

Multigenerational Health, Development, and Equality

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Purpose: Because of the significant aging of the global population, world regions are experiencing an increase in the number of generations within families. However, to date most practice methods in the health and human services are explicitly organized by age. This article discusses a multigenerational practice approach and the impact of an infusion strategy to integrate multigenerational practice into social work education. **Design and Methods:** A required first-year MSW course was targeted for concentrated infusion of multigenerational content cutting across substantive areas. To compare students' perceptions and needs prior to and following the infusion of multigenerational content, students were surveyed, and mean scores were compared between the two time periods. **Results:** Although the majority of social work practitioners work in multigenerational settings, most have received training that has been fragmented by age and relevant to only one stage of the life course. The vast majority of students endorsed multigenerational issues as important to social work in general and to their own professional careers. Following the infusion of multigenerational content, students' knowledge and skills in multigenerational practice increased significantly. **Implications:** A multigenerational practice framework honors the contributions, needs, and requirements of each generation as well as interdependence among generations. This approach prepares social work practitioners for practice, policy, and research that are more clearly relevant to the changing nature of the 21st century.

Key Words: *Social work education, Multigenerational framework, Life span perspective*

Because the global population is aging significantly, the number of generations within families is increasing over entire regions of the world (World Health Organization, 2002). Contrary to popular myth, it is now more common than ever in the past to have multiple generations within a family, with some families spanning up to four or five generations (Bengston, 2001). Although intergenerational issues have been of interest to practitioners and scholars for years, an intergenerational field of study is still in the early stages of development. This pioneering field encompasses a range of topics, including intervention programs designed to foster connections between generations and cross-generational approaches to individual, familial, and community development. In the United States, the intergenerational field is nearly synonymous with intergenerational programming (Newman, 2003). This pairs older adults and young people, most often young children, in various activities supporting either group interaction, such as with school-based curricula, or individual development, such as with senior mentoring (Kuehne, 2003a, 2003b). The most common dependent variable in intergenerational programming research is children's attitudes toward elderly people, with most studies finding that children develop more positive attitudes toward older adults after involvement in intergenerational programs (Bales, Eklund, & Siffin, 2000; Chowdhary et al., 2000; Kassab & Vance, 1999; Newman, Faux, & Larimer, 1997). A limitation resulting from the focus on intergenerational programming is that the field has been minimally guided by theoretical knowledge (Bostrum, Hatton-Yeo, Ohsako, & Sawano, 2000; Kuehne, 2003a; VanderVen, 1999).

At the societal level, relations among the generations are best embodied by the status of the social compact. This compact is an informal and unwritten "promise" between generations that "gives expression to and is based on the reciprocal ties that hold families, governance, and society together over time" (Cornman & Kingson, 1999, p. 10). It is the method by which generations provide mutual support to each

This project was funded in part by the Hartford Foundation.
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other during times of need and seek to both contribute to and create better futures for proceeding generations (Cornman & Kingson). The growing number of generations is also spawning concerns about the efficient use of scarce resources among the generations and the potential intergenerational conflict spurred by inequity (Kingson & Williamson, 1993; Wisensale, 2003). Yet the changing multigenerational nature of our society provides rich opportunities for cross-generational reciprocity and collaboration, and it may provide the impetus for important new fields of practice and innovative educational models.

This article outlines components of a multigenerational practice framework that is currently being developed at the Institute for Multigenerational Health, Development, and Equality at the University of Washington's School of Social Work, and it examines the impact of a curricular infusion strategy to integrate multigenerational practice into social work education. The article also discusses practice implications and next steps toward integrating a multigenerational framework.

Methods

Multigenerational Practice Approach

The goal of a multigenerational practice perspective is to promote health, development, and equality across multiple generations through interdisciplinary practice, research, and community-based partnerships. The term *intergenerational* is most frequently used by practitioners and researchers and generally refers to relations and interactions between two generations (most often the very young and very old; see Kuehne, 1999 and Rosebrook & Larkin, 2002). A multigenerational perspective illustrates the reciprocal obligations, rights, and influences between two or more generations within the family as they are affected by individual, familial, cultural, community, organizational, and social factors. This approach promotes the understanding of what processes lead to different outcomes for families: the what, why, and how of generational interactions and assistance, and how change and development occur across multiple generations within families. A multigenerational framework illustrates the increasing number of generations, generational interdependence, and the high degree of heterogeneity across generations by such variations as culture, race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation. Although many health and human service professionals work in settings that serve families with multiple generations, the vast majority of these individuals have received no related training (Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2003).

