Intergenerational Community Action and Youth Empowerment

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ABSTRACT. Empowerment theory can provide a useful framework for the design and evaluation of intergenerational community-building programs. Using an intervention research approach that draws heavily on empowerment theory, the author designed, facilitated, and evaluated an innovative model for intergenerational community engagement involving undergraduate students and older adult residents of an assisted living facility. This “Intergenerational Community Action Group” met at the assisted living facility throughout a school year to engage in group-building activities, to discuss and choose an issue of concern to them in the community, and to plan and implement an action project to address the issue. This article discusses the use of empowerment theory in intergenerational community action and similar programs, and reviews the empowerment outcomes for youth participants in the Intergenerational Community Action Group.

KEYWORDS. Empowerment, community action, intergenerational, theory, college-linked retirement community

INTRODUCTION

Intergenerational programs have evolved from brief gatherings of children and elders designed to promote ‘good feelings’ to complex and
ongoing initiatives joining youth and elders together to create positive social changes in their communities. Participatory community planning, transmitting cultural heritage between generations, or collaborative lobbying and activism around an issue of concern to both generations are some of the activities promoted by many of today’s intergenerational community-building programs. In addition to benefiting the community, such initiatives benefit participants by teaching youth and seniors—both frequently disempowered groups—that they have something to give to society. Participants feel valued, empowered, and socially engaged (Kaplan, 1997).

While intergenerational community-building programs are increasing in number, systematic research on both program processes and outcomes is lacking. This may be due to a lack of awareness of applicable theories with which to guide program development and research (Kuehne, 2003a, 2003b). Historically, few intergenerational programs have relied on theory to determine program processes and intended outcomes (Cohon, 1989; Kuehne, 1999, 2003a, 2003b; VanderVen, 1999). Furthermore, when theory has been incorporated into intergenerational programming, research, or evaluation, primarily micro-level theories such as contact theory (e.g., Allport, 1954) or human development theories (e.g., Erikson, 1963) have been utilized. In a recent review, Kuehne (2003a) identified more than 15 theoretical approaches that have effectively been applied to intergenerational program development and research; however, most of these theories were still in the realm of developmental psychology.

Empowerment theory, which involves both micro- and macro-level outcomes, has not yet been used to a significant extent in intergenerational programs. As an outcome of intergenerational programming, empowerment has been neglected, despite the fact that youth and the elderly are two groups who often have the least amount of formal power in society. Empowerment theory, however, can be useful in guiding both the design and evaluation of intergenerational community-building programs.

This paper is part of a larger study that explores the processes and outcomes of “intergenerational community action”—that is, older adults and youth working together to address a community issue of mutual concern including the ways in which intergenerational activism can contribute to older and younger people’s empowerment and sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of the other generation. Using an intervention research approach, the author designed, facilitated, and evaluated an innovative model for intergenerational community en-
gagement involving undergraduate students and older adult residents of an assisted living facility. This “Intergenerational Community Action Group” met at the assisted living facility each week for 21 weeks (throughout a school year) to engage in group-building activities, to discuss and choose an issue of concern to them in the community, and to plan and implement an action project to address the issue. From an initial brainstorm of over 90 local, national, and international action project ideas, the participants chose to focus on increasing the linkages between the students’ university and the assisted living facility, to create an environment in keeping with other college-linked retirement communities. Among other accomplishments, they successfully created internship and service-learning opportunities for nursing, psychology, social work, and other students at the assisted living facility, and they promoted the development of an ongoing lecture series of professors at the assisted living facility.

The focus of the article at hand is on the ways in which an intergenerational community action intervention can promote the empowerment of youth. This paper is a synopsis of a more substantial paper that explores in depth the details of the community action process and the outcomes for the participants (Lawrence-Jacobson, 2005).

**EMPOWERMENT THEORY: A BRIEF SUMMARY**

If intergenerational studies is to become a strong interdisciplinary academic field, it is important to root programs in theory. Theory serves a number of important purposes, including providing coherence, direction, and a focus of attention; presenting hypotheses, goals, ideas, and applications; as well as explaining, predicting, and encouraging understanding (Rappaport, 1995). In terms of program evaluation, theory highlights the changes a given program is intended to produce and explicates the ways in which the program activities should produce those changes, so that practitioners can select appropriate outcomes to measure (Rennekamp and Nall, 1999).

Empowerment theory lends itself well to intergenerational community-building initiatives and programs. Empowerment is defined as “an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain a greater access to and control over these resources” (Cornell University Empowerment Group, 1989, p. 2). It is a developmental process that oc-
curs over time; a “mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives” (Rappaport, 1984, p. 3).

Empowerment may be most easily identified when it is lacking, as in the situation of powerlessness, which can be considered the counterpoint for empowerment (Kieffer, 1984; Rappaport, 1984). Powerlessness involves isolation, impotence, alienation, learned helplessness, and loss of control over one’s life. Powerless individuals are acted upon rather than actors themselves.

