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Available online: 09 Jul 2006

To cite this article: Donna P. Couper, Nancy W. Sheehan & Eugene L. Thomas (1991): ATTITUDE TOWARD OLD PEOPLE: THE IMPACT OF AN INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAM, Educational Gerontology, 17:1, 41-53

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0360127910170105

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ATTITUDE TOWARD OLD PEOPLE: THE IMPACT OF AN INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAM

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The impact of a 1-day, 5-hr intergeneration workshop in changing elementary and high school students' attitudes toward older persons was assessed. Results indicated that participation in the program significantly improved young people's personalized attitudes toward old people and their acceptance of old people. The association between age, gender, and attitudes is also examined. The implications of intergenerational programs for improving attitudes are discussed.

The need for programs aimed at improving young peoples' attitudes about aging and older persons is well documented (Cassell, 1972; Powell & Arquitt, 1978; Wass, Fillmer, & Ward, 1981). However, not all educational intervention programs achieve their desired goal of improving attitudes. Educational programs that focus on the problems of old age frequently result in negative-attitude change (Bennett, 1976; Rosencranz & McNevin, 1969). Similarly, problem-focused curriculum and exposure only to frail, old people produces negative attitudes. For this reason, Seefeldt (1987) cautioned that schools should not limit children's exposure to nursing home residents.

Frequency of contact with older persons does not predict more positive attitudes (Ivester & King, 1977; Jantz, Seefeldt, Galper, & Serlock, 1977). The nature and quality of the contact seems to be the critical determining factor (Knox, Gekoski, & Johnson, 1986). Direct experience with older adults in controlled settings appears to be more effective in changing attitudes than information or discussions on attitudes and facts about aging (Murphy-Russell, Die, & Walker, 1986). Other research suggests that attitudes formed as a result of direct experience are a better predictor of behavior than attitudes formed through indi-

This research was supported in part through a grant from the Research Foundation of the University of Connecticut.
rect experience (Fazio & Zanna, 1981; Regan & Fazio, 1977). Researchers have generally concluded that spontaneous, intimate, but brief, contact correlates with more positive attitudes toward old people (Bennett, 1976; Drake, 1957; Rosencranz & McNevin, 1969; Tuckman & Lorge, 1958).

Of equal concern to negative stereotypes is the “portraying of old age as a romantic glamorous time, or to portray the elderly as wise sages or eccentric, unique people” (Seefeldt, Jantz, Galper, & Serock, 1981, p. 7). Countering this concern, Labouvie-Vief and Baltes (1976) argued that intergenerational programs using advantaged groups of old people are preferable because they would serve as models for successful aging. Active and alert older adults would also be more representative of the population over 60 years old.

Types of intervention programs that have resulted in positive attitude change toward old people include: (a) oral history projects (Myerhoff & Tufte, 1975); (b) elder volunteer programs (Carstensen, Mason, & Caldwell, 1982); and (c) open-ended intergenerational discussions (Labouvie-Vief & Baltes, 1976; Olejnik & LaRue, 1981; Seefeldt et al., 1981; Trent, Glass, & Crockett, 1979).

The literature on gender differences in attitudes of old people is contradictory (McTavish, 1971). However, several studies on children’s attitudes suggest that girls generally hold more positive attitudes than boys (Fillmer, 1982; Olejnik & LaRue, 1981; Thomas & Yamamoto, 1975).

Researchers differ on the preferred age group for educational intervention programs. Targeted age groups range from kindergarten-age children (Page, Olivas, Driver & Driver, 1981) to middle-aged adults (Ahammer & Baltes, 1972; Glass & Knott, 1982). No studies, to our knowledge, compare the effects of intervention programs on elementary and high school populations simultaneously.

Recently, gerontologists have applied contact theory as developed by Allport (1954) and Amir (1969) to explain attitude changes toward old people (Knox, Gekoski, & Johnson, 1986; Seefeldt, 1987). According to contact theory, certain conditions for intergroup contact lead to improved attitudes. Seefeldt (1987) summarized these conditions as follows: (a) equal status between groups; (b) intimate rather than casual contact; (c) contact that is pleasant and rewarding for both groups; and (d) functional interaction occurring with both groups involved in goal setting and participation in important activities.

