

Service Learning with Rural Older Adults: Effects on Students' Career Perspectives in Gerontology

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the effects of a service-learning project with rural older adults on social work students' choice of working professionally with older adults upon graduation. Service learning is a course-based community service experience designed to enhance students' understanding of course content while meeting an identified community need at the same time. The service-learning intergenerational project consisted of ten hours of face-to-face interaction between a BSW student and an older adult living in rural South West Virginia and the city of Charleston. Twenty-one undergraduate social work students attending the Micro Practice course participated in the study. Data collection consisted of face-to-face interviews guided by a set of open-ended questions. Data analysis revealed that participation in the intergenerational project did not change a students' choice of major but it increased their desire to explore the field of aging. [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>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

The number of elders in the population is growing in a consistent manner. Persons 65 years or older currently make up 12.7% of the population in the United States and are estimated to reach 20% (70 million) of the U.S. population by 2030 (U.S. Administration on Aging, 2000). This growth leads to an increased need for social workers specializing in gerontology to facilitate family support for the elder family member, to provide information on existing services and counseling to the adult and his/her family, to coordinate care and to develop home and community-based services for the aging population (Geriatric Enrichment in Social Work Education, 2001). In spite of the growing need for well trained professionals specializing in working with older adults, research findings demonstrate that large numbers of students trained in the human and health services are reluctant to work with older persons (Paton, Sar, Barber, & Holland, 2001). Social work students are no exception. They, too, show reluctance to choose aging as an area of specialization (Mason & Sanders, 2003).

As the need for professionals with knowledge of the aging process increases, researchers focus on identifying those factors that contribute to the desire of college students to work with older adults. Previous research focused on college students and was based on questionnaires and/or face-to-face lab experiences to identify the effect that personal contact with an older adult has on a student's desire to work with this population upon graduation. Results of such studies demonstrated conflicting results. Some studies revealed a positive relationship between students' personal contact with an elder and their choice of a career in gerontology. Other research results showed no such effect (Paton, Sar, Barber, & Holland, 2001; Valeri-Gold, 1996).

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on this subject by examining the effects of a service-learning intergenerational project with rural older adults on social work students' choice of working professionally with this age group. Results of this research assist in reducing the ambiguity due to conflicting past research results. Findings further assist in identifying those factors that contribute to an increase in the number of professionals providing service to the growing older adult population. Service learning is a

credit-bearing educational experience that provides students with the opportunity to successfully link theory to practice while meeting an identified community need (Brown & Roodin, 2001). The goal of the service-learning intergenerational program described here is to provide older adults who do not participate in community-based services with companionship and with information on existing opportunities available to them in the community. In addition, social work students participating in this project had an opportunity to practice their interviewing skills and clarify their personal preference of working with the older adult population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing research explored the effect that previous personal experience and professional experience with older adults has on students' attitudes towards the elderly and their choice of working professionally with them (Gorelik, Damron-Rodriguez, Funderburk, & Solomon (2000). The major assumption of the researchers was that positive attitudes among students towards older adults increases their interest in gaining more knowledge about this age group and results in a stronger wish to professionally work with older adults upon graduation. However, a review of the literature suggests that knowledge about factors known to influence interest in aging is limited. Further, studies exploring the relationship between personal contacts with older adults, attitudes toward the elderly, and increased interest in working with this age group demonstrate conflicting findings (Paton, Sar, Barber, & Holland, 2001; Valeri-Gold, 1996). For example, some studies found no correlation among knowledge, attitudes, and preferences. Increased knowledge about older adults does not necessarily lead to changes in attitudes and work preferences (Carmel, Cwikel, & Galinski, 1992). Other research found that laboratory experiences, courses in gerontology and exposure to older adults have a positive impact on students' attitudes towards, and increased interest in working with, this age group (Robert & Mosher-Ashley, 2000). And yet another study involving undergraduate students (McKillip, 1980) revealed that previous career interest in working with older adults proved to be the variable most useful for predicting undergraduate interest in gerontology. The following section provides a review of studies on the effect of personal and professional experiences on students' choice of working with older adults upon graduation.

