

1-1-1994

## INTERGENERATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND ONTOLOGICAL CHANGE

Thomas G. McGowan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceintergenerational>

---

### Recommended Citation

McGowan, Thomas G., "INTERGENERATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND ONTOLOGICAL CHANGE" (1994).  
*Intergenerational*. 40.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceintergenerational/40>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Topics in Service Learning at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Intergenerational by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).



high percentage of respondents who said they enjoyed their contact with the older adults and were interested in pursuing a practicum experience with this age group.

Our research design recommendations for future intergenerational programs involving these two age groups include the use of a pre-post-test control group; reliability analyses performed for the selected evaluation instruments; and the use of multiple measure, including self-report and observation. We also encourage programmers to secure larger and more representative samples of both older and young adult college students and to explore possible gender and racial differences in the effects of participation.

## REFERENCES

- Aday, R., Rice, C., & Evans, G. (1991). Intergenerational partners projects: A model linking elementary students with senior center volunteers. *The Gerontologist*, 31, 263-266.
- Atwater, E., (1992). *Adolescence*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Brady, E. M., & Fowler, M. L. (1988). Participation motives and learning outcomes among older learners. *Educational Gerontology*, 14, 45-56.
- Burke, J. L. (1982). Young children's attitudes and perceptions of older adults. *Aging and Human Development*, 14, 208-222.
- Chapman, N. J., & Neal, M. B. (1990). The effects of intergenerational experiences on adolescents and older adults. *The Gerontologist*, 30, 825-832.
- Cox, C. (1991). Why older adults leave the university: A comparison of continuing and noncontinuing students. *Educational Gerontology*, 17, 1-10.
- Dellmann-Jenkins, M. M., Sanders, M., Fruit, D., Fowler, L., & Brahce, C. (1992, November). *Impact of intergenerational sharing seminars on senior guest and young adult college students*. Paper presented at the 45th Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society, Washington, DC.
- Dobrosky, B., & Bishop, J. (1984). Children's perceptions of old people. *Educational Gerontology*, 10, 429-439.
- Lambert, D., Dellmann-Jenkins, M., & Fruit, D. (1990). Planning for contact, between the generalizing: An effective approach. *The Gerontologist*, 30, 553-556.
- Levinson, D., Darrow, C., Klein, E., Levinson, M., & McKee, B. (1978). *The seasons of a man's life*. New York: Ballantine.
- Papalia-Finlay, D., & Wendos-Olds, S. (1981). *Human development* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Pearce, S. D. (1991). Toward understanding the participation of older adults in continuing education. *Educational Gerontology*, 17, 451-464.
- Seefeldt, C. (1989). Intergenerational programming: Impact on attitudes. *Children in Contemporary Society*, 185-193.
- Strom, R. (1988). Intergenerational learning and curriculum development. *Educational Gerontology*, 14, 165-181.

## INTERGENERATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND ONTOLOGICAL CHANGE

Notice: This material may be protected by copyright law. Title 17, US Code)

Thomas G. McGowan  
Sara Blankenship

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Rhodes College,  
Memphis, Tennessee, USA

*The phenomenological concept of ontological change, or change in self-understanding, is used to structure an analysis of the experiential impact of a college-based, intergenerational service-learning project. The semester-long project aimed to create interpersonal, intergenerational situations in which students (N = 12) could experience for themselves the lack of fit between their inherited assumptions regarding aging and the actual meaning of aging as experienced by elders. Content analysis of students' journals indicated that students experienced four temporally distinct types of experiences during the project. Students entered the project with an understanding as to how they should interact with their companions based on inherited assumptions regarding aging and the elderly (anticipation experiences). In the presence of their companions, however, the students' assumptions were revealed as inappropriate and incapable of adequately guiding them in their interactions (personal-conflict experiences). To alleviate the awkwardness experienced in the field, students had to reevaluate their understanding of themselves and their role in their intergenerational relationship and identify changes they could make to improve their intergenerational relationships (reevaluation experiences). Ten of 12 students reported effecting positive changes in their relationships after redefining their role vis-à-vis their companions (transposition experiences). Phenomenological theory provides (a) insight into the type of intergenerational relationships conducive to combating ageism and (b) a framework (journal content analysis) for assessing the experiential impact of program participation.*

