The Applicability of Empowerment Theory
to Intergenerational Programming

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Abstract

Intergenerational scholars and practitioners have in the past only occasionally relied on theory – whether sociological or psychological theory – to drive programs and research, and when theory was called upon it was most often a micro-level attitude change or human development theory. With the advent and growing popularity of intergenerational initiatives that aim to create positive social changes in participants' communities, where participants engage in collaborative community research and activism around issues of common concern, more relevant theories are needed to build a solid foundation for practice and research. This paper is intended to identify and evaluate a theoretical perspective that can be useful for informing intergenerational community building efforts: empowerment theory. Examples are provided of how intergenerational practitioners, working in various settings and contexts, function when embracing empowerment ideology, as well as of how empowerment theory can offer researchers a solid foundation for exploring the community renewal and civic involvement implications of intergenerational work. Challenges associated with using empowerment ideology to inform intergenerational work are also discussed.

Introduction

The concept of bringing different generations together to support one another, to foster interdependence, and meet societal needs has become increasingly popular in the United States (Henkin & Kingson, 1998/99) as well as in countries throughout the world (Kaplan, Henkin, & Kusano, 2002). Calls for increased "intergenerational programming," generally defined as the purposeful bringing together of different generations in ongoing, mutually beneficial, planned activities (Newman & Smith, 1997) are coming from many directions. The intergenerational engagement theme is finding its way into the publications and meetings conducted by professional societies in a broad range of fields, including social work, education, child development, community development, and gerontology.

Despite the growing popularity of intergenerational programs in a variety of settings, intergenerational scholars and practitioners readily admit that as an emerging field, intergenerational studies has produced a limited amount of rigorous theory-driven research and evaluation (Kuehne, 2003, 1999; Ward, 1997). Furthermore, much of the research that does exist examines outcomes related to attitude change and the reduction of stereotypes about older adults, while ignoring other outcomes such as change at the organizational and community levels. This is partly because until recently, many intergenerational programs in the U.S. were designed specifically for the purpose of promoting positive attitudes toward older adults (e.g., Dellmann-Jenkins, Lambert, Fruit, & Dinero, 1986; Seefeldt, 1987).

Certainly, reducing age-related stereotypes and creating more favorable attitudes toward older people are important goals, as attitudes may influence policy decisions and interpersonal behaviors. However, intergenerational initiatives that address more than simply attitude change

are necessary. In the U.S., where we see what Putnam (1995) terms "the strange disappearance of civic America," or what Freedman (1997) discusses as the "decline in civic infrastructure," intergenerational programs have been portrayed as a promising strategy for civic renewal (Generations United, 2002). In the United Kingdom and some other European countries, intergenerational specialists emphasize objectives and outcomes tied to the concept of "social inclusion" (Granville & Hatton-Yeo, 2002). In The Netherlands, a "neighborhood reminiscence" model was established to promote better relations between new immigrants (e.g., from Turkey) and long-time Dutch residents (Mercken, 2003). A program in Hamburg, Germany enables Jewish Holocaust survivors returning to Hamburg to engage German schoolchildren through conversation and site visits (Ohsako, 2002). Considering the community-building and improved community relations functions of intergenerational programs, the theories used for program design and evaluation must move beyond those looking only at attitude change.

This article articulates how "empowerment theory," as described by Rappaport (1984), Zimmerman (2000), and others, shows good promise as a theoretical framework for informing a broader spectrum of intergenerational inquiry and practice. The concept of "empowerment" involves actual life circumstances and real (not only perceived) quality of life issues. Hence, intergenerational professionals who embrace an empowerment framework are more likely to be aware of, and to promote, community change as well as attitudinal change outcomes. When neighborhood youth and senior adults work collaboratively to establish a neighborhood watch program, for example, they do more than foster positive attitudes toward one another; they are also helping to build a safer, and ideally a more socially friendly, place to live.

Empowerment theory can provide critical direction in framing what intergenerational specialists (practitioners and scholars) do, including how they go about program development and evaluation, what they advocate, and what they seek to achieve. Examples are provided of how intergenerational practitioners, working in various settings and contexts, function when embracing empowerment ideology. This article also discusses some of the challenges associated with using empowerment ideology to inform intergenerational work. Before delving into a consideration of empowerment theory and its relevance and utility regarding intergenerational programming, however, we provide a brief discussion of the role of theory in informing intergenerational programming and research.