Personal Contact with Older Adults and a Student's Interest in Working with the Elderly

Studies exploring student interest in gerontology as a career revealed that, for the most part, students feel either neutral (Kane, 1999; Reed, Beall, & Baumhover, 1992), or alternatively, demonstrate low interest in working with older adults upon graduation (Carmel, Cwikel, & Galinski, 1992). Previous studies also revealed that students' academic discipline (primarily medical, nursing, and social work as compared with business majors) plays a role in students' interest in working with older persons (William, Lusk, & Kline, 1986).

A general review of the literature indicates that two types of research methods were used for examining the relationship between a student's experience with older adults and their choice of career path in gerontology: questionnaire-only-based research and lab-based, face-to-face experience followed or preceded by a questionnaire type of research. Studies results demonstrate that when professional and personal contact (friendship or familial) were examined with regard to interest in aging, findings have been contradictory (Dunkle & Hyde, 1995). Some studies reveal that personal and professional experiences with older adults are associated with interest in working with this population. Personal experiences such as having lived with an older adult person (Gomez, Young, & Gomez, 1991; Reed, Beall, & Baumhover, 1992; Robert & Mosher-Ashley, 2000), having cared for an older person (Adelman, Fields, & Jutagir, 1992; Gomez, Young, & Gomez, 1991; Michielutte & Diseker, 1984), or having had a close and positive personal experience with older persons (Bessiner, 1990; Carpenter, 1996; Kane, 1999; Shoemake & Rowland's, 1993) are associated with interest in gerontology. Other studies document that after having either personal or professional contact with older adults, students do not always develop a positive attitude about older persons, nor do they always express an interest in working with this population upon graduation (Brown & Roodin, 2001; Paton, Sar, Barber, & Holland, 2001; Valeri-Gold, 1996). One study conducted by Gorelik, Damron-Rodriguez, Funderburk, and Solomon's (2000) revealed that interest in aging proceeds along a continuum, from preceding factors such as having frequent contact with older adult family members to initial interest in aging (i.e., taking an aging course) and then to substantial interest in aging (taking more aging courses, majoring in gerontology, working or planning to work with older adults).

The overview of the literature demonstrates that the existing knowledge base about personal contact with older adults as related to interest

in aging as a career of choice is inconclusive. However, a general trend seems to be gaining shape, namely, when students have a positive experience with an older adult it may increase their interest in working with this population upon graduation. The purpose of this study is to contribute to increased clarity of how contact with an elderly person affects social work students' interest in choosing aging as a field of practice upon graduation. The following section describes the methods and procedures of this study that aims at addressing this research problem.

METHOD AND PROCEDURES

Twenty-one undergraduate students attending a social work practice course participated in the study. Before going on their first home visit, the students completed a unit on interviewing skills, a short training on the project and techniques of developing a relationship with this segment of the population. Participation in the program was for credit. Social workers from the local senior services recruited the older adults who expressed interest in meeting with a student and introduced the students to their prospective older adult partner. After the initial meeting the intergenerational partners established follow-up meetings.

Using semi-structured open- and closed-ended questionnaires, undergraduate students attending the social work research course interviewed the group of students who participated in the service-learning intergenerational project. The interviews were carried out in January through April 2003. Research students started their interview by developing a general discussion about the project and exploring feelings and impressions that the practice course students had about their interaction with their older adult partner. Interviewers then proceeded with the interview to include demographic information, a close-ended questionnaire, and three open-ended research questions. The close-ended questions addressed study participants' past professional and familial involvement with older adults and previous courses on aging as well as interest in working professionally with the aging population upon graduation. Variables such as previous education and past contact with older adults have been shown to have an effect on college students' choice of practicing with the older adult population. The open-ended questions were used to explore students' desire to choose gerontology as their major field, if and how the project affected their choice, and their interest in exploring a career in this occupational field. Another open-ended question explored students' ideas about making Aging a desired major.