The impact of intergenerational service-learning programs designed to combat ageism is typically assessed in terms of attitudinal change (Chapman & Neal, 1990; Glass & Trent, 1980; Green, 1981; Nishi-Strattner & Myers, 1983). A strictly attitudinal approach to program assessment is limited, however, because it is incapable of addressing the broader, experiential impact of program participation. This limitation is most problematic when contradictions are found between attitudinal findings and program participants' qualitative self-reports. For example, Reinsch and Tobis (1991) found a discrepancy between

We thank the H. W. Durham Foundation for providing a substantial grant that made the Rhodes College Life Histories Project possible. The research presented in this article focuses on the project's impact on participating students.

Address correspondence to Thomas G. McGowan, Rhodes College, 2000 North Parkway, Memphis, TN 38112.

objective attitudinal post-tests and self-reported descriptions of participant experience. Objective attitude measures indicated no significant shift in negative attitudes held by undergraduates participating in a long-term intergenerational program. However, this finding was contradicted by self-reports that indicated that a positive disposition toward elders had been experienced by students in the field.

Thus, conflicting results emerged between the subjective questionnaire, which evaluated students' personal experience at the senior centers, and the objective Quiz on Aging which examined knowledge on aging and identified certain errors as negatively biased and certain errors as positively biased. (Reinsch & Tobis, p. 222)

This discrepancy is an empirical example of the lack of fit that often exists between knowledge and experience.

Researchers attempting to move beyond strictly attitude-based program assessment may use participants' anecdotal self-reports to obtain qualitative insight into program impact. For example, Aday, Rice, and Evans (1991) used participants' qualitative self-reports in an attempt to assess the experiential meaning of participation in an intergenerational partners program. However, because this methodology lacks theoretical and analytical grounding, the research value of the data it provides is limited. The collective study of intergenerational program impact would benefit from the development of a theoretically grounded framework that allows for the interpretive analysis of the meaning of participant experience beyond the attitudinal level.

One methodological strategy available to researchers who wish to analyze the experiential impact of intergenerational programs is to conceptualize impact in terms of the phenomenological concept of ontological change—change in self-understanding. The concept of ontological change is grounded in contemporary phenomenological and hermeneutical (interpretive) theory and is developed most extensively in the work of Gadamer (1960/1991; also see Crapanzano, 1992; Palmer, 1969; Weinsheimer, 1985). Synthesizing Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) with Hegel's notion of the contradictory nature of negative experience, Gadamer conceptualized ontological change as a process whereby new experiences contradict implicit assumptions, resulting in self-reflection and changes in self-understanding. To put it simply, ontological change occurs when people experience something that forces them to view themselves differently. This view of ontological change thus equates changes in self-understanding with self-change. It follows logically that changes in the self will ultimately cause changes in relationships with others. When this view of ontolog-

ical change is applied to intergenerational project design and assessment, the goal is to create and assess changes in the way young people understand themselves differently as a result of intergenerational experience. In this article, we describe a curriculum-based intergenerational project grounded in this view of ontological change and report findings from a content analysis of student journals that provide insight into the impact of program participation.

## THE INTERGENERATIONAL PROJECT

Gadamer's (1991) concept of ontological change embodies phenomenology's important distinction between the idea of a thing and the thing itself (Brockelman, 1980). Experience is prestructured by inherited, conceptual assumptions (ideas of things) that are culturally and temporally circumscribed. From this perspective, overcoming ageism at the interpersonal level involves facilitating situations in which young people can experience for themselves the lack of fit that exists between their idea of aging and the phenomenon of aging itself. Intergenerational programs aimed at combatting ageism may thus be viewed as attempts to use the inherently instructive nature of experience to educate young people on the actual meanings of aging and being old as they are experienced by those who have aged. Couched in the language of traditional social science, intergenerational experience operates as the independent variable effecting change in students' self-understanding.

The Rhodes College Life Histories Project was conceptualized in terms of this phenomenological view of ontological change. In addition to creating ego-supportive mentor roles for homebound elders in Memphis, Tennessee, the project aims to create interpersonal situations in which students can experience for themselves the lack of fit between their inherited assumptions regarding aging and the actual meaning of aging experienced by elders. The intent is to situate students in intergenerational relationships so that they can learn for themselves that aging is a natural process and that elders are individuals for whom aging is a diverse and varied experience.

