

**Measuring the Impact of Intergenerational Service-Learning on Students' Stereotypes
Toward Older People in an Agricultural Education Technology Course**

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Introduction/Need for Research

The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that 31.9% of the workforce will be in the 65-74 age range by 2022 (Toosi, 2013). The rise of the aging workforce presents a challenge for college graduates entering the workforce with limited prior exposure to seniors. Chumbler (1994) found that negative stereotypes toward older people, such as irritability, health behavior, personality, and activity, existed among college students. Chumbler suggested that such views may "reflect a lack of sensitivity and awareness of older individuals on college campuses" (p. 207). Augustin and Freshman (2016) opined "The exposure effects of service-learning provide an opportunity to change attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors while simultaneously gaining new knowledge and understanding of the aging population" (p. 125).

Service-learning reinforces two values commonly known to agricultural educators, community development and hands-on learning. Newman & Smith (1997) described intergenerational service-learning (ISL) as "Through mutual interaction, people across the life span from one another can contribute to each other's growth and development while enhancing their own lives" (p. 19).

The primary purpose of the study was to measure the impact of intergenerational service-learning on the attitudes toward older people by students enrolled in an agricultural applications of educational technologies course. This was conducted at a Land Grant in the Southeast.

Theoretical Framework

Ageism is a theory based on negative bias or stereotypic attitude toward the aging and aged. Traxler (1980) postulated four primary factors that contribute toward the negative views of aging, more specifically, Ageism. The factors are: the fear of death in Western society; the emphasis of youth culture in American society; the emphasis in American culture on productivity, and the manner in which previous gerontological studies have been conducted.

The theoretical basis of this study is found in the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein, 1967; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) which later expanded into the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1988, 1991). This theory states an individual's attitudes, subjective norms in respect to a behavior, and perceived control over a behavior can predict behavioral intentions with a high degree of accuracy. In consideration of the theories of Ageism and Reasoned Action, one may purport that if stereotypes toward seniors exist, negative attitudes could result in less favorable intentions in the workplace and in general society.

Methodology

To assess the impact of intergenerational service learning on students' perceptions toward older people, a descriptive research design was used. The population of the study consisted of 29 undergraduate students. Usable data were collected from 25 students.

The instrument, Chumbler's (1994) *Stereotypes Toward Older People Scale (STOPS)*, was chosen to assess students' attitudes toward older people. Pre-tests and post-tests were administered before the first meeting with seniors and during the final session of the course, respectively. The service-learning activities were conducted with a group of seniors at the local Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI). The students had ten weeks of class instruction before they were introduced to the seniors at OLLI. The students were assigned to work with a specific participant. During each of the three sessions, students assisted in scanning old photographs, film negatives and 35mm slides using different digital technologies. Means and Standard Deviations

were used to analyze the data collected by the STOPS instruments. Mean scores were calculated into composite mean scores based on groupings of the 14 questions, previously determined by Chumbler (1994).

Results/Findings

Findings from the pre-test STOPS indicated that all four of the factor areas had high composite mean scores, ranging from 12.6 to 19.48. Following the service-learning activity, the composite scores of each factor changed to “more favorable” views, ranging from 12.04 to 17.44. Of the four factor areas, the factor labeled as “Personality” had the greatest change with a decrease of 2.04 in composite means, from the pre-test mean of 19.48 and post-treatment mean of 17.44. The statements with the most impact on this change were that old people are “set in their ways” and “are old-fashioned.”

Conclusions

Results from the pre-test indicated students’ initial perceptions toward older people were in the negative categories of the instrument. The statements for personality with high mean scores included old people are “set in their ways,” “old-fashioned,” and “think about the good old days.” Most of these are commonly portrayed personality characteristics within the media. The data supporting the high mean scores of the personality factor could be linked to one concept in Traxler’s Ageism theory, where the emphasis placed on youth culture in the American society. The theory elaborates that this emphasis stems from a media bias against older people. These findings might lead one to question the origin of students’ initial stereotypes toward older people and how much socio-environmental elements, including media, affect the views of personalities of older persons. This finding supports Brown and Roodins’ (2001) recommendations that ISL can positively impact students’ stereotypes toward older people. The biggest change in students’ stereotypes was in the Personality factor, as students had ample opportunities to observe personalities of the participants. The change is less obvious with Activity, Irritability, and Health Behavior factors.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

The general implications of this study are that students enrolled in the course possessed somewhat negative stereotypes toward older people. However, with the opportunity to interact with older persons, the students’ negative views improved even from the minimal exposure to seniors. Considering the potential for future agricultural educators and agricultural business employees to interact closely with older people (as FFA volunteers and resource persons), the need for such exposure to reduce stereotypes is evident. Teacher educators and other faculty may seek to expose students to the growing population of aging baby boomers.

Based on supporting literature and the findings of this study, it is recommended that agricultural educators who teach courses with service-learning components consider the benefits of intergenerational activities. Such activities provide opportunities for Land Grant Universities to extend their outreach activities, as faculty can share their research through students. It is recommended that additional studies be conducted using Chumbler’s instrument with larger populations. Using this instrument with large introductory freshman classes would provide valuable baseline data as well as would help to determine, if trends differ among various colleges/majors. A final recommendation is that future studies using the instrument include specific questions related to students’ prior history of interaction with older people.

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