The Role of Theory in Intergenerational Programming and Research

Because many intergenerational programs are initiated not by academic researchers and scholars but by professionals in the human services field, programs are often built through a process of need-identification (e.g., at-risk children left alone after school) and resource-identification to meet the need (e.g., older adults at home alone able to provide telephone contact and reassurance to latch-key kids), rather than driven by theoretical questions. While the responsiveness of intergenerational programs to actual field-based needs is commendable, it is also 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; and helping to explain, predict, stimulate, and encourage understanding (Rappaport, 1995). The consistent use of theory would strengthen intergenerational research, provide an explanation for conflicting results, and simplify the process of starting new programs.

The emerging intergenerational field is not without theoretical underpinnings, however. Traditionally, development theories such as Erikson's (1963) developmental stages or activity theory (Havighurst, 1963, 1968) have been used as a rationale for providing older adults with opportunities to remain active and involved in nurturing younger generations. Several authors have attempted the integration of child and adult development theories in an intergenerational context through side-by-side comparisons of life tasks for each age group (e.g., Newman & Smith, 1997; ReVille, 1989). These authors conclude that older adults and young children have reciprocal needs, such as to nurture (older adults) and to be nurtured (children), and to have a successful life review (older adults) and to learn from and about the past (children). Likewise, theories of attitude change (e.g., Allport's [1954] contact theory) have been loosely applied to intergenerational programs since the 1970s, when studies of children's attitudes toward older people suggested that ageism is prevalent among youth and that contact between the generations could change attitudes (Ward, 1997). Fostering positive attitudes toward aging and the elderly is still considered one of the primary traditional functions of intergenerational programs.

It should be noted, however, that the research on intergenerational attitude change outcomes has produced remarkably mixed results. Schwartz & Simmons (2001) conclude that the intergenerational contact literature is ambiguous in that it has not led to robust conclusions regarding which contact conditions are necessary for improvement in attitudes toward older adults and which are not. Fox & Giles (1993), in their critique of 25 years of research on intergenerational contact, also found mixed results which they attribute to methodological inconsistencies as well as a distinct inattention to the communicative behaviors occurring within the contact situation itself.

Despite the occasional use of developmental or attitude change theories to promote contact between the generations, most intergenerational research and programming does not rely on theory to determine program processes and intended outcomes (Kuehne, 2003, 1999; VanderVen, 1999; Cohon, 1989). One reason we suspect this is the case is that the current suite of theoretical frameworks available to intergenerational practitioners is too limited to address the full range of topics, issues, and concerns encountered by intergenerational specialists. In the remainder of this paper, we describe empowerment theory and explore its utility for guiding intergenerational program development and research.

What is Empowerment Theory?
The Cornell University Empowerment Group (1989) defines empowerment 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 greater access to and control over these resources" (p. 2). Kieffer (1984) emphasizes the long-term developmental nature of empowerment: It is "a process of becoming, as an ordered and progressive development of participatory skills and political understandings" (p. 17), in which individuals move from socio-political illiteracy or 'infancy' to socio-political 'adulthood'" (p. 18). A frequently-cited definition of empowerment was originally articulated by Rappaport (1984, p. 3): "Empowerment is viewed as a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives."

Context- and population-specificity are key components of empowerment. That is, different individuals reach empowerment in different ways, and the

outcomes and meaning of empowerment will also differ by individual, group, and context (Rappaport, 1984; Zimmerman, 2000). For example, "empowerment of a poor, uneducated black woman can look very different than for a middle class college student or a thirty nine year-old businessman, a white urban housewife or a single elderly person resisting placement in a nursing home" (Rappaport, 1984, p. 3).

Empowerment occurs at the individual, organizational, or community level of analysis. Much of the existing empowerment research involves empowerment only at the individual level of analysis (also called "psychological empowerment") (Zimmerman, 2000). Psychological empowerment involves three dimensions (Zimmerman, 2000): 1) an intrapersonal dimension, which encompasses how people think about their ability to influence their social and political environment and involves a sense of personal control, 2) an interactional dimension, which involves gaining a critical awareness of one's environment as well as the skills and resources necessary to affect change, and 3) a behavioral dimension, which involves actual behaviors to exert control in one's environment. This tri-dimensional delineation of psychological empowerment helps to differentiate it from other psychological constructs with which empowerment is often confused, such as perceived control. Psychological empowerment involves more than just feelings of control - it also entails knowledge and skills ("critical understanding") and actual behaviors to exert control and to participate.