A multigenerational framework illustrates the reciprocity of cross-generational dynamics within different families, cultures, and communities, highlighting how strengths and challenges may be transmitted across generations. Multigenerational practice is defined here as assisting individuals and families within the context

of cross-generational relations and larger social systems to promote change that strengthens the inherent capacities of the family system and supports the best possible relationship between individuals and families and their environment. Central tenets of a multigenerational practice framework include the following: (a) knowledge base and values recognizing the importance of life-course development; (b) awareness of the growing inequities (especially by race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status) across the life span; (c) recognition of how physical, psychosocial, and emotional health, as well as other strengths and challenges, may be transmitted across generations; (d) awareness of the impact of specific generational, historical, and cohort influences on physical, psychological, and social well-being and other life and communal experiences; (e) an understanding of the complexity and reciprocity of multigenerational dynamics across different communities and cultures; and (f) identification of strategies to address age-based service and policy fragmentation and to support interventions aimed at strengthening families and reciprocity across generations.

Infusion Strategy

The School of Social Work at University of Washington is a top-ranked school in a major university located in an urban area, employing a large number of faculty with diverse interests and responsibilities. Researchers designed a survey instrument to assess the perceptions of first-year students in the master of social work (MSW) program regarding their level of interest and knowledge in multigenerational practice issues and their related educational needs. They distributed the initial survey at the beginning of fall quarter 2002 during a course session required of all incoming MSW students; 83 students completed the initial survey, representing a 93% response rate of all first-year MSW students. The sample was 83% female. Student ages ranged from 22 to 48 years with an average age of 28 years. In terms of ethnicity, 66% of students were White, 19% Asian or Pacific Islander, 9% Latino, 2% African American, and 5% other ethnicities. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual students comprised 12% of the sample. Sixty percent of the students were single, 34% married or partnered, 5% divorced or separated, and 1% widowed.

Researchers targeted a required first-year MSW course for concentrated infusion of multigenerational content cutting across substantive areas. The infusion process engaged faculty with interests in diverse areas and populations to infuse content on multigenerational practice throughout all sections of a required practice course. Courses included: (a) Multigenerational Relations and Social Justice; (b) Social Work With Diverse Families; (c) International Social Work and Community Practice: Global Issues and Local Change Strategies; (d) Empowerment Practice Within Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Communities; (e) Empowerment Practice With Children With Mental Health Issues and Their Families; and (f) Caring for Persons With Life Limiting Illnesses: A Lifespan

Approach. All first-year MSW students selected one of these required courses as part of their first-year program of study.

While planning the course, the designated faculty group met on a regular basis to develop a common course framework and objectives. They developed the following framework:

A multigenerational empowerment practice approach provides the framework for all of the [first-year advanced practice] courses. Concepts fundamental to this approach are diversity, resiliency, and a multigenerational family- and community-focused perspective. This framework is consistent with the social change and social justice mission of the MSW curriculum.

Congruent with this framework, common learning objectives across all courses included the following: (a) students will understand the complexity and reciprocity of multicultural, multigenerational dynamics across different populations, substantive areas, and families and communities; (b) students will develop the ability to bring a multigenerational, multicultural lens to their assessment of the strengths of individuals, families, and communities; and (c) students will recognize how both strengths and challenges—physically, socially, and emotionally—may be transmitted across generations. Researchers provided curricular support materials, such as articles on social work practice across the life span and cross-generational studies, to faculty, and there was ongoing communication to ensure that multigenerational content was infused throughout the courses. Faculty also received support from one another in selecting curricular materials linking their substantive areas of interest with multigenerational practice.

To capture the impact of infusing multigenerational content, researchers surveyed students regarding their perceptions of the importance of being trained to work across multiple age groups. The researchers compared the results of the survey at baseline with those following the course.