The Life Histories Project situates college undergraduates in semester-long intergenerational relationships that allow them to experience the meaning of aging by way of ongoing, dialogical contact with their elder companions. Participating students are enrolled in a seminar in which readings, lectures, and discussions prepare them for their semester-long field work. Several weeks into the seminar, students are introduced to their elder companions and begin visiting their companions in their homes. Students and elders are paired by the project director on the basis of descriptive and biographical information pro-

vided by students and elders prior to participation. The pairing process is important and is primarily directed by the goal of creating a challenging, but not overwhelming, interpersonal situation for the student. For example, a student with experience as a health care volunteer might be paired with an extremely frail or chronically ill elder, whereas a student with no such experience would not.

During weekly visits, students talk to their companions about their lives and begin work on the explicit goal of recording their companions' life histories, in which aspects and events of the elders' lives are explained with reference to the social and historical contexts in which they were experienced. Students are taught Socratic interviewing skills (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985) and are instructed to position themselves in the dialogic relationship as a student would vis-à-vis a mentor. As the end of the semester nears, students work closely with their companions on revising and editing their histories.

An important variable that affects the outcome of intergenerational programs is the nature of the interactive situation or context in which the intergenerational contact takes place. Citing the work of Amir (1969), Seefeldt (1987) listed five preconditions that make an interactional context conducive to successful out-group contact (i.e., contact capable of overcoming one group's prejudice toward a categorically distinct other group, in this case, the prejudice of the youth toward the elderly). The interactional context should

1. Be intimate rather than casual,
2. Involve shared goals and cooperative activity,
3. Be pleasant and mutually rewarding,
4. Position participants in roles of equal status, and
5. Involve minority group members who occupy high status within their own group.

Seefeldt argued that intergenerational programs need to reflect these considerations if they are to promote interaction capable of combatting ageism among young persons.

The Life Histories Project contains the first four interactional features recommended by Seefeldt (1987). The project does not meet the fifth condition because it deliberately serves elders of lower social status who are in need of companionship. Nevertheless, the intergenerational relationships are structured such that elders occupy the role of mentor and thus have status vis-à-vis their student companions. By focusing on biographical story telling and dialogue, the weekly meetings provide substantive (intimate) rather than casual interaction. Each student-elder pair produces a paper documenting the elder's life,

and the companionship and learning exchanged make for a mutually rewarding experience. In addition to these features, the intergenerational relationship facilitated by the Life Histories Project involves longitudinal dialogical contact between the student and elder. The weekly dialogues allow the student and elder to build a type of mutual understanding that, according to Gadamer (1960/1991; also see Crapanzano, 1992), can only be developed through dialogic contact. On the basis of these features of the intergenerational relationships and the theoretical assumptions of phenomenology discussed earlier, it is reasonable to hypothesize that participating students experience ontological change (change in self-understanding) resulting in a less stereotypical understanding of their companions and aging in general.

## METHOD

The methodological challenge of studying ontological change is considerable. In the present study, ontological change was defined operationally as changes in students' self-understanding and was measured through content analysis of journals that students kept as part of their project experience. Journal writing is considered an excellent way of mediating self-understanding and as such presents itself as an appropriate data source for researchers wishing to assess the ontological impact of students' experience. Following the work of Turner (1969), Myerhoff and Metzger (1992) described journal writing as a "liminal undertaking," an activity that opens up possibilities of self-discovery and change.

The journal, as we construe it, is an activity as much as a form—a process, in the course of which a self may be constructed. . . . The process almost inevitably leads the writer into new regions of awareness. The journal is a means for *acquiring*, not merely recording, knowledge. (p. 348)

The activity of journal writing thus involves self-mediation through reflection on the articulated meaning of an experience. By entering into a conversation with him- or herself, the writer objectifies experience in order to reflect on it and re-experience it as an observer. Journal writing thus simultaneously involves self-interpretation and self-construction. As Brockelman (1985) pointed out, "a self is *both* unity and difference" (p. 14). The self-reflective activity of journal writing allows the self to negotiate its unity and difference, to process the meaning of experience, and to mediate and redefine itself to itself.