At the organizational level, empowerment involves "organizational processes and structures that enhance member participation and improve organizational effectiveness for goal achievement" (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 44). Empowering organizations provide members with opportunities to

gain control over their lives, develop skills, and develop a sense of control.

At the community level, empowerment involves connections among community organizations and agencies to meet the needs of multiple stakeholders. Wolff & Kaye (1997) developed a "Coalition Empowerment Self-Assessment Tool" to assess the degree to which membership policies, communication processes, and decision-making practices are consistent with empowerment ideology. Empowering communities may have an accessible government system and accessible media and other resources, so as to increase the empowerment potential of its members (both individuals and organizations).

In sum, employing empowerment theory means creating an environment in which individuals, organizations, or communities have the opportunity to become "empowered" as defined above (e.g., at the individual level, people have the opportunity to develop each of the three dimensions of psychological empowerment). References to an empowering "style" or approach allude to an acceptance or employment of the basic tenets and propositions inherent in empowerment theory.

Intergenerational Applications of Empowerment Theory

This section highlights several intergenerational initiatives that explicitly draw upon tenets of empowerment theory in their design and/or expected outcomes. In particular, we focus on intergenerational programs with an explicit community study/action dimension. These programs aim to involve young people and older adults in positively changing their communities together, whether through joint service to other populations, activism around an issue of common concern, or providing input into community

planning and development. Reciprocity, activities that meet real community needs, planned reflection, partnerships that build community, and decision making opportunities for old and young are among the guiding principles used for intergenerational community service initiatives (Tice, Angelis, and Poulsen 1995; Generations United, 2002). An empowerment framework is consistent with efforts to enhance participant involvement and control in terms of choosing the issues on which to focus, defining community change objectives, and making decisions about organizing tools and tactics. This approach shares strategies with community development theory (e.g., Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), which emphasizes community-based problem definition and problem solving, attention to power inequities, and a focus on mutual support and interdependence.

Several examples of programs with an explicit community advocacy or action component include:

1) The Intergenerational Community Action Group: This initiative, developed and piloted at the University of Michigan, brought undergraduate students and elderly residents of a nearby assisted living facility together over the course of a seven month period to conduct a community project centered on an issue of mutual concern. The project included discussions about civic engagement and community life, and a participatory planning process based on principles of group decision-making and shared leadership. In the pilot project, college students and assisted living facility residents developed a mission statement and an action plan aimed at strengthening the links between their respective institutions (the university and the assisted living facility). Project outcomes included instituting internships for nursing, psychology, and other students at the assisted living facility, creating service learning opportunities for students in psychology and social work courses, and

designing an ongoing lecture series in which university professors share
their research with the older adult residents (Lawrence-Jacobson, 2005).

2) "Communities for All Ages:" This comprehensive intergenerational
approach to community building, developed by the Center for
Intergenerational Learning at Temple University in consultation with
organizations involved in several community demonstration projects, is
a strategy for engaging community residents and professionals in a
participatory planning process designed to facilitate multi-agency
collaboration and greater opportunity throughout the community for
ongoing, mutually beneficial interaction between age groups (Henkin et
al., 2003). "Communities for All Ages" initiatives are participatory in
form and function; outcomes include increased civic participation and
interaction across age groups, more comprehensive and responsive
systems to support all age groups, community activities that respond to
the developmental needs of children, youth, and older adults, and the
involvement of an age diverse group of residents in community planning
efforts (Henkin, 2004).

3) "Neighborhoods-2000": This intergenerational local studies curriculum
was developed at the Center for Human Environments at the City
University of New York Graduate Center and implemented in over 10
neighborhoods in the U.S. Over a 6-month period, senior volunteers and
elementary school students share their community-related concerns,
work on community exploration activities such as land-use mapping and
walking tours, and come up with designs and projects for community
involvement and action that they later present to local planners and
other community development professionals (Kaplan, 1994, 1997).
Participants learn about local issues as well as the neighborhood
planning process and the role of stakeholders in community-level
decision making, and they become more skilled in voicing their concerns

to local human service and urban planning professionals (Kaplan, 1994). Neighborhoods-2000 projects also lead to community change outcomes, such as more outdoor water fountains, less dumping of chemicals in water drains, and reduced litter.