Respondents' description: The students participating in the project were non-traditional students. Most participants were juniors, with an average age of 30.6 years. Except for two male students, all study participants were women. Fourteen students (66.7%) were white non-Hispanic, four students (19%) were African American, and 3 students (14.3%) identified themselves as being of mixed race. Students' varied in relation to having past contact with older adults, either through a job they held, volunteering, or maintaining contact with a relative. Table 1 contains the information on such past experiences that students had with older adults. Table 1 also contains statistics on aging courses the student attended in the past and field placements they held.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Data analysis methods were based on grounded theory procedures and techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Straus & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory refers to an inductive process of discovering theory from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interviews lasted for approximately one half hour. The semi-structured interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed, each student transcribing his/her own interview. Data analysis procedures used in this study may be described as collaborative data analysis, where students participating in the research course, along with two faculty members, performed the data analysis. Respondents' answers were coded with identification numbers assigned to each based on conceptual labels and emerging theoretical understanding. Responses were then grouped by interview question. Students were asked to read and make notes in the transcripts' margins. Comments were to include thoughts, identified themes, main ideas, words frequently used, and questions students may have. These notes, called "memos" were later used to classify ideas, tie ideas together, and provide themes for the class discussion regarding research questions. Themes and patterns were extrapolated for each question from the combined interviews regarding the experiences that students encountered while developing a relationship with the elderly and their impression as the effects of this project on deciding to work professionally with seniors upon graduation. Data was also analyzed for respondents' opinions on increasing students' interest in following a professional career with older adults upon graduation. Decisions regarding meaning were reached through discussion and group consensus. The two faculty members participated in each step of the data

TABLE 1. Students' Past Experiences, Attending Courses, and Field Placement Opportunities Relating to Older Adults

Experience with older adults	Yes		No		Missing	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Employment	12	57.1	9	42.9		
A Family Member						
Frequency (once a week or more)	18	85.7				
Occasional (a few times a year)	3	14.3				
None			2	9.5		
A Non-Family Member						
Frequency (once a week or more)	13	61.9				
Occasional (a few times a year)	6	28.6				
Volunteering	4	19.1	13	61.9	4	21
Attending Courses Relating to Older Adults	15	71.4	6	28.6		
Field Experience with the Older Adults	11	52.4	10	47.6		

analysis process and were responsible for the final integration of data analysis results.

RESULTS OF DATA ANALYSIS

Negative Feelings About Participating in the Project Turn Positive

Initial feelings about participating in the outreach intergenerational project with older adults varied among the participating students. Students' responses ranged from a few who showed anger about choosing to focus the project on older adults rather than another age group, to those expressing unspoken resistance by showing little or no interest in pursuing this project's objectives. A number of students, those who initially were interested in working with older adults upon graduation, were looking forward for their first meeting with their prospective elder.

As students developed a relationship with the older adult partner assigned to them, negative feelings became positive for all students except one. For example, as students were asked to reflect on their feelings about this project, one student responded:

I wasn't particularly looking forward to it, but after I started it, I began to enjoy it. I guess what makes me feel this way is just that I've never really paid too much attention to the elderly. I've never really been interested in them. It's not that I disliked them. It's just that I had no interest in them. The good thing about the project is that it showed me that there is a need for social workers in the gerontology profession. It showed me a lot about aging that I didn't know and it was a positive experience.

Other students recognized the contribution of the intergenerational project to their personal and professional growth:

I felt good about this project. I have a greater understanding of how people grow old and what keeps them well and alive.

Well the lady I interviewed, she showed me a different side of aging. She was older but she was really into living life and had been through a lot but was still healthy, and overcame many different obstacles, so she showed me that the better end of working with the elderly, because most people think that when you work with the elderly its death, but this lady was really full of living, she stayed on the move. So after working with her I realized that growing old doesn't always mean dying. It means you know still living and having a lot of youth, so I had seen the bad side of elderly and this opportunity gave me the chance to meet a person that who was elderly but living well.