Analyzing the journals of students who participated in the project thus gave us a sound way of examining the impact of participation in the Life Histories Project on their mediation of their self-understanding (ontological change).

## THE JOURNALS

Students were required to make three journal entries each week as a way of processing and making sense of their experience. Journal writing was unstructured, and the choice of topic and length of entries was left to the students. The only requirement was that the entries reflect thoughts or experiences directly related to project participation. According to participating students, journal writing helped them to process and make sense of their complex and challenging experience.

Twelve students (11 young women and 1 young man) participated during the first semester of the project. All were from middle- or upper-middle-class families and averaged 20 years in age. The 12 participating elders ranged in age from 65 to 101 years. Their average age was 84 (median = 83). All were nonambulatory and homebound and had reported being lonely and in need of companionship prior to participation. The elderly sample was predominately female ( $n = 9$ ) and consisted of 9 whites and 3 African Americans. Qualitative interviews with the elders who participated in the project's initial semester suggested that their experience had been positive (McGowan, in press).

Students completed an average of 27 handwritten journal entries during the course of the semester. The average length of each journal entry was 1.25 pages (the typical journal was a standard  $8.5 \times 11$  inch notebook). These entries reflected an average of 16.4 hr of face-to-face interpersonal contact between students and their elder companions. This average was upwardly skewed by 1 student who spent 32 hr with her companion. The median amount of contact was 14.5 hr, and the least amount of contact was 7 hr. These hours were distributed more or less evenly over an average of 10.9 visits (median = 10.5), yielding an average amount of time spent per visit of 1.49 hr.

An inductive approach was taken to the content analysis of the journals so that a general field of coding categories could be obtained. Journals were read by two researchers working independently of one another. Both coders were instructed to code every phrase, sentence, or series of sentences that they judged as (a) a reflection on or (b) a description of a project-related experience. Each coder created a list of conceptual categories based on all the coded comments. The coders then met to compare their work. Joint coding decisions were made to resolve coding differences. Working together, the coders created inclu-

sive, overarching conceptual categories representing the various dimensions of the students' collective experience. For example, 6 students reported experiencing fear, 5 expressed uncertainty, and 4 mentioned feeling nervous before participating in the program. These three conceptual categories were collapsed into an overarching conceptual category called *apprehension*, consisting of the dimensions fear, nervousness, and uncertainty. This approach allowed us to identify and analyze general patterns in the students' collective experience. Attention was also placed on the chronological ordering of various experiences, allowing us to discern various stages through which the intergenerational relationships developed.

## FINDINGS

The content analysis of students' journal entries yielded four overarching conceptual categories evidencing four general types of collective student experiences. These four types of experiences occurred in specific chronological stages during the 3½-month project. The first, *anticipation*, occurred during the 2-week period before the students entered the field and was marked by apprehension and expectation. Stage 2, *personal conflict*, began with initial contact and lasted, on average, 4–6 weeks. This stage was marked by a variety of unexpected and unsettling field experiences—unsettling in that they contradicted students' expectations and challenged them in ways they had not anticipated. Stage 3, *reevaluation*, refers to the students' self-reflection as they struggled to come to terms with their unsettling experiences. This period was typified by intense and, in many cases, pivotal reflexive insights that students generally described as necessary and unavoidable. The fourth and final stage, *transposition*, refers to the latter weeks of the semester, when students began to effect changes in their role in the intergenerational relationship.

### Anticipation

The anticipation stage contained two conceptual dimensions: apprehension and expectation.

*Apprehension.* Specific concerns ascribed to the apprehension dimension included

- Fear of (a) alienating the elder, (b) appearing naive, (c) sounding superficial, (d) embarrassing oneself, (e) being rejected, and (f) not being able to understand the elder;

- Uncertainty regarding (a) not knowing what to say, (b) the workability of the project/interviewing, and (c) the extent to which the elder would benefit from the project; and
- Nervousness due to (a) inexperience with elders and (b) negative assumptions toward the elderly and aging.