While easy to define in its absence, empowerment is harder to define positively because the content of the empowerment process can vary from person to person, group to group, as well as across contexts. In other words,

The behaviors necessary for a 16-year-old mother to become empowered are different from the behaviors for a recently widowed middle-aged man. Similarly, what it means to be empowered for these two individuals is not the same. Thus, empowerment is context and population specific. (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 45)

This poses a challenge for intergenerational programs that aim to empower two distinctly different populations (i.e., youth and elders) in one group setting. However, by paying attention to individuals’ own definitions of and expectations around empowerment, programs and evaluations can be designed to enhance and depict the empowerment experiences of both younger and older individuals. Standardized surveys and other global measures of empowerment may therefore be less well-suited for measuring empowerment than qualitative, inductive, constructive approaches that can elicit the informant’s own unique perception of his/her empowerment (Foster-Fishman et al., 1998).

Empowerment can occur at the individual, organization, or community level. At the individual level, empowerment involves three dimensions (Zimmerman, 2000): (1) an intrapersonal dimension, (2) an interactional dimension, and (3) a behavioral dimension. The intrapersonal dimension encompasses how people think about their ability to influence their social and political environment. Intrapersonal empowerment involves a sense of personal control.

The interactional dimension of empowerment involves gaining a critical awareness of one’s environment. People with a well-developed interactional dimension of empowerment know how to use their skills to influence the environment, can garner the necessary resources to achieve their goals, and can analyze and understand the political scene
and factors that influence decision-making. Zimmerman et al. (1992) define the interactional component as “the transactions between persons and environments that enable one to successfully master social or political systems” (p. 707). This dimension can also be thought of as the link between the intrapersonal component (self-perceptions regarding control) and the behavioral component (what one does to exert control).

Finally, the behavioral dimension of individual-level empowerment involves actions that exert control over one’s environment. Often these behaviors are participatory in nature, such as being involved in an organization and joining in collective action. The specific actions that one takes are not necessarily as important as making an attempt to exert control in collaboration with others (Zimmerman, 2000).

This tri-dimensional delineation of individual-level empowerment helps to differentiate it from other constructs with which empowerment is often confused, such as perceived control. While perceived control is “the belief that one can influence outcomes” (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 48), empowerment involves more than just feelings of control—it also entails knowledge and skills (“critical understanding,” or the interactional dimension) and actual behaviors to exert control and to participate (the behavioral dimension). The more of these dimensions cultivated by an intervention, the more empowering the intervention (Kieffer, 1984).

METHODS

The Participants

The Intergenerational Community Action Group (IGCA) consisted of eight older adults living at an independent and assisted living facility (the residents) and five undergraduate students. The residents were all Caucasian, and all were college-educated with the exception of one. Three were male, five were female. They ranged in age from 77 to 90 years old, with a mean age of 83. The students included one freshman, three sophomores, and one senior. Two were Caucasian, two were African American, and one was biracial (Latina and Caucasian). Four were female, one was male. Their mean age was just over 19 years old.

Older adult participants were recruited from an assisted living facility, Ivory Tower Manor, through a combination of invitation and self-selection. In order to ensure a good fit between participants and a group that would require reflective thought, sharing, participation, and proactive engagement, 11 residents who were described by facility ad-
ministrators as appropriately verbal, active, interested in getting involved in the community, and not cognitively impaired were invited to participate in the Intergenerational Community Action Group. Of these 11, eight chose to participate.

Student participants were recruited from the University’s Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, through which students could work at Ivory Tower Manor in exchange for academic credit or work study money. All students who expressed an interest in doing their Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program work at Ivory Tower Manor were invited to participate in the Intergenerational Community Action Group, and five students accepted the invitation.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study utilized qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Data were collected in four primary ways: (1) pre- and post-intervention semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews with each participant in the Intergenerational Community Action Group, (2) mid-year and end-of-the-year mono-generational focus groups, (3) participant observation of the Intergenerational Community Action Group, and (4) semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews with the residents and students who chose not to participate in the Intergenerational Community Action Group, as well as with key staff members at Ivory Tower Manor. In sum, 45 individual interviews were conducted with 34 different people (students, residents, and staff). Four focus groups were held, consisting of a total of 18 individuals. Participant observation was conducted of all 21 sessions of the Intergenerational Community Action Group.

All interviews, focus groups, and all 21 Intergenerational Community Action Group sessions were tape recorded and transcribed. Field notes as well as these transcripts were analyzed using NVivo (QSR International, NVivo 2.0), a software program for qualitative analysis which facilitates coding data, searching for patterns within the coding, and theorizing about the data.

SUMMARY OF EMPOWERMENT OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

Of the three dimensions of Zimmerman’s (2000) psychological empowerment, the interactional dimension—that is, gaining the knowledge
and skills with which to take action—was the most salient for the students. Students gained knowledge in three main areas:

1. Students learned how to approach people in positions of authority (e.g., professors) with requests to do something as part of our action project. Said one student, “Once I started contacting people, it was not as hard as I thought... I was like, ‘Oh, I’m scared, I don’t know how to ask them.’ Now it’s a lot easier for me.”

