Intergenerational Interaction
Between Institutionalised Older Persons
and Biologically Unrelated
University Students
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ABSTRACT. Most studies on older persons focus mainly on what the aged can no longer do and on the impact that this has on the community and specifically on their carers. In contrast to this, this research focused on the value of friendship between older persons living in a retirement home and students whom they did not know prior to their interaction in the project. Friendship, in this instance, is viewed as a multidimensional facet of social support. Participatory action research was used to describe the relationship between the students and the older persons, and the illustrative method, as a qualitative research method, was used to analyse the data, obtained from students’ reports, observations and interviews. The results are used to propose guidelines for the transfer to other contexts of the intergenerational involvement of biologically unrelated students with older persons. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

Ageing is very often regarded as a kind of extended terminal illness. Many authors have referred to the older person’s feelings of helplessness, uselessness, their physical deterioration and loss of independence (Burgener, Shimer & Murrel, 1993; Newman & Newman, 1998; Noonan & Tennstedt, 1997; Reker & Butler, 1990; Simons, 1983; Tout, 1989). Very little has been documented on the interrelational potential that older persons possess and how they can contribute to and benefit from relationships with younger people who are not biologically related to them.

BACKGROUND

Research findings indicate a positive relationship between social support and psychological well-being, including enhanced self-worth, increased self-esteem, competency and/or autonomy (Bondevik & Skogstad, 1996; Sherman, De Vries, & Lansford, 2000; Siu & Phillips, 2002; Tesch & Whitbourne, 1981). According to Von Dras, Williams, Kaplan and Siegler (1996) social support is a very important contributor to all humans’ ability to cope and that it has also been associated with lowered rates of morbidity and mortality. Social support can be viewed as “the positive feelings of contentment, security and belongingness that arise from social relationships” (Berkman in Lowenstein & Rosen, 1995, p. 105). Older persons who are actively involved in interpersonal relations will be happier and will demonstrate greater psychological adjustment than their peers who lack such involvement (Lowenstein & Rosen, 1995; Simons, 1983).

Interpersonal relationships, which sometimes may compensate for a lack of meaningful relationships with family members, involve an element of unconditional caring and voluntary commitment (Cook, 1981; Simons, 1983), and could be referred to as informal support. Informal support can take many forms, including giving advice, affection, companionship, helping with transportation and nursing care (Kvale, 1987; Siu & Phillips, 2002). Friendship is regarded as social support, which can be described as a dynamic interactive process involving the individual as well as the context in which it develops. Friends can provide both instrumental and emotional support (Siu & Phillips, 2002).

The literature on friendship is being criticised because of inconsistencies in definitions (Roberto & Kimboko, 1989). Definitions may in-
clude descriptions of people who are confidants, likeable or trustable, indications of absence of discord in relationships, as well as an emphasis on companionship and voluntarily interactions (De Vries, 1996; Field, 1999; Sherman et al., 2000; Simons, 1983; Tesch & Whitbourne, 1981; Williams & Roberts, 1995). Friendship is a multidimensional experience which includes the idea that friends can serve as a complement or contrast to, or substitute for the family (De Vries, 1996; Siu & Phillips, 2002). Friends can serve as sources of support, encouragement, trust, social contact, emotional connection and can reduce the psychological impact of exposure to stress (Cavanaugh, 1997; De Vries, 1996; Sherman et al., 2000). The emotional connectedness between friends is made possible by an underlying sense of trust, loyalty and commitment (De Vries, 1996). Although emotional attachments promote a feeling of acceptance and validate a person’s worth, older persons are sometimes reluctant to make emotional investments, because they are often unwilling to risk losing again (Cook, 1981; Sherman et al., 2000).

A friendship needs time to grow. According to Cavanaugh (1997), a friendship develops in three stages. The first stage, mutual awareness, is followed by the second stage of surface contact. If a true friendship develops, the parties involved proceed to the final stage of self-disclosure. De Vries (1996) identified three dimensions of friendship from a comprehensive literature survey. The first dimension, the affective nature of friendship, includes the sharing of personal thoughts and feelings, expressions of intimacy, appreciation and affection. The second dimension reflects the shared nature of friendship in which individuals assist one another in activities of mutual interest. The third has to do with the sociability and compatibility of friends as sources of amusement, fun and recreation.

