Hannon & Gueldner, 2008; Thomas, 2003; Whitworth, 2003).

In contrast to the prevalent focus on the needs of the young, the requirements of the older people are rarely contemplated and their opinions not often heard (Reisig & Fees, 2007). In the call for contributions to the Special Issue on Work, Community and Citizenship, the editors made particular reference to "the importance of work for both community engagement and the crafting of individual identities". The study reported in this paper concerns two cohorts of the population, at either end of active participation in the world of work – older people no longer employed and adolescents who have yet to enter formal employment – but had the aim to explore the experience of older people who attend a respite centre that is visited by younger people from a local secondary school as part of an intergenerational program that has a community engagement focus. Specifically, the intergenerational program recognises the need to create opportunities for students to interact with older people in the community, and goes beyond inviting grandparents and older relatives to attend school functions

(e.g., awards evenings, cultural events, and national celebrations) in promoting community engagement. This is operationalised as students being encouraged and supported in participating in voluntary, service-oriented activities, and providing learning opportunities that address negative stereotypes of the elderly. A useful and aspirational definition of intergenerational programs suggests they should “involve active engagement and participation of multiple generations in activities requiring mutual exchange in a range of formal and informal spaces” (MacCallum et al., 2010, p. 121).

The study reported in this article was conducted from a qualitative and phenomenological perspective, and employed thematic analysis to identify significant patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). From a phenomenological perspective, the investigator tries to look at the way participants see their own world and to try, as much as possible, to explore the participants' experience from their own perspective. Instead of trying to come out with 'neutral' statements about an issue, this approach examines the participants' personal description of the experience and seeks to summarise the characteristics of individual experiences. It is submitted that the article makes a contribution to theory and practice in community psychology, and specifically addresses the focus areas of the special issue by exploring community engagement and citizenship enhancement in a setting which brings together two cohorts of participants, respectively at the beginning and end of the world of work.

Methodology

The study was conducted at a Day Respite Centre that is part of a Senior Citizens Centre in a city on the east coast of Australia. The Respite Centre provides services which allow visitors to benefit from the companionship of other people in a secure and caring setting and offer carers and families some respite. Assistance offered to elderly people from the local area includes transport to and from the centre, morning tea

and lunch, various types of entertainment (including moderate exercise classes), group activities (including craft, bingo and scrabble), theme days, and excursions to local attractions. The Centre also arranges for regular visits by occupational therapists, podiatrists and hairdressers. Additionally, once a month, a group of four to six male students from a local all-boys secondary school visit the Respite Centre as part of a school program that aims to enhance engagement with the local community. These students, drawn from the Year 9 classes and on average 14 years old, volunteer to visit the Respite Centre and attendance earns them credit towards a formal recognition of their commitment to positive citizenship.

By way of orienting the reader, a brief description of the facilities and procedures is offered. On average 20 elderly people attend the Respite Centre on any given day. The Centre comprises a large room with four distinct areas: a fully equipped commercial kitchen where morning tea and lunch are prepared, an eating area with tables and chairs, an office used for administrative work and an area for activities. Arrangements are in place for the elderly people to be collected from their homes to be taken to the Respite Centre where they are served morning tea. By the time the group from the school arrives, the elderly people are sitting in a semi-circle getting ready for the activities of the day. The researcher observed that they all appear to be very happy to be there and there is a clear sense of camaraderie between members of the mostly female group.

The students are briefed by a member of the school's staff prior to them going to the Respite Centre. They are informed that the elderly people attending the Respite Centre are in reasonably good health, and yet appreciate being spoken to loudly and clearly. It is explained that the elderly people look forward to see the boys as they often remind them of their own grandchildren and also of their younger selves. The boys are told that they have to introduce themselves, talk a little bit about their family and where

they come from (some of the students are from country areas as this school has a boarding component to it) and that after that they will probably help with the activities of the day.

This study had ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University to which the authors are affiliated (Approval number H12REA059). The coordinator of the Respite Centre granted permission to recruit participants (aged 60 years and above) and to interview interested individuals who gave their informed consent to participate in the study. It was agreed that the interviews would be recorded.

A total of seven visitors to the Respite Centre consented to participate in the study (five women and two men). Five of the participants agreed to divulge their age which ranged from 76 to 96 years. In the interests of confidentiality and anonymity participants were offered the opportunity to nominate a pseudonym of their choosing; the following pseudonyms are assigned to quotes from the interview transcripts used to illustrate themes identified in the analysis: Alice, Bianca, Esther, Geraldine and Mary (all female); Barry and Nick (male). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants using an interview guide; as agreed interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted by the first author during a series of visits, having an average of two interviews per visit.