What these three programs have in common is that they aim to instil in participants a sense of "active citizenship." Participants are dynamically involved in collaborative community improvement endeavors of their choosing. Through such involvement, they realize that they have the potential and even the responsibility to make things better. As they gain knowledge about community issues, gain skills to affect community change, and find others with similar concerns with whom to work, they become "empowered."

High Versus Low Levels of Empowerment in Intergenerational Practice

In the interest of further exploring what an empowerment orientation means for the program planning and implementation process, Table 1, below, distinguishes between "high" and "low" levels of empowerment in regard to: program design decisions, intergenerational interaction dynamics, how community issues on which to focus are selected, how participants are recruited, how staff members are trained, and how programs are evaluated. This "empowerment chart" can be used to provide some program design guidance for intergenerational practitioners seeking to achieve empowerment objectives.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Challenges in Formulating Empowerment-Oriented Intergenerational Programs and Practices

Problems of Definition

While empowerment theory can be useful for informing intergenerational programming efforts, challenges and problems exist as well. A fundamental obstacle to employing empowerment theory to guide program development is ambiguity about the concept of "empowerment." In some colloquial uses of the term, what is meant is simply having "choices" or "getting what you want." In contrast, empowerment theorists allude to a multi-faceted concept that includes a tri-dimensional constellation of feelings, knowledge/skills, and behavior (for "psychological empowerment" as delineated by Zimmerman, 2000), and has implications for how organizations function and for how community relations are forged.

Part of the problem with definition is the fact that empowerment is inherently a flexible concept. Empowerment theorists are clear about the need for context- and population-specificity when designing empowerment interventions and measuring results. Accordingly, what empowerment looks like will differ greatly between individuals, groups, settings, and over time. Because individuals may take multiple pathways to empowerment even within one setting (Foster-Fishman et al., 1998), program designers must allow for people to "get empowered" in different ways, at different speeds, and to different extents. In designing intergenerational empowerment-oriented interventions or research, the emphasis should be on participants' definitions and goals for their own empowerment; this implies, as noted by Rappaport (1984), allowance for multiple definitions of success. In our point of view, this flexibility does not translate into ambiguity.

Constraints on empowerment

In many cases, there are constraints on empowerment among intergenerational participants. For instance, health issues or economic instability may increase powerlessness. As noted by Kieffer (1984, p. 17), "Survival is, in itself, a full-time occupation. As such, engagement in citizen action is inescapably an additional burden." In intergenerational endeavors, older adults who may be grappling with survival issues such as health problems, financial insecurity, or other serious concerns may have a limited capacity for the energy and commitment that certain forms of community engagement entail. Setterlund and Abbott (1995) examined the barriers for frail older women to becoming active in community life as volunteers in local schools. They found that, indeed, health issues did present a challenge to community participation, as the older adults struggled with pain management, mobility, and activities that conflicted with doctor's appointments. The older women in this study had to contend with challenges and realities of their daily life that meant that "many of the older women could not always commit themselves to long-term, regular involvement in the school communities" (p. 283). Intergenerational efforts to involve older adults in their communities need to take into account these "survival" constraints and provide flexible pathways to involvement.

Beyond considering empowerment constraints at the individual level, as in the above discussion, it is also important to consider "contextual constraints" – tied, for example, to institutional policies, environmental design practices, and characteristics of the social environment – which can also delimit opportunities for empowerment.

Importance of long-term perspective

Another challenge for intergenerational practitioners with an empowerment orientation is the fact that empowerment is a long-term developmental process. Kieffer (1984) identified four phases of the development of empowerment (which he terms "entry," "advancement," "incorporation," and "commitment"), each lasting a year or so. He writes, "While individuals may expand their political fluency or grow in their sense of self-competence in more limited time frames, only those who evolve through all identified areas of involvement establish a fully mature participatory competence" (p. 27). Moreover, he contends that "it would be frivolous to pretend that there can ever be developed a 'short course' in individual empowerment" (p. 27). Intergenerational empowerment interventions may be constrained by limited time frames and, therefore, limited results. This constraint was encountered in a school-based intergenerational community studies project:

> Although one of the goals of the project [Long Island City-2000] was to facilitate a community participation ethic on the part of participants, it would be unrealistic to expect that within six months they would become seasoned community activists. In fact, the school year ended just as program participants were clearly displaying an enhanced understanding of community development issues. To have reached the point in which participants could have initiated and participated in neighborhood improvement campaigns would have required at least another semester (Kaplan, 1994, p. 57).