*Expectation.* Although students were apprehensive before meeting their companion, they generally shared high expectations regarding their ability to make a positive difference in the lives of their companions. Journal comments evidenced that students expected to

- Help improve their elderly companions' lives,
- Develop a new appreciation for the elderly,
- Participate in a meaningful field experience,
- Be enlightened by their companions' stories and experiences,
- Collect interesting historical facts, and
- Have a personally satisfying experience.

### Personal Conflict

Journal entries made during the weeks after students had entered the field evidenced that their nascent intergenerational relationships were full of unexpected and unsettling experiences. These unsettling experiences included emotional and personal challenges as well as challenging experiences and questions related to field and methodological issues.

*Personal challenges.* Unsettling interpersonal/relational experiences included

- Feeling detachment. This took the form of (a) occasionally desiring to be somewhere rather than in the companion's home interviewing and (b) feeling bored from time to time while visiting.
- Being forced to consider sobering facts about life. Students found themselves facing grim realities when (a) their elder's discussions about death caused them to reflect on their own mortality, (b) the extent of the elder's pain and/or health problem was great, (c) they realized the pain/frailty of their companion and of life itself, and (d) when they considered their companion's dependency.
- Feeling guilt. Students recorded that they felt guilty when they (a) broke promises they had made to their companion, (b) missed visits, (c) did not want to visit or stay at times, (d) failed to listen closely/engage during visits, (e) left their companion when their

- companion wanted them to stay, and (f) felt pity toward their companion because of her or his poor health.
- Encountering the difficulty of caring about an elderly person. These experiences included (a) dealing with the reality of the elder's pain and (b) fearing for the elder's safety/health.
- Feeling disappointed or frustrated. Students recorded feeling disappointed or frustrated when (a) the dialogue and the relationship were developing too slowly, (b) it was difficult to schedule visits because of the elder's unpredictable health, (c) a visit was canceled because of a health problem, (d) they felt awkward in the role of interviewer, and (e) the limiting aspects of their companion's physical condition were evident (e.g., the companion could not talk for long without taking a break).
- Having worldview/values challenged. Such experiences entailed the students' (a) learning how to respond to clash of values with the elder, (b) reconciling their view of the elder in light of contradictions in her or him, and (c) realizing contradictions in themselves.

*Field challenges.* Unsettling field/methodological experiences included

- Encountering the ethical challenges of the field. The ethical challenges the students' documented included (a) avoiding patronizing or condescending behavior, (b) knowing when to avoid lines of questioning that were upsetting to the elder, (c) questioning whether the elder needed their company, (d) deciding how to represent the elder accurately in print, (e) avoiding pushing the elder to answer questions, and (f) determining the proper distance to maintain in the relationship.
- Feeling overwhelmed by the demands of the project. Students recorded that (a) the project was emotionally draining; (b) the project demanded too much time or work; (c) they experienced role strain, finding it difficult to be both student researcher and friend to the elder.
- Not knowing how to handle situations. Situations that the students recorded they were unsure how to handle included (a) whether to tell the companion when she or he repeated stories and (b) whether to visit when the companion was ill.
- Meeting the challenge of oral history interviewing. This included (a) establishing chronological accuracy, (b) focusing on the history when the companion would rather chat, (c) bearing painful story content, (d) deciding what was or was not historical, (e) dealing

with an elder who preferred to talk about a present situation, and (f) getting the elder to open up.

## Reevaluation

Approximately midway through the semester, journal comments revealed that the students were wrestling with their interpersonal and methodological difficulties and had begun reevaluating their understanding of themselves, their role in the project, and their intergenerational relationship. The students had, of course, been involved in a self-reflective process prior to this period, but attempts to come to terms with their unsettling and challenging experiences were categorically distinct during this period of reevaluation. Insights associated with reevaluation were differentiated into four categories: (a) self, (b) project role, (c) intergenerational relationship, and (d) view toward aging and the elderly.

*Reevaluation of self.* This dimension of students' experiences included

- Discovering that project participation was leading to unexpected personal insights.
- Accepting old age as an aspect of their life and the lives of loved ones,
- Realizing that apprehension toward the elderly indicates fear of their own mortality,
- Realizing that nothing is permanent, and
- Realizing that common bonds do not always equal common beliefs (e.g., not all black women agree on all issues).