Results

Prior to the infusion of the content into the curriculum, nearly all (99%) MSW students indicated that content on working across multiple generations should be a “very important” or “important” component of their education, with 72% viewing such skills as “very important” or “important” in their own professional careers. However, only 15% of the students felt they were skilled in multigenerational practice, and only 11% felt they had a strong knowledge base to engage in such practice. Approximately 60% of the students expressed an interest in additional multigenerational coursework.

To compare students’ perceptions and needs prior to and following the infusion of multigenerational content, researchers ran *t* tests and compared mean scores between the two time periods. Table 1 illustrates the

differences in students’ interests and educational needs following infusion efforts. From pretest to posttest, students reported a significant increase in their multigenerational practice knowledge and skills. In addition, students’ impressions significantly changed regarding the value of multigenerational practice skills to their own careers. At pretest, 72% of the students believed such skills were important to their own careers, whereas 88% felt so at posttest. At both pretest and posttest, students were more interested in acquiring additional knowledge and skills as well as pursuing further coursework in multigenerational practice as compared with aging-related practice. Following the infusion efforts, there was no significant difference in the students’ perceptions regarding the importance of the educational content or skills to social work in general or their interest in additional coursework.

Practice Implications

A multigenerational practice approach honors the contributions, needs, and requirements of each generation as well as interdependence among generations globally. However, current fields of practice are almost completely fragmented by age. Currently, graduate social work students lack preparation in multigenerational practice, although they are keenly aware of the need for such content and training. The vast majority of students endorsed multigenerational issues as important to social work in general and to their own professional careers in particular. Following the infusion of multigenerational content, students’ knowledge and skills in multigenerational practice increased significantly.

Although the majority of social work practitioners work in multigenerational settings, most have received training that has been fragmented by age and relevant to only one stage of the life course. By utilizing a multigenerational practice approach, practitioners are better positioned to assist individuals and families within a generational and communal context to strengthen their capacities and support growth and development across generations. On the basis of a multigenerational framework, practitioners can be trained to clearly identify their values and attitudes toward different stages of the life course and diversity among different generations and populations. Practitioners can learn to identify and differentiate what the common health and social issues, potential problems, and strengths and capacities are that individuals, families, and communities may encounter across the life span, as well as those that may be unique to particular stages in the life course.

Across multiple generations, each family has its own constellation of opportunities and constraints, as well as a unique set of dynamics and patterns of behavior. Existing research demonstrates the intergenerational transmission of specific health-risk behaviors, lifestyles, family-functioning processes, and help-seeking behaviors (Boyer et al., 2002; Jacob

Table 1. Student Responses Regarding the Importance of Multigenerational Practice at Times 1 and 2

Topic	Time 1 (<i>n</i> = 83)		Time 2 (<i>n</i> = 74)		<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>
	%	<i>M</i>	%	<i>M</i>		
Importance of educational content		1.3976		1.3108	-0.973	.334
1. Very important	61.4		70.3			
2. Important	37.3		28.4			
3. Somewhat important	1.2		1.4			
4. Not important	0.0		0.0			
Current practice knowledge		3.3049		2.9189	-3.452	.001
1. Very strong	0.0		5.4			
2. Strong	11.0		20.3			
3. Somewhat strong	47.6		51.4			
4. Not strong	41.5		23.0			
Current practice skills		3.2530		2.9595	-3.003	.004
1. Very skilled	0.0		0.0			
2. Skilled	14.5		20.3			
3. Somewhat skilled	45.8		63.5			
4. Not skilled	39.8		16.2			
Importance of skills to social work in general		1.5181		1.3784	-1.883	.064
1. Very important	50.6		62.8			
2. Important	47.0		37.8			
3. Somewhat important	2.4		0.0			
4. Not important	0.0		0.0			
Importance of skills to own career		1.9518		1.5946	-2.818	.006
1. Very important	33.7		54.1			
2. Important	38.6		33.8			
3. Somewhat important	26.5		10.8			
4. Not important	1.2		1.4			
Interest in additional coursework		2.2771		2.1370	-3.452	.189
1. Very interested	16.9		23.3			
2. Interested	43.4		45.2			
3. Somewhat interested	34.9		26.0			
4. Not interested	4.8		5.5			

