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**Age is an attitude, not a number: The change in perceptions of college students
about aging.**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
Department of Child and Family Development.

By Jennifer Nelson

Under the mentorship of Dr. Jennifer Zorotovich

ABSTRACT

“Ageism is an untrue assumption that chronological age should be the main determinant of human characteristics and that one age group is better than another” (Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2015, p. 31). Even though America is currently undergoing population aging, ageism is still experienced by 77% of adults (Novak, 2012). Although there has been an abundance of research on the outcomes of ageism (Burnes, et al., 2019; Kallio & Thomas, 2019, Scott, 2019) not as much attention has been given to intergenerational programs. The current study compared qualitative feedback to better understand students’ experiences in service learning with different populations of older adults. One group of students interacted with frail older adults and the other group interacted with active older adults. Analysis utilized a thematic approach (Lindsay, 2019) of qualitative data to explore group differences on perceptions toward aging between the two groups of students. A discussion of results is presented in terms of the impact that intergenerational programming may have on college students’ perceptions of aging and older adults.

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How old is old? Research explored a similar inquiry about how old is old among three different groups of people. Results confirmed that children defined ages 35 to 80 years as old, nurses identified 50 to 75 years as old, and older adults stated those between 45 and 80 years were old (Davidovic, Djordjevic, Erceg, Despotovic & Milosevic, 2007). The previous study demonstrated that everyone has a different view on what age defines being old. The question of how old is old is important to consider given that America is currently undergoing population aging, a trend in society resulting in an increased rate of older adults (Novak, 2012).

Even though population aging is widespread in America, many people are still misinformed about aging (Novak, 2012). For instance, Levy and Macdonald (2016) identified common descriptions of older adults as “burdensome, forgetful, ill, incompetent, and unattractive” (p. 3). These types of perceptions are central to ageism, “a set of beliefs, attitudes, social institutions and acts that denigrate individuals/groups based on chronological age” (Whitbourne & Whitbourne, 2017, p. 28). The reason that some people may have ageist attitudes is because of culture, lack of knowledge, and the influence of media (Novak, 2012). Ageism is an important social problem to address because there is a quickly growing age group of older adults that are 60 and over worldwide (Levy & Macdonald, 2016). Currently, there is a growing body of research pointing out the potential usefulness of intergenerational programming that brings together different age groups (Allan & Johnson, 2009; Flamion, Missotten, Marquet, & Adam, 2019; Galbraith, Larkin, Moorhouse, & Oomen, 2015). The current study explored these effects among college students after completing a course in human development and interacting with older adults.

Literature Review

Contact theory is centered around linking contrasting groups to promote positive interactions and decrease negative attitudes (Weaver, Naar, & Jarrott, 2017). This theory was developed in the early 1950s by Gordon Allport. “The theory holds that contact between two groups can promote tolerance and acceptance, but only under certain conditions, such as equal status among groups and common goals” (DeAngelis, 2001). Although contact theory was intended to be applied to instances where research was connecting different racial and ethnic groups, this theory has also been used to look at interactions between older adults and younger generations (Weaver, Naar, & Jarrott, 2017). Since these two groups are different ages, contact theory can be applied to help understand the impacts on ageism when younger and older individuals have the chance to interact. .

Although any age group can experience ageism, research has documented that younger generations are the ones that tend to be the most biased towards older adults (Yılmaz, Kisa, & Zeyneloğlu, 2012). Studies show that younger generations also tend to have a more negative mindset towards growing old (Yılmaz, Kisa, & Zeyneloğlu, 2012). Burnes and colleagues (2019) confirmed a strong correlation among ageism, in the connection between “negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination toward older people, and risks to their physical and mental health” (p. 1). Most studies examined outcomes and prevalence of ageism, however, there is less research about what strategies are effective in reducing ageism.

As previously mentioned, intergenerational programs that bring together different age groups can address problematic stereotypes. Galbraith and colleagues (2015)

conducted a study where they reviewed twenty seven articles that examined intergenerational programs for older adults with dementia and children. They discovered that each group involved benefitted from the interaction. Specifically, older adults with dementia experienced positive effects while interacting with children than those who did not participate in this interaction. These outcomes included a change in perceptions of dementia, behavior, personal view of themselves, involvement and frame of mind. Researchers used qualitative and quantitative data to assess the effect of intergenerational programs.