Results

Although principally adhering to the guide to doing thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), the authors were also influenced by the work of Smith, Jarman, and Osborne (1999) in seeking to understand the experiences of the participants. Instead of making an effort to generate 'objective' accounts about a particular issue, an attempt was made to view individual's own description of the experience and to summarise the quality and texture of individual experiences (Thornhill, Lyons, Nouwen, & Lip, 2008). Interview transcripts were analysed one by one. Each

transcript was read and re-read a number of times, and keywords and points of interest where noted regarding the participant's experience of the Respite Centre. Themes were tentatively organised and then explored in more detail. This process was repeated for each transcript. This iterative process involved numerous returns to each transcript to check meanings. Each theme's relation with other themes was also examined, working toward what Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to as "a thematic 'map' of the analysis" (87). Finally, themes were integrated across transcripts in order to identify shared themes which captured the essence of the participants' experience of interacting with the young people visiting the Centre. These shared themes that came to light from the participants' descriptions were the key focus of the analysis, accepting that individual experience and differences across participants need to be recognised.

Three major themes were identified in the transcripts, and were labelled "the experience of self and life," "the experience of the Respite Centre" and "the experience of the intergenerational interaction". These themes were well represented across the interviews, providing a relatively comprehensive account of participants' experiences in the Respite Centre and in particular in relation to the interaction with the young people at the Respite Centre.

Theme 1: The Experience of Self and Life

Participants were asked in general terms about their life, their previous occupation and their family as part of the interviews. Typical stereotypes of ageing and older people in general include the idea that older people are miserable and lonely most of the time (Kupetz, 1994; Pain, 2005). The research on ageism suggests that older people are not often purposely disliked; instead they are more likely to be the sufferers of paternalistic prejudice which labels them as kind, but incompetent (Packer & Chasteen, 2006), "feeble yet lovable, doddering but dear" (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002, p. 4). The experience of the elderly people interviewed for this research portrayed a

very different picture. Participants were confident, had strong opinions about topical issues like politics and education:

Politicians should be ruling this country, not fighting each other ... they play up to the public and I don't know whether they really put the public first. (Mary)
School is writing, reading, but morality, parents. (Esther)

Adams-Price and Morse (2009) describe dependency and helplessness as one of the most widespread of all the stereotypes used to categorise older people. On the contrary, the participants in the reported study were positive and optimistic in spite of physical difficulties:

There is so much good in the world. All we hear on the TV or anywhere is the negative of people, we don't hear the good people – the goodness of people. (Mary)
We oldies have a wonderful life. It's marvellous. No responsibility and we meet lovely people. If I growl I say to myself: there is no war, there are no storms and you're not in pain, stop whinging Alice! (Alice)

There was a general sense of gratitude, positiveness and optimism throughout the conversations. Similarly to the findings in Kruss Whitbourne's (2005) work, the elderly people interviewed had a positive opinion of themselves. When reminiscing about their past, they were hardly ever bitter or sad, there was, for the majority of the time, a sense of appreciation for the good things that happen to them and even more so for the opportunities they have today:

When I was growing up, it was hard and I appreciate life now. (Alice)
Notwithstanding that participants were encouraged to share their experiences of work during the interview – for example, the interview guide developed for the project included the following prompts: How long have you been retired? How would you describe your role or occupation or job prior to retiring? – they had very little to say in this regard. This aspect of the interview may have

benefitted from more direct questioning, but it appeared that participants were more engaged in the discussion about the Respite Centre.

Theme 2: The Experience of the Respite Centre

The experience of the Respite Centre refers to participants' experiences of the activities, their relationship towards other participants and how the visits to the Respite Centre fit into their lives. All participants spoke with great affection and generally in a very positive way about the Respite Centre. Participants had been attending the Centre for an average of two years and they all planned to continue visiting the centre in the future. Participants described the benefits of visiting the centre with practical and emotional reasons. For example, some of the elderly people visiting the centre have either very little or no family at all. The centre provides a safe space for socialisation. Responding to the question about reasons for coming to the centre some of the participants responded:

Oh, just all the company and the people that are here and I can talk to them, you know, just freely and act the fool. (Nick)

It's an enjoyable day and you meet a lot of nice people. (Geraldine)

The company. It helps me get by living on my own. (Bianca)

Oh well, the socialising.