It has been found that gender differences exist in friendship patterns amongst older persons. Women tend to maintain their friendships over longer periods of time than men, although women tend to view friendship as more intimate and complex (Siu & Phillips, 2002). According to Field (1999) the conversations between women friends are more personal and characterised by an awareness of the affective qualities of the relationship.

The aim of this research is to describe facets of friendships between generations, who are not biologically related, as well as phases in the process of interaction between older persons living in a retirement home and students whom they did not know prior to their interaction. The results obtained may guide more volunteer involvement of this nature in the elderly community.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Context of the Research

The research was conducted over a two-year period in the context of two retirement homes in deprived socioeconomic environments in South Africa. The older persons in the homes who may receive state or retirement pensions do not have access to these funds, which are paid either to the management of the retirement home or to the older person’s family. In most of the cases the pensions are supplemented by subsidies from the retirement home or from the families of the residents. The financial limitations of the residents can also be observed in the fact that many try to earn an additional income with embroidery or crochet work on articles that they sell. A nurse at one of the homes confirms the financial position of the residents: *They do not have money for anything else but to cover their basic physical needs, and sometimes not even that.*

The closing of one of the retirement homes due to financial reasons had a profound effect on the residents. One student’s observation in this regard was the following: *The elderly person that I visited became very distracted by the fact that the old age home is going to be closed. She was very emotional and disturbed because of this.* The financial context is not the only neglected area in the retirement home. At this home, sixty percent of the residents do not receive regular visits from their family or have no family at all.

PARTICIPANTS IN THE RESEARCH

The Students

Forty students volunteered to visit the residents of two retirement homes after the management of the retirement homes asked the Department of Psychology of the University of Pretoria to become involved with the aim of focussing on the emotional well-being of the residents. The students were divided into four groups, and visited the older persons for a total of ten sessions during the first and second halves of the year, respectively. The visits lasted for half an hour or longer. The students (aged 19 to 21 years) were not biologically related to the older persons and their reasons for becoming involved varied. Some of their reasons include the following:
I am fond of elderly people and my own grandmother has passed away. I was very close to her and went to visit her often.

If one takes into account that they [the elderly people] must sacrifice a lot of freedom, privacy and quality of life, elderly people can feel very useless. Loneliness strips people of their humanity.

The Older People

Many of the residents were in frail care and some of them were physically challenged. Some could not speak due to strokes, others had hearing difficulties, some were confined to their beds or wheelchairs while others struggled to communicate coherently. One of the residents was not able to communicate with his fellows or the staff because he could not express himself in a common language. The residents generally spent their days sitting, waiting, eating and sleeping. One student explains it as follows: The general lounge of the home is a popular gathering place for the elderly. They all go there during the times that they’ve not anything to do. Most of the times we walked in there, everyone was busy with his or own thoughts or sleeping in their chairs. The ratio of males to females was more or less equal and their ages ranged from 53 (a resident diagnosed with brain cancer) to 98.

Ethical Considerations

Continuity of the interaction between students and the older persons was ensured by the continuation of the project over a few years (the two-year project was singled out only in terms of the research). Although it was not possible for the older people to have interactions with the same grouping of students, there was always the possibility of engaging with someone who took an interest in them. Furthermore, the older people and the management of the retirement home were informed that the interaction with the specific grouping of individual students would be limited to the course of one academic year. Despite the limitations of the interaction however, the students fulfilled an important social support system for the older people who were faced with the trauma of relocating in the case of the retirement home that was to be closed.
Method

Participatory action research, as described by Schurink (1998), allowed the older persons to be actively involved in the process. The residents were paired off with individual student volunteers and they decided together how the contact sessions would be structured. The rationale for pairing individual residents with students is supported by the following older person’s words: “We need visitors who will be dedicated to come in and take one person and get to know them, and not to go around and say ‘how do you do?’ to you and ‘how do you do’ and ‘how do you feel?’ No—take one person” (Cook, 1981, p. 422).