I already knew a lot about growing old and aging, but I guess I could say that this lady I interviewed was on a budget, where my grandparents were really very much financially stable. So she did kind of showed me that she had to receive food stamps and had to get a medical card and different things like that. So it kind of did open my knowledge and realize that not all elderly have the money to take care of themselves.

There Is No Change in Desired Major but There Is an Increased Interest in Gerontology

When asked if the intergenerational project contributed to their wish to work professionally with the older adult population upon graduation,

students' responses varied. Those students declaring aging as their area of concentration before the intergenerational project started found this assignment either making no difference in their initial wish or reinforcing their decision. For example, one of the older students in the class said:

Well, my interaction with the elderly person actually had nothing to do with my desire to be involved with the elderly. My basic desire to be with the elderly and learn more about them is because I'm a Baby Boomer and I'm going to be among a large category of people who are going to have a lot of needs and I want to learn as much about their needs now as I can. This way I'll be prepared for myself and other people too.

And as other students narrated:

I have always had an interest in the elderly even before the project. I enjoyed the experience, and hope to work with the elderly professionally one day. One experience that I enjoyed was spending time with the lady (assigned through the project) because she had some of the same interest that I have, such as knitting. The experience reminded me of the times when I was younger and would visit my grandmother. She showed me how to knit. The project did not change my feelings about the elderly, because I feel that my personal involvement with my grandparents made me love being around the elderly.

That's basically what I want to go into social work for is to work with the elderly. This is what I wanted to do before I started this project so this just added more detail. My dad was sick and he had home health care, and a social worker came and gave me information about resources available to him at the time. She made sure we had comfortable arrangements. This incident helped me out.

Among the group that was initially resistant to this project, two stories emerged. One group said that the intergenerational project had no effect on their choice—they do not consider working with older adults upon graduation.

I have no interest in working with the elderly and the project did not change my mind.

However, the other group of students found the interaction with their elder partner to be enjoyable. They further found themselves interested in gaining further knowledge and/or field practice with older adults before making a decision.

I kind of liked the experience. It made me kind of want to get more experience with elderly people. You know, talking to my grandmother and stuff like that and other older people who are in my family didn't make me want to work with the aged or anything. People that I know that just live around me didn't make me want to work with the aged. It was this experience alone. It just showed me a different side of the aging population that I didn't know about. I had stereotypes about elderly people, and a lot of my stereotypes were proven wrong. I guess that's what affected me. I saw a different side of it than I expected. I would like to work with the elderly people, but I would kind of like to learn as I go along. I really don't have any desire to take any more classes.

Or as another student stated:

I think I'd be more willing to work professionally with the elderly in the future now after the interaction.

When asked to recall an experience that affected this opinion, she said:

She (the elderly lady) did not fit my stereotype of an elderly person. She was very independent and very comfortable with her life now. She takes care of all her finances on her own. She enjoys living by herself. She is active by going out in her community and making crafts.

A few students considered starting their own business once they graduate.

After I graduate I will try to go to some grant writing programs and hopefully I can get a grant to help out the elderly in need. A lot of them do need home health care and I mean they need good help to come in and help them. So I had really gave it some thought for opening up my own place where the elderly can come in and give an outreach to them and show them the different things and how to get and how to make their food last and how to do their medication.

I've actually thought about having a home that is just not for the elderly, but a home for the elderly and young people that would come in and help the elderly. Actually I would like the home for gay and lesbian people to have a place to go because right now if they have to go into a nursing home facility and they have a partner that would like to go with them, they cannot be put in the same room together. So, I would like to have a home to be able to provide those services to that population.

Personal Involvement, Increasing Knowledge, and Monetary Incentives Increase Students' Interest in Following a Professional Career with Older Adults Upon Graduation

Finally, study participants were asked to express their opinions as to what might increase students' motivation to choose the aging field as their preferred area of concentration. Most respondents agreed that any form of personal experience and increased knowledge on aging issues positively affect students' choices. Increasing personal involvement with older adults through participating in service learning intergenerational projects was the method of choice that students identified to achieve this purpose. As one student expressed:

I think little projects like this one, working with the elderly one-on-one can persuade them to probably consider working with the elderly. Working with kids is kind of traditional, working with the homeless is kind of traditional, so you can kind of expect most college age students right now to be interested in that. I just think that one on one experience can probably change your mind.