Because community research skills and activism (and their results) take time to develop, intergenerational practitioners doing community work may want to consider setting realistic expectations and brainstorm ways to continue participation after time-specific programs end.

Research Considerations

In terms of research on intergenerational programs, there needs to be a more explicit link to empowerment theory. Evaluation studies of intergenerational programs tend to look at outcomes that are only tangentially related to empowerment, such as life satisfaction, psychological well-being, or self-esteem among program participants (e.g., Newman, 1985; Segrist, 2004). However, studies that explicitly focus on intergenerational participants' feelings of control (or competence, or efficacy), skills and knowledge to garner resources and affect change (or critical understanding), and actions taken to exert control over one's environment – the three components of individual empowerment according to Zimmerman (2000) – are virtually non-existent. The same is true for intergenerational research on organizational-level or community-level empowerment.

From an empowerment point of view, there are critical questions that come up regarding how much, and in what way(s), program participants are (and should be) involved in making program planning and management decisions. Whereas the empowerment orientation is one of maximizing participants' involvement in decisions affecting their day to day lives, when intergenerational programs are implemented in settings where participants have limited control over certain dimensions of their lives (e.g., students in a classroom and residents of an adult care facility), questions of who holds the "power" to plan activities and grant program participants "access" to other age participants take on even more importance.

Conclusion

The intergenerational field has devoted much of its past programmatic and evaluation attention to attempting to understand and change children's

attitudes toward older adults. While not an insignificant goal, broader social problems such as civic dissolution and community apathy are deserving of immediate attention and may be a more pressing issue for intergenerational efforts than changing attitudes. Intergenerational programs are now beginning to focus on developing civic responsibility and community involvement among youth and older adults through intergenerational community service and action programs.

Empowerment theory can provide a useful basis for the development and evaluation of such programs, particularly when "empowerment" is viewed as a tri-dimensional theoretical construct involving feelings of competence, knowledge and skills to affect change, and participatory behaviors. Program planners can incorporate an empowerment framework into intergenerational endeavors by providing participants with opportunities to share decision-making responsibility and to collaborate in recruitment, networking, and evaluation strategies. As the intergenerational movement evolves toward an increasing emphasis on community-building and civic renewal, empowerment is a promising construct for use in program design, evaluation, and research.

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Table 1: *High versus low levels of empowerment in intergenerational practice*

Program function	Low empowerment	High empowerment
Decision-making about program design	Emphasis is on the program model; issue selection is organization- and organizer-driven; program participant viewed as passive "consumer" of program services.	Participants share responsibility for making program-related decisions; efforts are made to accommodate the concerns and life experiences of participants.
Intergenerational interaction dynamics	Participant roles are largely predetermined and routinized; emphasis is on prescribed pathways for intergenerational interaction.	Participants have option to modify their roles; emphasis is on providing participants with control over the discourse, including how much information they disclose and at what pace.
Choosing community issues on which to focus	Participants are relatively passive in the process of choosing community issues to study or otherwise address.	Participants give meaningful input in deciding on community issues on which to focus and action strategies to pursue.
Recruiting participants	Program staff plan and conduct recruitment campaign.	Participants help to design and implement recruitment strategy; seasoned participants might choose to function as "peer recruiters."
Organizational processes	Top-down management styles; outreach to other organizations as a function of emphasis on program tasks and efficiency of program delivery.	Collaborative framework; emphasis on bringing together organizations with a common agenda, with recognition of how collaborative efforts empower organizations to influence social change.
Staff training and roles	Staff are provided with information and expectations regarding program model and procedures; staff are trained in how to direct/manage intergenerational communication	Staff provide ongoing input in developing/ refining program goals and procedures; staff are trained to find out participants' skills and interests, and modify activities accordingly.
Evaluation strategy	Set, closed-ended methods; researchers determine what data to collect and how to use evaluation results; attention to mechanics of intergenerational exchange (e.g., who said what, when, and how often).	Methods provide participants with opportunities to share their views and on their own terms (e.g., through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, reflective journals); participant input is sought regarding research questions; emphasis on how participants perceive, experience, and become critically aware of the role of intergenerational exchange in their lives.