This study evaluates an intergenerational program that incorporates these four contact conditions to promote positive changes in attitudes toward younger and older age groups.
METHODOLOGY

The present study explored the impact of a 1-day, 5-hr intergeneration workshop (Couper, 1983) in changing both male and female elementary and high school students' attitudes toward older persons.

Sample Description

Elementary and high school students from the same school system in a middle- to upper-class town served as subjects. The town is a bedroom community in the northeastern United States.

Two of four combination fifth- and sixth-grade classes from a public elementary school were randomly selected for the treatment program ($n = 44$: 26 boys and 18 girls). The remaining two fifth- and sixth-grade classes in the same school served as the control group ($n = 47$: 29 boys and 18 girls). Student assignment to the respective classes was random, with no special grouping according to ability or interest. Ages of the elementary students ranged from 9 to 13 ($M = 10.9$).

The high school students were enrolled in an elective social studies course. Two of three classes of students ($n = 29$: 13 boys and 16 girls) were selected to participate in the treatment program; the remaining third class served as the control group ($n = 41$: 20 boys and 21 girls). Assignment to the three sections of the social studies course was done randomly by computer scheduling. Ages of high school students ranged from 15 to 18 ($M = 16.4$ years).

Although the older adult participants were not tested, their profile is important to this study. The older adults consisted of 36 women and 3 men, 60 years of age and over, who volunteered to participate in the workshop. These older volunteers were contacted through two senior centers within the same town as the student population. Although a few had slight hearing and mobility difficulty, the older group represented a relatively healthy and independent population as opposed to a more frail population (Labouvie-Vief & Baltes, 1976; Seefeldt, 1987).

Intergeneration Workshop

Workshop participants were organized into small groups of between 8 and 10 people with at least 2 representatives from each age group. Small-group activities included interpersonal communication, group problem solving, and values-clarification exercises (Simon, Howe, & Kirschenbaum, 1972). Structured group exercises included ones in which members cooperated on simple problem-solving tasks. Common life experiences and feelings were shared during self-disclosure
exercises. Acceptance of different beliefs was encouraged through a values communication activity. The closing exercise was a sharing of positive feedback on personal strengths from group members. All exercises had previously been used successfully with other groups of elementary and high school students. The goal of each small-group exercise was to affirm the commonality of needs and feelings among the different age groups. Emphasis was on similarities rather than age-related differences.

**Procedures**

This study used a quasiexperimental design (Applebaum & McCall, 1983) with posttest control group design and cluster sampling. With cluster sampling, each member of the cluster (class) is included in the sample (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 1979). Four days after the intervention, both experimental and control groups of elementary students completed the attitude measures in a single group setting. Five days after the intervention, both experimental and control high school students completed the attitudinal instruments in their respective classes.

**Measuring Instruments**

Three different measures of attitudes toward older adults were used. Each measure was an adapted version of widely used instruments to measure attitudes: (a) sentence completion (Golde & Kogan, 1959); (b) The Kogan Old People (OP) Scale (Kogan, 1961); and (c) Aging Semantic Differential (Rosencranz & McNevin, 1969). Classroom teachers reviewed the measurements and found the vocabulary and format to be appropriate for their students.

The sentence-completion test assessed personal perceptions of older people in social situations. It consisted of six items (e.g., “If an old person I do not know sits down next to me on a train or bus, I . . .”; “When I am with an old person, I feel . . .”). Items were coded on a 3-point scale, with 0 representing a negative response, 1, a neutral response, and 2, a positive response. Interjudge agreement between two raters ranged from 85% to 97%.

A shortened version of the Kogan OP Scale explored feelings of comfort or tension generalized toward old people, and assessed general perceptions of interpersonal relations between generations. It consisted of six positive statements matched with six negative statements: for example, “Most old people are very relaxing to be with”; “Most old people are constantly complaining about the behavior of the
younger generation.” Statements were labeled “strongly agree,”
“mildly agree,” “mildly disagree,” “strongly disagree.” Positive
statements were scored 4, 3, 2, and 1. Negative statement scores were
reversed.
Finally, the Personal Acceptability-Unacceptability (PA-U) subscale
of the Rosencranz-McNevin Aging Semantic Differential (1969) was
used. Although other scales on the Semantic Differential are descrip-
tive in nature, the PA-U is primarily evaluative, reflecting an attitude
component that assesses personal acceptance of old people (Knox et
al., 1986).