Socialising, meeting other people, and the staff are lovely. (Mary)

Sims, Levy, Mwendwa, Callender, and Campbell (2011) suggest that social support improves mental and physical health and reduces the risk of disease. Loneliness has also been associated with higher blood pressure in elderly people and is a predictor of depressive symptoms (Victor & Yang, 2012). The Respite Centre can, therefore, fulfil an important role in providing opportunities for socialisation for the elderly people. Practical concerns were commented on in very clear terms:

I get my meals here too, and I get

my hair done and I get my feet done from my podiatrist and my hairdresser. They pick me up and take me home. (Bianca)
Well, it fills in a day for me. (Geraldine)

Both practical and emotive reasons are part of the experience of the elderly people visiting the Respite Centre. Participants identified enjoyment of the activities and the company as well as meeting practical needs like eating a prepared meal and having one's hair done by a hairdresser. All participants reported that they were happy with how things were run at the Respite Centre and had no suggestions for changes to the daily routine.

Theme 3: The Experience of the intergenerational interaction

The third, and perhaps central, theme that came up in the interviews was that of the experience of interacting with the young people visiting the Respite Centre. Participants were unanimous in their view that these visits were a positive addition to the activities they had in the Centre:

I like the boys ... they are nice company. (Bianca)
What do I think? I think they're wonderful! (Alice)
Well, it's [the day] a bit more interesting. A bit of happiness and see the boys happy and we're happy ... just makes you feel better to have young people around. (Nick)
I think it's just two generations mixing and getting to know each other and having conversation. The young and the old getting together, it's wonderful. (Mary)

One of the positive aspects of the boys' visits commented on by the participants was how the elderly people felt treated with respect by the students, a respect that is not always present when they are out in the community:

Well, they are not rude like some young people can be. (Barry)
They're well behaved boys,

they're nice boys and when spoken to they speak nicely to you. (Geraldine)
They're very polite. Some of the other kids around the place here are pretty rough, you know. (Nick)

As much as the boys are liked and their visits appreciated and enjoyed, the boys seem to have a relatively passive role when they attend the Centre:

They help here and there with these other games, with the ten pin bowling and the little golf game, you know? I don't talk much to them. (Nick)

There is a bit of variety in the morning for us really. I don't talk much to the boys. (Geraldine)
They never say anything much. They just take it in their stride. (Alice)

We have games with them, they just do what they are asked to do. (Esther)

Palmore (2005) suggests that for an intergenerational activity to be effective, and not reinforce stereotypes and prejudice, three features should be present: participants should have equal status; it must lead to personal relationships; and activities should be cooperative and not competitive. That any these conditions are met at the Respite Centre cannot be argued with great confidence. The elderly people and the young people are not on even standing, based on the disparity in their respective ages and also because the boys were not familiar with the environment or the routine, and seemed a bit hesitant at times. Although some of the activities (e.g., mini golf, word puzzles, bingo) have a competitive side to it, winning is clearly not a focus as there are no prizes, and it is basically good, fun entertainment. The aspect that was most clearly missing was the experience of a relationship with the students. There is little real relationship between the two groups – ways to improve this situation will be discussed in due course. The routine is quite mechanistic: the boys arrive, the elderly

people are sitting in a circle, the boys introduce themselves to the group and then they help with the different activities. There is no real interaction or opportunity for building relationships. Some of the participants expressed how they would prefer to have things organised so there is a closer encounter with the young people visiting the centre:

Another thing I'd like is to just sit down and have a conversation.

That's the only thing I like. Just to sit and talk but they just organise things you see. You don't get a chance to really know them that well. (Mary)

I wouldn't mind talking to them more. (Bianca)

We always say g'day to them but just to sit down and talk to them, I don't, no. (Nick)

For an intergenerational program to have real benefits, research suggests that a number of encounters between the young and older people were needed to allow time for relationships to grow and that 'one off' contact has less chances of being successful (Springate et al., 2008). Part of the reason there is not a closer relationship between the two groups is due to the way the program is organised. With different boys in each visit there is little chance of sustained interaction between the elderly people and the students; the program does not really contribute in forming a relationship that, in turn, would help to change preconceived ideas of youth (by the elderly people) and of old age (by the students). In spite of their interest in having more contact with the students there was also a degree of hesitation from some of the participants about having more contact with them:

...the only thing is I don't know whether I would have the conversation to interest a younger generation. I don't know if I would have that ... (Mary)

To be quite honest I don't know what I would really talk to them about. (Nick)

Participants also believed these visits were a

positive experience for the boys; responses to the first author asking "Is it good for them?" included the following:

