

Interaction: Bridging the Gap between Old and Young?

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INTRODUCTION

The number of older adults in America is increasing drastically. The likelihood that college age individuals will work directly with, have a relationship with or provide some sort of service to people in the population of older adults is increasingly high. We believe a major contributor to these negative attitudes is the lack of interaction among young and older adults.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are college students attitudes, as represented by CSU students, toward older adults, specifically those seventy-five and older?
- Does interaction with and knowledge about older adults create positive attitudes?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

- Many college students hold negative attitudes or opinions toward older adults. (Hawkins, 1996)
- Prejudicial attitudes are due in part to limited interactions between generations. (Downey & Miles, 2005)
- Attitudes become more positive with increased interaction with older members of society. (Dorfman, Murty, Ingram, Evans & Power, 2004)
- Increased interaction with older persons can positively influence one's feelings about his or her own aging process, and also feelings about older persons with whom they have close personal relationships. (Hawkins, 1996)
- The contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) states that mutual interaction with an individual in an out group can lead to more positive attitudes toward the out group. (Schwartz & Simmons, 2001)

METHODOLOGY

Sample

An availability sample was collected of:

- 161 students at Colorado State University
 - Gender:
 - Male 64 (39.8%),
 - Females 96 (59.6%)
 - Missing 1 (.6%)
 - Mean age = 21.46 years
 - Years:
Freshmen 23 (14.3%), Sophomores 35 (21.7%) Juniors 54 (33.5%) Seniors 40 (24.8%), Graduate Students 7 (4.3%), Missing 2 (1.2%)
 - Ethnic/Racial groups:
White 131 (81.4%), Hispanic 7 (4.3%), African American 4 (2.5%), Multiracial 6 (3.7%), Asian 3 (1.9%), Native American 1 (.6%), Missing 9 (5.6%)
 - Colleges:
Agricultural Sciences 4 (2.5%), Applied Human Sciences 54 (33.5%), Business 27 (16.8%), Engineering 9 (5.6%), Liberal Arts 24 (14.9%), Natural Resources 1 (.6%), Natural Sciences 32 (19.9%), Undecided 9 (5.6%)
- ### Data Collection
- A self administered questionnaire was administered consisting of:
- A semantic differential scale developed by Sanders, Montgomery, Pittman & Balkwell (1984).
 - Additional questions pertaining to amount and quality of interaction with older adults.

FINDINGS

- Average score on the semantic differential scale was 3.35 (From a possible range of 1 to 7, with a lower score indicating a more positive attitude.)
- Women overall had more positive attitudes than men (female mean score = 3.2, male mean score = 3.6, $t = 4.18$, $p < .01$)
- Students who reported interacting with older adults in the following ways had more positive attitudes when compared with those who don't.
 - Lived with an older adult(s)
($t = -2.51$, $p < .01$)
 - Worked with an older adult(s)
($t = -2.71$, $p < .01$)
 - Had a relative who was an older adult(s)
($t = -2.48$, $p < .01$)
 - Volunteered with an older adult(s)
($t = -2.96$, $p < .01$)
- Respondents who had taken a course in gerontology had more positive attitudes ($t = -2.89$, $p < .01$)
- Students perceptions of their own aging appear to be positive. The five most frequently selected characteristics were:
 - Happy (49.1%)
 - Wise (44.1%)
 - Healthy (39.1%)
 - Knowledgeable (35.4%)
 - Trustworthy (16.1%)
- CSU students appear to have more positive attitudes than those reflected in previous studies.
 - Students in Washington, D.C. (Hawkins, 1996)
Mean score = 3.98
 - Social Work students in China (Tan, Zang & Fan, 2004)
Mean score = 3.81

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

- This research supports the contact hypothesis because students who had more interaction with older adults had more positive attitudes.
- Research also supports the use of courses in gerontology to create positive attitudes.
- CSU students perception of their own aging shows a significant shift in the way the younger population is viewing the aging process, rather than fearing the process they are anticipating a positive transition into older adulthood.
- Social work students need both education and experience with older adults in order to help them develop positive attitudes.