Studies that have explored interactions between older adults and younger generations who interacted with one another found similarities in outcomes experienced by both cohorts. Another study by Flamion and colleagues (2019) examined the effect of “personal and familial parameters on the views of 1,151 seven to sixteen year old children and adolescents” (p.1). Researchers used explicit and open ended questions to assess the influence of personal and familial parameters on the views of seven to sixteen year olds. They found that boys had slightly more negative views than girls and that participants who were 10 to 12 years old had the least ageist responses. One study researched by Allan and Johnson (2009) assessed anxiety and factual understanding on aging among 113 college students using three different methods. This study was performed to see if there was any association between interaction or knowledge with older adults and ageism. Researchers determined that an increase in knowledge of factual aging and the realistic process of aging reduced the level of ageist attitudes. It was also found that women had significantly more positive views on aging than men, this comparison of views was seen across all other variables in this research.

Of the studies that have explored the effects of intergenerational contact, two focused on interactions between older adults and children (Flamion, Missotten, Marquet, & Adam, 2019; Galbraith, Larkin, Moorhouse, & Oomen, 2015) and one between older adults and college students (Allan and Johnson, 2009). Even though Allan and Johnson (2009) have begun to explore the impacts of interaction between older and younger adults, this remains a relatively new area of research. The current study will contribute to this gap in the literature by expanding on the works of Allan and Johnson (2009) to reveal patterns of change among undergraduate students who are enrolled in a human development course while completing a service learning component. Specifically, this study compared perceptions of aging among college students who participated in a service learning experience through conducting service learning with frail and those conducting service learning with active older adults. The research question that was addressed is how does perception of older adults and aging change among college students interacting with frail older adults versus those interactive with active older adults? I hypothesized that students interacting with active older adults through their service learning endeavors will have a more positive perception of older adults and aging.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Forty two college students enrolled in a human development course with a service learning component were invited to participate in the current study. The duration of service learning was initially set at a 10-hour commitment over the course of the semester where students chose to interact with active older adults at a local Parks and Recreation

Department or with frail older adults at a local residential care facility. To participate in the current study, students had to be at least 18 years of age.

The original research design included the goal of collecting pre- and post-semester data to explore college students' attitudes and perceptions of aging and older adults based on type of service learning. It was anticipated that participants would complete a survey in-person at both time points during the semester to answer a set of demographic questions, quantitative questions on attitudes toward older adults, and a small set of open-ended questions to generate qualitative data on perceptions and descriptions of aging. Pre-semester surveys were administered in hardcopy format where the primary investigator handed out the surveys to participants and then stepped out during the time in which students completed the surveys. The faculty member teaching the course also stepped out of the classroom during the duration of the pre-semester survey. The primary investigator and faculty member stepped out to keep anonymity and to ensure that participants felt free to decline participation. Students were asked to place their surveys in an envelope that was located at the front of the class for the researcher to collect at the end of data collection. After 15 minutes had passed, the primary investigator returned to the classroom to collect the envelope of completed surveys. After taking the pre survey, participants engaged in service learning, and the original plan was to have students provide end-of-semester data in the same, hardcopy format.

However, COVID- 19 presented unique circumstances and substantial change to the project's design. Specifically, the post-semester survey needed to be administered online to maintain social distancing requirements. This online survey for post-semester data collection was created using Qualtrics and posted on the course's folio webpage for

the students to complete. Additionally, the service learning requirement in the class had to be lifted by the instructor considering that required interaction between older and younger cohorts was no longer a possibility. As a result, the overall response rate for the current study was low as was the time students spent in the field by those who provided end-of-semester data. After both pre- and post-surveys had been completed and final grades were posted, the data were entered electronically but only post-surveys were used for analysis.

In total, eight students participated in the current study by providing end-of-semester data and all eight participants identified as women. Of the eight students, three conducted service learning with active older adults and five conducted service learning with frail older adults. Of these students, the average time spent in service learning was four and a half hours. To accommodate the low response rate, quantitative measures evaluating attitudes on aging were used to supplement the descriptive statistics (see Table 1) and a heavier focus on qualitative feedback was used in the analysis plan.

Measures

Quantitative data were collected on attitudes towards aging to supplement descriptive statistics and qualitative data were collected on perceptions of aging and older adults.

Attitudes towards aging

Quantitative data was collected to measure attitudes towards aging with the use of Kogan's Attitude Towards Old People Scale (1961). This scale consisted of 34

statements, which included 17 positive statements towards older adults and 17 negative statements towards older adults. Participants were asked to respond to each prompt using a six-point Likert-scale ranging from 1: *strongly disagree* and 6: *strongly agree*. These 34 statements evaluated attitudes towards aging along five subscales: prejudice, appreciation, expectation, ambivalent and avoidance.