Yes, they learn from older people. (Barry)

I suppose they enjoy it too ... they get to know older people. (Mary)
... and they are getting out of lessons! (Alice – with a very cheeky smile)

Discussion

This qualitative study explored the experiences of elder people who visit an inner-city Respite Centre in an Australian city. As part of their school's community engagement program, groups of boys visit the elderly people once a month. From the interviews with the elderly participants a number of patterns and themes emerged across their accounts and three main themes were identified. These were labelled as the experience of self and life; the experience of the respite centre, and the experience of the intergenerational interaction. While these three themes are presented separately, they were inter-related and created a picture across all the interviews of the experience of the elderly people visiting the Respite Centre.

The interviews challenged a number of stereotypes of elder people. There was no sense of defeat or pessimism in the participants. On the contrary, and despite serious health limitations in some cases, the researcher did not see people complaining, sad or even lonely. They were an interesting group who could be characterised as being "full of life". Participants asked many questions about the researcher's life and this project in "off the record" conversations. It is possible that participants were engaged to a greater extent by the conversations with the researcher than they were generally by the students. This aspect might be readily addressed by a more formal survey of the expectations of the elderly visitors to the Respite Centre, which is to say what level of interaction with the students they would prefer; this in turn could inform the "briefing" that members of the pastoral care

team at the school provide to the students.

Participants were unanimous about how much they enjoyed their visits to the Respite Centre, a place they see mainly as a place to socialise, where they value the efforts of the staff, and are also appreciative of the visits from the students. These visits are, however, currently nothing more than another “activity”; they are one more thing that happens in the Centre, like playing bingo, tenpin bowling or visiting a local sporting club. This is not necessarily a bad thing. However, if these visits were to become more meaningful, and therefore, be more beneficial for the elderly people, it would be important to try to develop a deeper relationship, even in the context of a single visit. This could be easily achieved if the students shared one of the two meals the elderly people have in the Centre. The participants demonstrated that they have excellent conversation skills, they have interesting stories to tell and that they have an interest in other people.

It was noted in the results section that the intergenerational program reported in this study failed to meet Palmore’s (2005) criteria for effectiveness. Whilst it may not be appropriate to expect a situation whereby the adolescent and elderly people had equal status, given their age and circumstance, the relative lack (or at least superficial nature of) personal relationships established between the students and the elderly clearly diminished the “engagement” outcomes of the interactions. This could be remedied by amending the scheduling of repeat visits, while the equally important issue of utilising the interaction between the students and elderly for the purposes of citizenship enhancement for the students could involve a more active role by appropriately trained members of the school counselling or pastoral care team – reflection exercises and coaching could be usefully employed to facilitate insight and personal growth of the students.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the data are from a small sample of older people in a particular setting (i.e., a

Respite Centre in a city in Australia), and hence the findings may not be germane to other contexts. Second, only boys visited the Respite Centre; in order to evaluate whether gender differences were a factor an appropriate school for girls (or girls and boys) would need to be recruited for a follow up study. Third, the interviews tended to be very brief, in part because the participants may have been unfamiliar with the research process and in part because the topics of enquiry were exhausted in the time taken. Data from “off the record” conversations with the first author were not included in the transcripts, and were therefore excluded from the analysis. These methodological issues can be addressed by engaging participants over a longer period, enhancing participants’ familiarity with the researchers and the research process.

Implications

The study has direct implications at the local level. Notwithstanding the limitations outlined above, there is some evidence that the community engagement aspects of the school program are achieving the goal of making students aware of the needs of elderly people in the community. The study highlights a number of easily implemented strategies to improve the program: providing opportunities for each boy to interact with the same elderly person over several visits; introducing structured activities that enhance the sense of worth of the elderly participants (e.g., recording achievements or imparting wisdom); designing reflective exercises for the boys to identify and reinforce the value gained from the volunteering experience. A formal evaluation of the program may yield opportunities for continuous improvement, which may be applied to other settings (e.g., residential aged care facilities).

Conclusion

In an environment where there is an increasing percentage of elderly people in our communities and where younger people have less contact with older people, both groups would benefit from more of the

initiatives taken by the secondary school reported in this study. The experience of visiting the Respite Centre is certainly positive from the point of view of the elderly people. The visits from the boys are currently an additional activity extra; a more meaningful relationship between the two groups could make these interactions more than just that. Implementing a small number of strategies holds promise for realising many of the positive outcomes of intergenerational programs, and evaluating these changes will contribute to the literature.

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