*Reevaluation of project role.* This dimension included

- Discovering the self-selective nature of narratives,
- Realizing the need to prepare for visits, and
- Coming to value the importance of active listening.

*Reevaluation of intergenerational and other relationships.* For the students, this dimension of project participation included

- Attempting to redefine their relationship with their companion,
- Reconsidering their relationship with their grandparents, and
- Reflecting on their relationship with their parents.

*Reevaluation of view toward aging and the elderly.* This dimension included

- Concluding that the meaning of age is relative,
- Seeing the elder as an individual with a personality, and
- Becoming angry with others' treatment of elderly persons as objects.

## Transposition

The period of reevaluation was generally followed by a period in which the students reconsidered their roles in the project and their way of interacting with their companions. We call this final stage *transposition* because it involved a change in the students' position toward themselves and their companions. Students repositioned themselves toward themselves by redefining their project role. In general, they stopped viewing themselves as student researchers and started viewing themselves as their companion's friend. This role shift allowed the students to drop pretenses associated with their original assumptions regarding how they should conduct themselves in relation to their companions (e.g., maintain objective distance, improve their companion's life by interviewing, and steer their companion toward certain interview topics). This eliminated the role strain experienced earlier in the relationship and freed the students to respond directly to their elderly companion, an important step toward building the new relationship. The role shift also allowed students to acknowledge the fact that they were the true benefactors of the intergenerational experience. Students also learned that there was no necessary or absolute model for their companion's life history and that the content and form of the history need only reflect the personality of their companion in a way that allowed the reader to gain insight into their companion's life and the sociohistorical context in which she or he lived. As friends, the students were thus fully capable of writing a paper documenting their companion's life history.

The newly defined relationship emerged naturally, albeit not easily, in light of changes in the way students reevaluated themselves and their role. The newly reconstructed relationships were the product of a process of reevaluation in which students attempted to respond actively to the uncomfortable and unsettling feelings they had experienced in the field. The redefined relationships may be described as "negotiated" relationships because they emerged out of the students' response to the fact that they had been interacting with their companion on the basis of spurious assumptions regarding how they thought they should interact with an elderly person. Particular features of the new relationships varied across student-elder pairs. One student be-

came an advocate for her companion, collecting information about health insurance and other problems experienced by her companion and pressuring social service agencies to respond to her needs. Another agreed to help her companion identify publishers that might be interested in publishing a manuscript that she had been working on for more than 20 years. In each case, however, the newly defined relationship reflected the interests of both parties.

Journal comments revealed that transposition occurred for all but 2 students. Journal entries for these 2 students indicated that although they did experience the process of reevaluation, they did not redefine their role or significantly change their way of interacting with their companion. Instead, their journals suggested that they simply struggled through the personal-conflict stage and muddled through until the semester ended. The remainder of the students (10) did effect changes in their intergenerational relationships. These students stated that they had begun to conduct themselves differently during their visits in order to make the situation work. The phenomenon of transposition is thus discussed in terms of both process (changes in the manner in which the students came to relate differently to themselves and to their companion) and outcome (the reconstructed relationship between the student and elder that reflected changes in the way the student related to her or him).

*Transposition process.* In the transposition process,

- Students attempted to focus on topics relevant to their life as well as the life of their companion,
- Students explored discussion themes relevant to both themselves and their companion (e.g., womanhood or racial identity),
- Both parties identified mutually beneficial tasks (e.g., editing each other's writing or the student's serving as an advocate for the elder in interactions with social service agents),
- The elder was encouraged to voice what she or he wanted from the project,
- Students became an advocate for their elder, and
- The elder became a source of emotional support for the student.

*Transposition outcome.* Transposition outcomes included ontological change related to the self and to the intergenerational relationship. Self-transposition included the following outcomes:

- The student gained new perspective on life.
- The student stated the need to accept that which cannot be destroyed (i.e., the aging process).

- The student felt differently about her- or himself (although the feeling was difficult to put into words).
- The student felt the need to be honest with her- or himself and the elder.
- The student realized the need to accept others in spite of discord/clash of views.