Prejudice subscale. The prejudice subscale contained 12 negative prompts with a range of scores falling between 12 and 72. Examples of the negative prompts included in the prejudice subscale were *most old people should be more concerned with their personal appearance and they're too untidy, and most old people are constantly complaining about the behavior of the younger generation.*

Appreciation subscale. The appreciation subscale consisted of 10 positive prompts and participants reported scores between 10 and 60. Some examples of the positive statements included in the appreciation subscale were *most old people are very relaxing to be with, most old people are capable of new adjustments when the situation demands it, and one seldom hears old people complaining about the behavior of the younger generation.*

Expectation subscale. The expectation subscale contained six questions where five were positive prompts and one was negative. Participants scored between 6 and 36 on the expectation subscale. One example of a positive prompt was *one of the most interesting and entertaining qualities of most old people is their accounts of their past experiences.* The negative statement in the expectation subscale was *it's foolish to claim that wisdom comes with old age.*

Ambivalent subscale. The ambivalent subscale consisted of three prompts, two positive and one negative, with a range of responses falling between 3 and 18. One example of a positive prompt in the ambivalent subscale was *it is evident that most old people are very different from one another*. The negative statement in the ambivalent subscale was *most old people would prefer to quit work as soon as their pension or their children can support them*.

Avoidance subscale. The avoidance subscale consisted of three prompts, all positive, where participants scored between 3 and 18. An example item included in the avoidance subscale was *it would probably be better if most old people will live in residential units with people of their own age*.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	Students who Interacted with Active Older Adults	Students who Interacted with Frail Older Adults
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Age	20.66 (.58)	19.8 (.45)
Kogan's Attitudes Towards Older People Scale (1961)		
Prejudice Subscale	52.33 (1.53)	49.2 (3.35)
Appreciation Subscale	44.33 (4.16)	43.4 (4.62)
Expectation Subscale	28.33 (4.04)	27 (2.12)
Ambivalent Subscale	15.33 (1.15)	11.4 (.55)
Avoidance Subscale	11.33 (1.53)	11.2 (.45)

Perceptions of aging and older adults

Three open-ended questions were used to gather qualitative data on perceptions of aging and older adults. Specifically, open-ended questions asked participants to reflect views on aging and then to write three words to describe aging and three words describing older adults.

Views on aging. Views on aging were assessed with one open-ended question that asked participants *What are your views on aging?* Given the open-ended nature of the question, students were free to elaborate as much or little as they pleased. Qualitative data is descriptive information about characteristics that are difficult to define or measure or cannot be expressed numerically. Specific to the current study, qualitative data were used to gain a deeper understanding of views on aging among students engaging in service learning with older adults.

Descriptions of aging. Descriptions on aging were assessed with one open-ended question that asked participants *What three words would you use to describe aging?* Given the open-ended nature of the question, students were free to pick any three words that they felt described aging.

Descriptions of older adults. Descriptions on older adults were assessed with one open-ended question that asked participants *What three words would you use to describe older adults?* Given the open-ended nature of the question, students were free to pick any three words that they felt described aging.

Analysis Plan

A new body of research has revealed the usefulness in using qualitative data in comparative assessments given that qualitative comparisons may reveal important nuances in people's experiences that could get lost in larger quantitative studies (Lindsay, 2019). Comparing groups based on qualitative feedback may contribute to a richer understanding of the lived experiences of people while also focusing on important differences between groups (Lindsay, 2019). To analyze the qualitative data, the researcher used a thematic approach, which many studies have reported as a strength (e.g., Dickie et al., 2009; Jaye & Tilyard, 2002). As informed by Lindsay (2019), the current study first looked at the data as a whole by highlighting significant statements. Next, data were analyzed to identify significant statements within each group, which were revisited to reveal common themes. Lastly, the researcher compared between the groups to find similarities and differences.

Results

Perceptions of aging and older adults

Views on aging

When asking participants what their views on aging were, two themes emerged in total for those who conducted service learning with active older adults, which were *accepting aging and being unafraid* and *aging is not a problem but a process*. Analysis of qualitative data on views of aging for those who conducted service with frail older adults revealed one theme, which was *embrace aging as a natural part of life*.

Accepting aging and being unafraid. This theme emerged by those conducting service learning with active older adults generally reflected students' views on aging as a matter of normative development. The participants were accepting about becoming older themselves and even pointed out that aging was not something to be afraid of since it would happen no matter what. Participants acknowledged the inevitability of aging and the sense of being open minded towards it. This was best captured in one participant's responses of *I am open to aging and am not afraid of it for the future.*

Aging is not a problem but a process. This theme emerged by those conducting service learning with active older adults. The focus on aging as a process rather than a problem represented participants understanding that aging is a complex process. The participants also acknowledged that aging is different for everyone. Aging is something that is truly personal to each individual. No one person ages in the same way. Getting older can often mean coping with an illness but some older adults are actually super active and healthy. An example of a participant's response for this theme included *I think some people have negative ideas about aging and older adults. The aging process is different for everyone. Older adults are not always cranky or in a bad mood as some people seem to believe. Older adults are actually really nice and funny.*