The students’ interaction with the older persons was continuously adjusted after group discussions with their supervisor and according to the feedback and needs expressed by the older person. The residents indicated the following needs in their interaction with the students:

- To assist me physically.
- To accept me just the way I am.
- To comfort me by showing physical affection.
- To listen to my private feelings.
- To tell me that they feel very close to me.
- To try to cheer me up.
- To express interest and concern in my well-being.
- To accompany me to consult someone who can help me with a problem.
- To tell me that they would keep the things I have talked about private.
- To do some activity together with me to help me get my mind off things.
- To tell me how they experience a situation that is similar to mine.

These expressed needs of the older persons support the findings of Simons (1983) that the desire for assistance, security, intimacy and a positive self-esteem are basic needs in the vast majority of mankind.

DATA GATHERING

The residents were asked to reflect on the contact sessions towards the end of the period of involvement. Staff members of the retirement home were also interviewed about their perceptions of the students’ in-
volvement and to report on what they observed of the interaction between the residents and the students.

Data was obtained from the student participants through survey research. Survey research is an appropriate method for gathering self-reported data of participants regarding their behaviour, attitudes, characteristics, expectations, self-classifications and knowledge (Neuman, 1997). Survey research is a popular research method to apply to exploratory and descriptive research (Babbie, 1995; Neuman, 1997). Students were asked to write self-reflective reports after each contact session regarding their expectations, their perceptions of the reciprocal relationships and their observations of the behaviour of the older persons.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analysed qualitatively. Qualitative methodologies appear to be particularly relevant for studying “the life worlds, lived realities and everyday practices of people in a particular social setting” (Kvale, 1989, p. 94). The data was analysed according to the illustrative method as explained by Neuman (1997). The illustrative method relies on existing literature to illustrate research findings. Existing theory or literature functions as “empty boxes” that are filled with the data.

RESULTS

Facets of Friendship

The following quotes from the students illustrate the expressions of intimacy, appreciation, and affection, including the respect and feelings of warmth, care, and love that they experienced in the interaction with the older persons:

• What I found extremely meaningful was when Ms. C. began opening up towards me and telling me about her life as a younger woman.
• Today I really made contact with Auntie A. I made contact with her family and that was a great benefit. I could get to know more of her and so find a starting point for our conversations.
• It was not necessary for me to initiate the discussions all the time. She started asking questions about my life too.
These descriptions support a dimension of friendship as described by De Vries (1996), who referred to it as the affective nature of friendship. It includes the sharing of personal thoughts and feelings, expressions of intimacy, appreciation and affection. The value of sharing in fostering affectionate bonds between people is considered by Carver, Scheier and Weintraub (1989) to be a strengthening of emotion-focused coping behaviour.

Another facet of friendship, reflects the shared nature of a relationship in which individuals assist one another in activities of mutual interest. One of the older persons expressed this mutuality in remarking: *We are making music*, while one of the students wrote: *Ms. W. loved her knitting, but thought she was unable to do so because of the lack of mobility in her hand due to arthritis. I bought her some large knitting needles and asked her to teach me how to knit. She is now knitting a jersey for the poor.*

- We shared our interest of cars and rugby, and decided who should play in the team and what is going to happen in the rugby matches during the weekend.
- When I heard that the one elderly lady is from Holland, I decided that she is the one I would like to visit, because I have very fond memories about my au pair work in Holland.

According to De Vries (1996), shared or similar experience appears fundamental to this dimension of friendship.

A facet of friendship that has to do with the sociability and compatibility of friends as sources of amusement, fun and recreation is illustrated in the following quotes from the students’ process reports. These quotes emphasise how this facet of friendship was nurtured in the relationship between the students and the older persons:

- We have formed a very close bond and we have both grown and learned new things together. She helped me to see that because she was an elderly person, that does not mean that she is incapable. I also realised that elderly people have a lot to offer by virtue of their wisdom and experience.
- They were very exciting and enjoyable visits. Later I looked forward to the visit just as much as Auntie A. did. The maturity and life experience of Auntie A. and her interesting accounts of her life always made me return with anticipation.
• Every visit with Ms. C. was meaningful to me. What I enjoyed the most about her was her sense of humour for an eighty-eight-year-old. She loved comparing all the old persons in the old age home to a football team which she called “the old crock” football team. When a fellow resident came walking past—or actually she was trying extremely hard to walk—Ms. C. would said: “Yes, she was the one who tried out for the fullback position but didn’t make it.”