& Johnson, 2001; Lawson & Brossart, 2001; Wickrama, Conger, Wallace, & Elder, 1999). Attending to the multigenerational nature of families, practitioners can learn to assess the positive, negative, and benign patterns that are passed from one generation to the next as well as the complementary and competing needs between generations. Such an approach provides practitioners with a multigenerational lens to inform assessment as well as intervention. By understanding the what, why, and how of generational interactions and the processes that lead to different outcomes for families, practitioners will be uniquely positioned to help individuals and families understand how patterns have been transmitted across generations and how change and development can occur within their families.

To understand the meaning of individual lives as well as generational linkages, practitioners must learn to identify cohort influences reflecting life experiences within a historical context to inform their practice and the applicability of specific intervention techniques. As individuals react to new situations based in part on their own biographies, historical events can

change lives and affect individual and familial adaptations (Elder & Liker, 1997). Historical influences explain how individual experiences with events such as the Holocaust—even when unspoken—can continue to influence families generations later (Kahana & Kahana, 2001; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). A multigenerational approach provides a framework for practitioners to help individuals and families link the life course to a historical context and major life environments and experiences that may have occurred in previous generations and may still be influencing the family.

A multigenerational approach highlights the interplay between generational influences and economic and health inequalities. Nationally and globally, with increasing heterogeneity across all age groups, we face the challenge of growing inequities across the life span. Practitioners who utilize a multigenerational framework are trained to recognize the link between historical influences and cohort effects as they relate to the growing inequities. Intergenerational health and the health of any specific generation or individual can only be understood within the context of events and conditions experienced through the life course. It

is also important that practitioners address cultural diversity within American society as well as cross-cultural variations globally. Cultural differences in types of family structures, how differing generations are valued, and in norms of reciprocity have to be fully considered if practitioners are to promote interventions aimed at strengthening multicultural, multigenerational families.

A multigenerational practice approach may provide a much-needed bridge between the field of aging and other substantive areas. Students resistant to aging are likely more receptive to a multigenerational perspective because it highlights the cross-generational nature of social problems and opportunities and provides a link between other substantive areas and gerontology. The infusion effort described here provided an opportunity for faculty to educate one another about multigenerational issues across the life course as they were linked to their own substantive areas. Thus, all faculty became “experts” in multigenerational content as it related to their substantive areas of interest. In the development and analysis of public services and policy, an approach is necessary that not only addresses a particular segment of the population at one point in time but also examines how policy affects various age groups over time. This perspective illustrates the need for practitioners to learn to identify potential strategies to address age-based service fragmentation and barriers within the health and human services. Such an approach allows for collaborations among practitioners with interests across varying public sector divisions, such as child welfare, health care, gerontology, developmental disabilities, and HIV/AIDS services. Torres-Gil (2003) outlined recent advancements that may enhance generational collaborations in the future, including: (a) moving away from age-based social service eligibility criteria toward criteria based on functional capacity; (b) using multidisciplinary teams for service delivery; (c) developing coalitions among individuals with disabilities and older adults; and (d) increasing attention to the enhancement of generational interdependence rather than independence.

Conclusions

A multigenerational perspective provides an innovative approach to affecting health and social problems as well as opportunities, because it breaks down traditional paradigms by cutting across age groups. By crossing substantive areas, service-delivery systems, and academic disciplines, a multigenerational approach provides rich opportunities for further development and interdisciplinary collaborations across multiple systems including health, housing, education, and international development, to name a few. More research is clearly needed to develop and assess the impact of specific components of a multidisciplinary, multigenerational training program and to evaluate the effectiveness of multigenerational

practice. New paradigms of multigenerational practice and culturally sensitive community-based care systems across the life span will likely enhance the interdependence and independence of generations as they each contribute to their families as well as to society. A multigenerational approach prepares professionals for practice, policy, and research that are more clearly relevant to the changing nature of the 21st century.

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Received June 26, 2003

Accepted April 15, 2004

Decision Editor: David E. Biegel, PhD