Transposition related to the intergenerational relationship included the following outcomes:

- The elder talked more about her- or himself than about history.
- Less oral history and more informal conversation took place.
- The elder asked about the student.
- The elder took an active interest in the student's life.
- The student served as an advocate for the elder.
- The elder came to reevaluate her- or himself in response to interaction with the student.
- The student viewed the elder as an individual who had aged rather than as an aged person.
- Age and health factors were no longer obstacles to interaction.
- The student became at ease with companion.
- Pity changed to sympathy/empathy.
- The interview relationship was replaced with friendship.

## DISCUSSION

In her anthropological classic *Number Our Days*, Myerhoff (1978) described humans as "homo narrans"—storytellers with a natural inclination to derive meaning by fashioning narrative descriptions of personal experience. For a listener, such descriptions provide insight into personal lives, social history, and culture. For the speaker, the act of narratively structuring the meaning of experience has a more primary function: It provides the order essential to personal identity. In this sense, the study of self-narrative must be considered a primary human science, an essential, ontological inquiry into what it means to be human.

This view of self-narrative as an ontological activity may be used to structure our interpretation of the impact of the Life Histories Project on participating students. Just as the elders' narrative descriptions of their lives and experiences of aging provided insight into their personal and sociohistorical identity, students' journals provided insight into the process whereby their self-identity and way of being in the world were mediated as a result of their experience as a project participant.



Engaged in the liminal activity of interpreting the self from the perspective of the self (journal writing), students experienced the reflexive act of self-mediation. The act of articulating whom the student conceptualized her- or himself to be became instrumental for the structuring of the self the student was becoming in light of the reflexive experience. The journal content analysis presented herein may thus be read as a polyvocal description of the ontological change that students collectively experienced as a result of their participation in the intergenerational project.

The importance of self-narrative was evident in the present study at yet another level. The personal conflict that prompted reevaluation and transposition was itself a product of the self-narratives that the elders presented to the students during their ongoing weekly dialogues. The students entered the intergenerational relationships with an understanding of how they should act that was based on their inherited assumptions regarding aging and the elderly. In the presence of their companions, however, the students' assumptions were revealed to be inappropriate. The self-narratives presented by the elders revealed constructed identities and an understanding of aging quite different from that assumed by the students, and students experienced this difference as unsettling and, in some cases, unbearable. To alleviate the awkwardness and uncomfortable feeling experienced in the field, the students had to develop a new strategy for interacting with their companions, and this required reevaluating themselves and their understanding of aging and their companion. The understanding of aging conveyed by the elders' self-narratives helped students to construct a new, working understanding of aging. In short, the students were forced by their experience to acknowledge the truth of the situation, a truth that could not be denied: Their cultural inheritance had not adequately prepared them for their intergenerational relationship.

The students' collective experiences of anticipation, personal conflict, reevaluation, and transposition reveal a process of personal growth that the students underwent by virtue of their intergenerational experiences. The overall process bears close resemblance to the dialectical view of change as a process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Students entered the project with ideas of the project, their role in it, and the type of relationship they would have with their companion (the anticipatory, or thesis, stage). Upon entering the field, students were surprised to find themselves engaged in a service-learning experience that challenged them in ways they had not imagined. The lack of fit between their ideas of and the phenomenon of aging was experienced by students as unsettling and difficult to reconcile. This personal-conflict, or antithesis, stage necessitated reevaluation and

led to changes in the way students viewed themselves; their companions; and, in some cases, life in general. The transpositioning of students into newly defined roles and relationships marked a synthesis in which students integrated the meaning of their unsettling and self-reflective experiences into a new self-understanding and way of relating to their companion.

The phenomenological framework used in the present study provided (a) theoretical insight into the type of intergenerational relationships that are conducive to combating ageism and (b) a framework (journal content analysis) for interpreting the experiential and ontological impact of program participation. Whether the ontological change experienced by the student participants may be considered long-term is open to question—an answer would require a long-term follow-up study. What is clear is that for the majority of students, their field experience affected their self-understanding and forced them to act differently in the context of their relationship with their companion. Only when they achieved a new understanding of themselves and their roles in the intergenerational relationship were students able to interact satisfactorily with their companions. Perhaps interpersonal ageism may best be fought by promoting intergenerational relationships conducive to ontological change, relationships that give young people the opportunity to experience the meaning of aging through direct, dialogical contact with elders. It is only through such contact that young persons will be able to experience the bankruptcy of their inherited ageist prejudices.