The above quotations support the statement made by Veiel and Baumann (1992) that social support is an “inferred characteristic or function of social relationships or transactions, rather than to the observable relationships or transactions themselves” (p. 2).

One of the nurses in the retirement home reflected upon the visits of the students as well as their observations of the older persons in the following way: The benefit of the involvement of the students with the elderly is that someone young and attractive from “outside” is taking an interest in them. They take time to talk to them, to listen to their long stories. And the students become like their own children. Some of the students still have contact and continue to be involved with the elderly. One student, I cannot remember who it was, even sent a Christmas card. That means so much to the oldies.

One older woman said: It is wonderful to talk to someone from outside. Someone who knows what is happening in the world outside the four walls of the old age home.

One of the students also wrote the following about the process: We did perhaps not always communicate word for word, but understood each other completely. And that was important for me. I then realised that what I say is not important. It was my approach that mattered. The fact that I was there—that I paid attention and took an interest in her as a person.

The value of the involvement of a younger generation with the older persons, although not biologically related, is that they can satisfy both instrumental and emotional needs, as illustrated in Figure 1 and the quotes below:

We took a few of the elderly (they were all above 80 years) on excursions. The outings consisted of going to tea gardens as well as the movie theatre. And the elderly enjoyed the trips and established a social network between them.

Today we spoke about the regrets Mr. M. had about his life. He told me that his greatest regret is not finding himself a wife. I could see how it
caused him much pain. From where I was sitting I could feel a mountain of regrets overwhelming him. He battled to keep his eyes dry and to keep them up—his life has been one big regret.

Beginning to have an “ear” is a powerful image for the difficult process of learning to help others make sense of themselves, their actions, and their situations. For volunteer helpers [students], it is a process that emerges from training and experience, from translating theory into practice, and from personal self-reflection. (Adelman & Albrecht, 1987, p. 255)

The above discussion pertains to the data that was gathered, however, the researcher acknowledges that it does not encompass all the possible facets of friendship. It seems as if the older people and the students indeed shared moments of amusement, fun and recreation with each other. For the quotes it is also possible that it might be easier for older persons to interact with younger people who are not biologically related to them, as the relationship between the older persons and their children or siblings might involve inequality of status which may hamper the development of a friendship relationship. Another process that has been observed in the research is that the relationship between the students and the older people developed according to certain moments of closeness.
Phases in the Process of Interaction

During the initial phase of a relationship, people develop a mutual awareness in which the different individuals notice each other and form judgments about each other (Cavanaugh, 1997). The older persons said the following about the students:

- I have an angel visiting me.
- She helps me.
- I did not know what to expect.

The students reflected on the initial interaction as follows:

- I was unsure of how to handle the situation. I was afraid that the old man would not be receptive to my visits because he was in the hospital.
- My elderly person had had a stroke and was partially paralysed. I was concerned about how we would be able to communicate. The fact that she was a total stranger of whom I knew very little did raise some doubt in me. What would I talk to her about? How would she be able to talk back? What would be her attitude to me?
- This aunt of 60 years older than me is locked up in an old age home because she cannot care for herself anymore, and that is why she is in frail care. That was what I thought on my way to Mrs. J.’s room.
- What if the elderly people forgot what we have spoken about? What if they do not like me and do not want me to visit them?

The students’ natural tendency to formulate judgments about the older persons was modified by a process in which they were orientated regarding the basic principles of community psychology, including how to engage with and exist out of a community, to respect human diversity, to be aware of how the sense of community is being expressed and to focus on the strengths and not on the weaknesses of the older persons (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2001; Duffy & Wong, 2000; Lifschitz & Oosthuizen, 2001; Orford, 1993).

According to Cavanaugh (1997), little self-disclosure occurs in the second phase of the development of friendship. The following resident’s remark on the presence of the students supports this: *It is very lonely here–his company means a lot to me.* The students’ reflections in the early stages of the interaction included very few of their own experiences, but rather indicated their awareness of the context in which the
older persons live: We started off by having conversations with the elderly people and it became clear that the social networks of the elderly, especially those in the sick bay, were almost nonexistent.

It seems as if the elderly lady wanted to make sure that I would be visiting consistently before she got attached to me. After the first few visits she hugged me when I arrived and I felt like a lifelong friend.