Increasing knowledge on aging issues and awareness to challenges faced by older adults was another suggestion expressed by most respondents. As one student related

I think that if the school system educated people more about the elderly instead of just having an aging course. If there was something incorporated about the elderly in every class, then people would be more aware of their (the elders) needs and what kind of people they are.

Or as another student expressed:

I think just by learning about them because they are not people that are done with life. They are very much active people. Some of them are more active than we are.

The same students further suggested to include aging among the other social work topics introduced in the social work program.

Introducing students to different fields such as aging or child abuse would give them a better understanding of what they would get into.

Offering incentives to those entering the aging field was suggested by two respondents:

I think that if the student does not already have an initial interest in working with the elderly, then maybe incentives may interest them in a professional career with the elderly upon graduation. By incentives, I mean offering a better salary for working with the elderly or even offering financial assistance with education.

However, as the second student noted, monetary incentives may not be suitable:

Money could draw the (the students), but then you think if it is just the money issue, how caring of the elderly are they really going to be?

Finally, although not the majority, a small number of respondents expressed their opinion that nothing can be done to increase students' desire to work with the elderly if they did not initially choose to do so:

I feel a student has an idea of what field they want to go into when they enter. It is innate, you already have a group that you are interested in. I really think it's all a personal choice you can have people to field of studies or placement or research. It's all about the person. A person has to have it in them to really want to be around, care for and work with the elderly. Well this project could increase interest, but you know you really can't force it on anybody. If somebody's heart isn't into it they aren't going to want to do it.

***DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION
FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH***

The purpose of this study was to explore how participating in an intergenerational project where students maintain personal contact with an older adult affects their interest in choosing aging as a field of practice upon graduation. Results of data analysis varied but an overall trend emerged. Students initially interested in working with older adults, showed no change in their choice of concentration upon graduation, or found the assignment positively enforcing it as a result of participating in the intergenerational project. However, among the group who did not consider aging as an area of interest, opinion varied as to the contribution of this project to their initial choice. While a few students vigorously objected an option of working with this age group, a considerable number of this group did not rule it out. Once the later group of students was able to experience such an interaction in a professional setting, they changed their perceptions about old age. These students realized how their preconceived ideas about aging prevented them from considering aging as an option, and they expressed a wish to gain more knowledge or professional experience in order to make an informed decision. This study's findings resemble those of previous research, where researchers concluded that there was either no change in interest in working with the elderly (Brow & Rodin, 2001), or a limited interest (Paton, Sar, Barber, & Holland, 2001) resulting from maintaining a professional contact with an older adult. However, results of this study mostly support Gorelik, Damron-Rodriguez, Funderburk, and Solomon's (2000) findings. These researchers revealed that interest in aging proceeds along a continuum, from preceding factors to initial interest in aging and then to substantial interest in aging. Although this study did not last long enough to identify the later stage, it nevertheless demonstrated similarity in maintaining that showing interest in working with the elderly is a process. Once students gain an initial experience of interacting with an older adult and are able to change their perception of old age, they show willingness to pursue this area of concentration before making a final decision. They do so by expanding their theoretical knowledge in the subject of gerontology and/or by gaining more practical experience.

The growing elderly population dictates the need for more professionals such as social workers and psychologists in the field of aging. To meet such a need, undergraduate and graduate educational programs should foster more interest among students. As the study respondents

indicated, and as result of this study suggest, giving students positive experiences with older adults may challenge their misconception about old age and as a result increase their interest in working with this segment of population. Service learning intergenerational projects are just one way to accomplish this task. Increasing knowledge on aging issues and awareness of challenges affecting people in old age by involving students and older adults in ongoing research addressing the encouragement of students to enter the gerontology field are additional means leading to the same end.

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