RESULTS
Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients found the three mea-
sures of attitudes toward old people to be moderately correlated. Cor-
rrelation ranged from .61 between the Aging Semantic Differential and
the Kogan OP Scales and .37 between the sentence completion and the
OP Scale. The Aging Semantic Differential Scale and sentence comple-
tion were correlated at .51.
Three 2x2x2 analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to mea-
sure the effect of treatment (experimental and control), grade level
(elementary and high school), and gender for each of the three mea-
sures (Reichard, 1979).

Sentence Completion
Responses to the sentence-completion test indicated significant main
effects for treatment, $F(1, 105) = 6.198, p < .05$, gender, $F(1, 105) =
12.196, p < .01$, and school level, $F(1, 105) = 9.871, p < .01$. There
was an additional statistically significant interaction among the three
factors, $F(1, 105) = 7.358, p < .01$.
Examination of mean scores on the 12-point sentence completion
revealed that (a) the experimental group scored significantly higher
than the control, $t(113) = 2.53, p < .05$; (b) elementary students
scored significantly higher than high school students, $t(86) = 2.91, p <
.01$; and (c) girls scored significantly higher than boys, $t(111) = 3.05,
p < .01$.
The breakdown of the second-order interaction indicated that the
high school girls in the treatment and control groups showed the great-
est differences in attitudes; the girls in the treatment group scored much
higher. However, the experimental group of high school boys scored
slightly lower than the control group of high school boys. Elementary
school treatment groups of both boys and girls showed similar higher scores than their respective control groups (See Table 1 and Fig. 1.).

**Aging Semantic Differential**

Responses on the Aging Semantic Differential Scale revealed simple main effects for the treatment factor, $F(1, 134) = 4.317, p < .05$, school level, $F(1, 134) = 5.655, p < .05$, and gender, $F(1, 134) = 4.199, p < .05$. There were no first- or second-order interactions.

Results on the Aging Semantic Differential Scale indicated that, first, the experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group, $t(113) = 2.53, p < .05$. Second, elementary students had significantly higher scores than high school students, $t(130) = 2.18, p < .05$. Third, girls had higher scores than boys but there was no significant difference.

The greatest differences on the Aging Semantic Differential Scale were between the experimental and control groups of both high school boys and girls. High school boys showed inconsistent results on the Semantic Differential Scale and sentence completion. On the sentence-completion test, high school boys in the experimental group showed slightly lower scores than high school boys in the control group. However, on the Semantic Differential Scale, the positive increase for high school boys in the experimental group was similar to the increase shown by high school girls in the experimental group over high school girls in the control group (see Table 2 and Fig. 2.).

**The OP Scale**

The ANOVA on the generalized stimulus responses from the OP Scale showed no significant main effects or interactions.

**TABLE 1 Means and Standard Deviations of Sentence-Completion Test Scores by Treatment, School Level, and Gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Control</th>
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<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.79</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10.07</td>
<td>1.94</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7.89</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8.79</td>
<td>2.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.69</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10.33</td>
<td>2.31</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7.07</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>3.12</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
FIGURE 1  Mean scores on the sentence-completion test for elementary and high school students as a function of treatment and gender.

DISCUSSION

This study of the effectiveness of the intergeneration workshop indicated the success of the program in improving younger participants' personalized attitudes toward old people. Students participating in the workshop reported more positive statements in their responses to hypothetical social situations involving themselves and an old person. Young participants also rated old people as personally more acceptable than did nonparticipants. However, the program did not significantly

TABLE 2  Means and Standard Deviations of Aging Semantic Differential Scores by Treatment, School Level, and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<tr>
<td>Elementary school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>57.93</td>
<td>7.94</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>58.56</td>
<td>7.54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>53.96</td>
<td>10.20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>54.41</td>
<td>9.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>50.26</td>
<td>9.27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>57.46</td>
<td>9.69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>48.05</td>
<td>10.10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>54.81</td>
<td>11.34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
School Group Differences

Results indicated that elementary school students held more positive attitudes toward older people than high school students. More specifically, elementary school students reported more positive personal responses to older persons in hypothetical social situations than did high school students. They also rated old people as personally more acceptable.