As self-disclosure between the two generations increased, the transition to friendship was observed. The following quotes from the participants illustrate the multidimensional aspects of friendship expressed in this study:

Older person: We have lots of conversations. Deep conversations: that’s what I like.

Students:

- I began to refer to him as “my uncle.” My whole family got to know him as “my uncle” and after a while began to enquire after him. I was very concerned about him in the hospital and I noticed that he also became concerned if I sometimes was late for our appointment.
- And so our friendship began. Mostly we talked about what had happened during my week. I tried to put her in a position where she would struggle to talk as little as possible. And if it should happen that she struggled, I pretended as if it was perfectly normal. By the fifth visit she had crocheted me the most beautiful coffee table cloth. Of her own volition. It really meant a lot to me . . .
- After every visit to Uncle D. I felt spiritually uplifted. Something inside me just felt right and that was pleasant. Uncle D. and I still keep contact and I see him every time I get a chance. He assures me that I am welcome any time and that he still looks forward to my visits.

One of the students were so inspired by her interaction with “her” chosen older person that she wrote the following poem to express her appreciation of the elderly:

Eventually there comes a time
When my hands must keep crocheting
So that my head can keep counting
The vast number of stitches one by one
That’s the time when my eyes
Will keep staring far
Into the blank past without seeing
Because sense and hope lie there
That’s the time when the autumn air
bores through three woollen blankets
A time with many hours of stillness
but just a handful that hear
That’s the time when the dusk
Sinks over me early in the day
And I in the safe moment
Can show my Maker that I am naked
At such a time heavenly bells ring
If a young person laughs somewhere
It is not on the other side of the hill
It is death that waits for me.

The relationship in which students and residents became confidants
to each other was built upon the way in which they related to each
other—the literature describes this as the trust that comes from reciproc-
ity of disclosure (Simon, 1983). The multidimensional nature of friend-
ship includes emotional and spiritual connectedness, which is made
possible by an underlying sense of trust, loyalty and commitment (De
Vries, 1996). “The benefits derived from such friendships are numerous
. . . and generally have a positive effect on subjective well-being” (Wil-
iliams & Roberts, 1995, p. 64).

DISCUSSION

Friendship, between younger and older people, who are not related,
is not a one-dimensional phenomenon, but something to which people
attributed different meanings. The specific facets of friendship that
might be highlighted in a relationship is based on the unique combina-
tion of personality characteristics, preferences and needs fulfilled in the
relationship. The students and the older persons shared personal
thoughts, feelings, appreciation and affection, and “developed private
norms to guide their relationship” (Cavanaugh, 1997, p. 358). Several
of the students’ and older persons’ descriptions and expressions of their
relationship illustrate deep concern and caring for each other, sincerity
and emotional support: all elements of friendship, which developed between participants who had been strangers before.

The notion that friendship develops through phases is observed in the interaction. Some of the older persons in frail care, who were unable to remember and chart the progression of the relationship, stayed within the phase of mutual awareness, while other older persons were able to progress to the phase of attaching more value to the affective nature of the relationship with a “soul mate.”

The value of involvement between biologically unrelated students and older persons has far-reaching implications for the emotional well-being of both the older persons and the students, and might be applied to other contexts. The following guidelines are proposed to allow the application of these findings to other contexts:

- Biologically unrelated students should become involved with the older persons on a voluntary basis, and should be well prepared for their involvement. They should be oriented to the basic principles and ethics underlying community psychology, the fact that it takes time to get to know someone, that people tend to make judgments from preconceived stereotypes and that friendship is a process that includes mutual awareness, sharing of thoughts and the self and the progression to a deep appreciation of each other as valued human beings.
- Students and the older persons should be paired off individually to allow for meaningful interaction to develop into friendship.
- All the participants in the context of a retirement home should be involved in the process, and adjustments to the process according to identified needs should be made continuously.

**CONCLUSION**

This research focused on the possibilities of enriching the lives of both students and older persons through a participatory community-based project, which aimed at establishing connections between two generations of biologically unrelated people. The value of these connections was described in this article, and recommendations made for the replication of this project. The value of this research is supported by Simons (1983) and Carver et al. (1989) who suggest that research should shift from an emphasis on “how many” and “how often” to the quality of friendships in later life. This research illustrates that “friends are fun for people of all ages” (Cavanaugh, 1997, p. 359).
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