2. Students grew in their leadership abilities. As one student explained, “I think [the group] helped me to take on a leadership role. I can see that I’ve furthered myself—I don’t have the leadership skills exactly, but I see that they’re developing now.”

3. Students came to feel comfortable voicing their opinions in groups, another important skill for community action. As one student noted, by the end of the year it was “easier for me to talk about, ‘I don’t really think that, I feel like this,’... It’s easier for me to state my opinions on things.”

Beyond Zimmerman’s framework, the IGCA group impacted students’ sense of empowerment by exposing them to active, “empowered” older adults. Participating together with older adults in a community action group provided students with a set of role models for empowerment in old age: “I think all the seniors in our group kind of feel empowered right now, because I mean, look at what they’ve done!” said one student. “How many seniors in senior living homes have the opportunity to get behind a cause and cause a change?” asked another.

That the IGCA group provided student participants with a deeper understanding of empowerment in older adults is evidenced by the differences between the IGCA group students and the other students interviewed (i.e., those who chose not to participate in the IGCA group). The students in the IGCA group considered the IGCA residents to be empowered elders and were able to note the ways in which residents behaved in an empowered manner. The IGCA group students also had a realistic understanding of the constraints on empowerment for older adults, having seen and heard about some of the challenges from the residents themselves. These students understood the powerlessness that residents may feel as they lose the ability to “do the things they’ve done their whole life.” Students in the IGCA group also witnessed the ways in which residents could adapt to their changing abilities and exert control in whatever ways they could. Students in the IGCA group
developed a nuanced, realistic view of the variety of empowerment experiences among older adults.

In contrast, many of the students interviewed who were not in the IGCA group had a hard time visualizing what empowerment for older adults might look like. When asked, “What do you think empowerment and powerlessness is like for older adults?” the students who were not involved with older adults in any capacity focused almost exclusively on the ways in which elders may feel powerless and were often at a loss to describe what empowerment might mean to older adults:

I guess for the elderly population, probably powerless would be something where your own physical or mental condition becomes a hindrance to you. So I feel like a lot of people are frustrated that they can’t walk or that they can’t do things on their own, and I feel like powerless is needing to rely on somebody else to do things that you used to be able to do on your own. And as far as empowerment goes, [pause] I’m not really sure what it would be for them.

None of the non-IGCA students suggested that empowerment might come from being involved in community action or making a difference in the world outside of the individual, which the IGCA students readily noted. By allowing students to work together with older adults to make a difference via a community-oriented project, the IGCA group promoted in students a richer understanding of the multiple paths to empowerment for older adults.

**SUMMARY**

The majority of intergenerational programs have not utilized theory to guide either the design of the intervention or evaluation/research on the program. The Intergenerational Community Action Group was designed using principles from empowerment theory and was evaluated as to the extent of empowerment outcomes among participants (see Lawrence-Jacobson, 2005, for a full discussion).

Student empowerment was affected by participation in the IGCA group in several ways. First, it allowed them to develop necessary skills and knowledge related to conducting our action project, which corresponds with Zimmerman’s (2000) interactional dimension of psychological empowerment. Second, it exposed them to a group of “empowered” older adult role models: Ivory Tower Manor residents
who spoke their mind, expressed their individuality with confidence, and were motivated to make a difference in their community. As a result, the students in the IGCA group developed a more nuanced and realistic view of empowerment among elders than did students who were not involved in an intergenerational community action project with older adults.

Several areas for future research are suggested by this study. While beyond the scope of this paper, the empowerment outcomes for older adults involved in the IGCA group are highly worthy of examination. It would also be worthwhile to examine naturally occurring opportunities for intergenerational collaborative action, rather than a contrived opportunity in a programmatic setting such as that offered by the Intergenerational Community Action Group. In real-world settings (e.g., neighborhoods, congregations, etc.) what outcomes might be produced by intergenerational action to address organic community problems (e.g., increasing crime in the neighborhood, environmental hazards, etc.)?

Within intergenerational programmatic settings, it would be interesting to understand the effect of other types of action projects besides a relatively local and non-controversial one such as that chosen by the IGCA group. Designing an action project around highly charged or contentious political issues (e.g., abortion, the death penalty, assisted suicide) might produce a host of different empowerment outcomes from those associated with a neutral issue such as the strengthening of the relationship between the University and Ivory Tower Manor.

Racial, socioeconomic, and other forms of diversity could be salient in intergenerational community action groups and is worthy of further investigation as well. This study involved a relatively homogenous group of highly educated, white, financially stable older adults with college students (both white and students of color) who were on the path towards professional careers and financial stability. The role of race, socioeconomic status, and other factors in empowerment could be examined with a more diverse group of participants.

As indicated by this study, empowerment can be a useful framework for intergenerational programs, particularly those that involve community action. For student participants, the older adults involved may serve as role models for maintaining empowerment in old age. Participants can gain important skills necessary for action, and can benefit from the opportunity to work together with others towards change.
NOTE

1. Names of institutions and individuals have been changed or omitted to protect the confidentiality of participants.

REFERENCES