Psychosocial issues characteristic of adolescence may explain high school students' more negative attitudes toward dissimilar others. Erikson (1968) described the increasing intolerance among adolescents, which he saw as a defense against their own identity loss during this developmental stage:

*FIGURE 2* Mean Scores on semantic differential for elementary and high school students as a function of treatment and gender.
Young people can become remarkably clannish, intolerant, and cruel in their exclusion of others who are "different," in skin color or cultural background, in tastes and gifts, and often in entirely petty aspects of dress and gesture arbitrarily selected as the signs of an in-grouper or out-grouper. (p. 132).

Evidence from this study suggests that old people are also among adolescents' out-group.

Although high school students' attitudes are more negative than their elementary school counterparts, their attitudes were influenced more by the program than elementary students. The more negative original attitudes of high school participants suggest that they experienced greater dissonance between their previous attitudes and actual experiences with older people in the workshop setting. In contrast, elementary students with more positive attitudes before participating in the workshop engaged in behaviors that were more consistent with their preconceived attitudes.

Additionally, hierarchical ordering along age lines during the workshop might also have occurred, which would influence the extent of attitude change for elementary and high school students. Although the group process was designed to be egalitarian and democratic, it is possible that high school students emerged as informal leaders. If so, their workshop experience would have been more affirming than that of the elementary students.

Interestingly, the change in attitudes for high school students might not have been so evident without the presence of elementary students in the contact situation. The younger students most likely enhanced the quality of interaction—comfort, intimacy, and openness—for both high school students and older adults. The presence of elementary students may have been important for establishing appropriate contact conditions for attitude change.

Finally, another explanation for the different attitudes of high school and elementary students is their different cognitive abilities (Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1932). Differences in cognitive and moral development would influence their perceptions of the workshop and their assessment of the older participants.

Gender Differences

Gender differences were also found to influence attitudes toward old people. Girls reported more positive responses than boys in hypothetical social situations with old people. They also rated old people as more acceptable than did boys. No differences between boys and girls were found with respect to generalized old people.
Gender difference in the psychosocial developmental tasks of adolescence may have influenced boys' and girls' responses to the level of self-disclosure and intimacy during the workshop. Gilligan (1979) suggested that for girls the search for identity during adolescence is fused with a concern for intimacy as the girl comes to know herself through her relationships with others. As Gilligan (1979) explained, “male gender identity will be threatened by individuation” (p. 434). High school boys in the experimental group may have experienced some personal discomfort in these activities, which may account for their more negative attitudes on the sentence-completion test.

High school boys may also have been negatively influenced by the disproportion of older women to men in the contact situation. However, some evidence suggests that both boys and girls respond more positively to an old woman as stimulus than to an old man (Fillmer, 1982). Further research is needed to address the question of psychosocial developmental factors and gender differences influencing attitudes and attitude change.

CONCLUSION

The results of the present study suggest the complexity of efforts to improve younger persons' attitudes toward old people. The intergeneration workshop was effective in improving the acceptability of older adults and responses to hypothetical social situations with older adults. It did not affect students' generalized stereotypical notions of old people. Future research needs to assess the impact of intergenerational programs with different combinations of age groups. Attitudes of older persons toward young children and adolescents also need to be assessed.

The impact of the intergeneration workshop may be accounted for by the content and structure of the workshop sessions. Involvement in workshop sessions may have increased the young participants' level of acceptance of old people as they engaged in activities designed to highlight the similarities in beliefs, values, and needs among people of different age groups. Additionally, group participants worked cooperatively on tasks that promoted intimacy through structured self-disclosure exercises. According to contact theory (Amir, 1969), the intergeneration workshop established desired conditions for positive attitude change.

The desire for intergenerational programs will increase with the aging of society as policymakers and educators seek to foster feelings of interdependence among generations. The relative success of the work-
shop suggests the positive influence that nonfamilial, intergenerational activities can have on young people.

REFERENCES


Received November 14, 1989
Accepted January 3, 1990