## REFERENCES

- Aday, R. H., Rice, C., & Evans, E. (1991). Intergenerational partners project—a model linking elementary students with senior center volunteers. *Gerontologist, 31*, 263–266.
- Amir, Y. (1969). Contact hypothesis in ethnic relations. *Psychological Bulletin, 71*, 319–342.
- Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brockelman, P. T. (1980). *Existential phenomenology and the world of ordinary experience*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Brockelman, P. T. (1985). *Time and self*. New York: Crossroad.
- Chapman, N. J., & Neal, M. B. (1990). The effects of intergenerational experiences on adolescents and older adults. *The Gerontologist, 30*, 825–832.
- Crapanzano, V. (1992) *Hermes' dilemma and Hamlet's desire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Gadamer, H.-G. (1991). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). New York: Crossroad. (Original work published in 1960.)
- Glass, J. C., & Trent, C. (1980). Changing ninth-graders' attitudes toward older persons. *Research on Aging*, 2, 499-512.
- Green, S. K. (1981). Attitudes and perceptions about the elderly: Current and future perspectives. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 13, 99-119.
- McGowan, T. G. (in press). Mentoring-remembrance: A conceptual and empirical analysis. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 38.
- Myerhoff, B. (1978). *Number our days*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Myerhoff, B., & Metzger, D. (1992). The journal as activity and genre. In B. Myerhoff (Ed.), *Remembered lives: The work of ritual, storytelling, and growing older* (pp. 341-359). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Nishi-Strattner, M., & Myers, J. E. (1983). Attitudes toward the elderly: An intergenerational examination. *Educational Gerontology*, 9, 389-397.
- Palmer, R. E. (1969) *Hermeneutics*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Reinsch, S. & Tobis, J. S., (1991). Intergenerational relations—pre-med students at senior centers. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, 13, 211-224.
- Seefeldt, C. (1987). Intergenerational programs: Making them work. *Childhood Education*, 64, 14-18.
- Turner, V. W. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Weinsheimer, J. (1985). *Gadamer's hermeneutics: A reading of truth and method*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Edited by  
J. Conrad Glass, Jr.

## BOOK REVIEWS

### MENTAL HEALTH AND AGING

Edited by Michael A. Smyer, Ph.D.

New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1994, 173 pages, \$26.95 (hard cover)

Reviewed by Thomas A. Rich and Diane W. Rich, University of South Florida

The book touches on a wide range of topics of current interest and future perspectives in the area of aging and mental health. The information is generally current and highly compressed, and ranges from broad public policy issues to highly specialized summaries of very specialized areas.

In chapter one, Wykle and Musil give a good overview of the current state of mental health and aging, compressing material for several courses or possibly a degree in the subject. Some chapters, such as *The Aging Brain* by Diamond, *Depressive Disorders* by George, *Anxiety Disorders* by Gurian and Goisman, and *Successful Adaptation in Later Life* by Sherman bring forth problems that tend to be overlooked in the current emphasis on dementia and older adults. The chapter by Bob Knight on *Psychotherapy as Applied Gerontology* continues his commonsense and applied approach for working with older adults and is a useful description of the evolution of mental health and aging in three phases, from the early concern that geriatric mental health held no future to a second phase when Alzheimer's Disease legitimized limited aspects of the field. Phase three, which he sees emerging now, is continuing the Alzheimer focus but moving toward a broader life course perspective on developmental psychopathology. The section by Wetle on mental health and managed care also brings an area into mental health thinking that is often neglected as we train counselors for their professional responsibilities.

In many ways, the strengths and weaknesses of this book are just different sides of the same coin. The fact that it is an up-to-date, topical, and thoughtful look at a broad range of issues to remind educators, practitioners, and others of the breadth of the field is a strong point. At the same time, the necessity for beauty's sales for very limited coverage becomes a weakness, with many chapters requiring much more background than others to understand. The book contributes to the literature base by bringing forth and making current the growing range of topics that must be considered in mental health and aging.