Embrace aging as a natural part of life. This theme emerged by those conducting service learning with frail older adults revealed that participants acknowledged aging as a natural part of life that may have its ups and downs, but life is what you make it. Examples of participants' responses under this theme were *There are benefits and disadvantages to growing just like any age you will be at. But it can be a*

very good time and *Becoming older is something that I am not necessarily excited about but I am looking forward to new life experiences and a family.*

Descriptions of Aging

A total of 25 words were provided by eight students in their descriptions of aging. Nine of those words were provided by the active older adults group and the other remaining 16 words were responses from the frail older adults group. Of the nine words provided at the end of the semester by those who conducted service learning with active older adults, the most commonly used descriptions of aging were *wise* (4.5%). In comparison to post-semester data for those conducting service learning with frail older adults, the most commonly used descriptions of aging out of the 16 responses were *learning* (12.5%), *growth* (12.5%), *knowledge* (12.5%), and *interesting* (12.5%). For more information about other words that were used to describe aging look at Table 2.

Descriptions of Older Adults

A total of 23 words were provided by eight students in their descriptions of older adults. nine of those words were provided by the active older adults group and the other remaining 14 words were responses from the frail older adults group. Of the nine words provided at the end of the semester by those who conducted service learning with active older adults, the most commonly used descriptions of older adults were *wise* (33.3%) and *caring* (22.2%). In comparison to post-semester data for those conducting service learning with frail older adults, the most commonly used descriptions of older adults out of the 14 responses were *experience* (21.4%) and *wise* (14.3%). For more information about other words that were used to describe older adults look at Table 2 below.

Table 2: Qualitative data post semester describing aging and older adults, word counts in parenthesis.

	Students who Interacted with Active Older Adults	Students who Interacted with Frail Older Adults
Aging	Wise (2) Retirement (1) Grandchildren (1) Graceful (1) Pain (1) Inevitable (1) Experience (1) Time (1)	Learning (2) Growth (2) Knowledge (2) Interesting (2) New (1) Unavoidable (1) Wonderful (1) Predictable (1) Process (1) Wise (1) Experience (1) Advice (1)
Older Adults	Wise (3) Caring (2) Funny (1) Kind (1) Different (1) Interesting (1)	Experience (3) Wise (2) Adventurous (2) Kind (1) Interesting (1) Welcoming (1) Lonely (1) Loving (1) Generous (1) Thoughtful (1)

Discussion

Obtaining a better understanding on the impacts of intergenerational contact through unique experiences such as service learning is important because both ageism and population aging is widespread in America. The current study compared qualitative feedback among college students enrolled in a human development course where some interacted with active older adults and others with frail older adults during service learning endeavors.

After conducting service learning with frail and active older adults, college students responded with mainly a feeling of acceptance towards aging. Furthermore, this shows that there was no group difference based on the students' experience with active vs frail older adults. Specifically, responses for views on aging were generally positive toward aging in that students reflected on being open to aging and not being scared of aging. Some participants were even excited to experience new things as they age. These findings are counterintuitive to the findings of previous research that stated the younger generation tend to have a more negative mindset towards growing old (Yılmaz, Kisa, & Zeyneloğlu, 2012). Participants in the current study also generally provided more positive descriptions about older adults and about aging. Specifically, when asked to report descriptions of older adults students commonly used words such as generous, funny, caring and adventurous. This finding contradicts what Levy and Macdonald (2016) identified as common descriptions of older adults which were “burdensome, forgetful, ill, incompetent, and unattractive” (p. 3). These discrepancies could be attributed to the idea that participants in the current study were also enrolled in a human development course that required in-depth discussions of aging and interactions with older adults. This

educational experience may have allowed for a better understanding of what aging actually entails. Given that America is a youth-valuing society, the course likely challenged students to think about older adults and aging in a different way other than what is commonly portrayed in society and media.

Results also revealed that both groups of students used a common word to describe aging and older adults, which was *wise* or *wiser*. No group differences were seen in descriptions of aging and older adults. However, those conducting service learning with older adults provided more descriptors than those conducting service learning with frail older adults. This trend may have emerged across groups due to the gains that can accompany aging for many. As Whitebourne and Whitebourne (2017) discuss the multidirectionality of aging, the authors point out that aging can be accompanied by both declines and gains. In this regard, as individuals live longer they tend to gain experiences in a variety of things in life which helps create the perception of aging being accompanied by wisdom.

Limitations of the current study revolved around the low response rate and lack of generalizability. The low number of responses, resulted in not having much data to compare between the two groups and as a result hinders generalizability. Also, all of the participants in the current study identified as women, which further limits the ability to generalize to more diverse populations of undergraduate students.

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