Lin, Y. Y., & Sandmann, L. R. (2012, June). Toward a new motivation to learn framework for older adult learners. Paper presented in Adult Education Research Conference (AERC), Saratoga Springs, NY.

Toward a New Motivation to Learn Framework for Older Adult Learners

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Keywords: older adult learning, educational gerontology, motivation to learn

Abstract: Although existing literature addresses adults' motivation to learn, and some specifically focuses on older adults, it is now recognized that older adults are more heterogeneous and complex than other age groups. Therefore, this study seeks to provide an alternative theoretical framework to investigate motivation to learn for older adult learners in Taiwan.

Purpose

As the number of older adults—that is, those aged 65 years and over—undergoes dramatic worldwide gains, understanding and providing for this aging population becomes increasingly important. Many current studies of older adult learners start at 50 or 55 years old, but very few studies focus on those 65 years of age and over. This is especially the case in Taiwan, where the population in this age group is expected to increase at a faster rate than in any other country (Council for Economic Planning and Development, 2011). In many motivation research studies of older adults, the findings indicate that cognitive interest and a desire to learn are the primary motivations (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Bynum & Seaman, 1993; Fujita-Starck, 1996; Kim & Merriam, 2004; Scala, 1996). Nonetheless, scant research reports focusing specifically on older adults' intrinsic motivations, including not only "the drive from within" but the moment of learning that highlights the emotional aspect of motivation. That is, most researchers in adult education or older adult education fail to consider the emotional aspects of these groups' motivation (Brookfield, 1995; Stephan, Fouquereau, & Fernandez, 2008). Additionally, little research considers the influence of context on older adult learners. Therefore, the current typologies derived from the adult education literature are insufficient for understanding older adult learners' motivation.

The purpose of this study is to provide an alternative theoretical framework to investigate motivation to learn for older adult learners in Taiwan. Specifically, the research questions of this study are: for older adult learners in Taiwan, (a) what are the intrinsic motivations to learn and (b) to what extent can the intrinsic motivations to learn be explained separately and jointly by personal predictor variables and institutional predictor variables?

Literature Review

The literature from adult education, gerontology, psychology, and other select fields was reviewed and critiqued for this study. In examining the adult education literature related to adult learning and adult development theories, it was found that research performed to date lacks specificity regarding older adult learners. For example, most adult development theories appear

to apply only to healthy and "young-old" groups; they fail to provide suggestions for "old-old," "oldest-old," or frail older adults (Norman, McCluskey-Fawcett, & Ashcraft, 2002; Westermeyer, 2004). Additionally, current adult learning theories, such as Knowles's (1984) six assumptions of andragogy, do not adequately describe older adults. It can be argued that Knowles's work does not apply well specifically to those older adults turning to engage in their inner world while disengaging from society to some extent.

Exploring adult education literature related to explaining the learning process in older adults also revealed deficits in research. Foremost, the theoretical frameworks and instruments that have been widely used are derived from research on *all* adult learners rather than older adults. The most obvious examples are Houle's (1961) and Boshier's (1973) typologies, which are not based on studying older adult groups. Findings from research on older adults indicate that cognitive interest and a desire to learn are the primary motivations for this group (Bye et al., 2007; Bynum & Seaman, 1993; Fujita-Starck, 1996; Kim & Merriam, 2004; Scala, 1996). However, scant research studies report focusing on older adults' intrinsic motivations. Therefore, the review indicates that current typologies of motivation to learn derived from the adult education literature are insufficient for understanding older adult learners' motivation.

A review of work in psychology indicates that research and frameworks of intrinsic motivation may contribute to better understanding older adults' learning. Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985) is one of the main theories used to understand learners' intrinsic motivation in educational settings. Its premise is that individuals have intrinsic needs and physiological drives, and these intrinsic needs provide energy for the individuals to act on (rather than simply to be reactive to) the environment. Also helpful is socioemotional selectivity theory (SST; Carstensen, 1991), which provides a lens into social and emotional characteristics, such as emotional regulation and generativity, to understand the motivations of older adults.

Theoretical framework

Based on an analysis of the literature, we propose a composite theory using self-determination theory and socioemotional selectivity theory as a new framework to explore older adult learners' motivation. Five constructs of intrinsic motivation were derived from the two theories: learning for new knowledge, learning for a sense of accomplishment, desire for stimulation, emotional regulation, and generativity. Overall, we view the combination of the theories of intrinsic motivation of SDT and SST from the psychological field as a better framework to understand the nature of motivation of older adult learners and to provide the implications for the study and practice in adult education.

Research Design

The research design of this study used a quantitative approach with survey method to investigate the intrinsic motivations of older adult learners in Taiwan. With the five motivations as its central constructs, the instrument also included items to determine personal characteristics and institutional predictor variables. The English version questionnaire was translated into Mandarin. On the five construct scales of intrinsic motivation, alphas ranged from a high of .91 to a low of .82.

This study used a large population rather than a scientific sampling because the researcher could not control the director's or instructors' recruitment of older adult learners to complete the questionnaire by online survey and because the number of participants could not be estimated while using the online survey. An online survey was used because the available budget did not support on-site data collection.

The data collection plan for the study revolved mainly around a confidential, self-administered, web-based survey. This survey methodology was selected because of the large sample size and the advantages of easy access and dynamic interaction (Dillman, 2000). SurveyMonkey software was used to conduct the survey. Descriptive statistical analysis and multiple regression analysis were performed with SPSS 19.0 to answer the research questions. The population for this study was 816 older adult learners in Taiwan with an average age of 67.95. The respondents were 32.4% male and 67.6% female.

Findings and Conclusions

Overall, the two findings of this study are: (a) older adult learners who responded to the questionnaire demonstrated high intrinsic motivation in all five constructs, on average; specifically, their most salient motivations were the *desire for stimulation* and *generativity*; (b) institutional predictor variables, especially teacher support and peer support, are the most important predictors of the intrinsic motivation of Taiwanese older adult learners. Additionally, family support is one of the strong variables to predict the intrinsic motivation of Taiwanese older adult learners.

First, descriptive statistical analysis indicates that older adult learners who responded to the questionnaire demonstrated high intrinsic motivation in all five constructs, on average: *desire for stimulation* (20.27) exhibited the highest item mean. The results showed that the two highest ranking items measuring intrinsic motivation were "learning makes me feel happy" and "learning gives me an opportunity to exercise my brain," which are measures of *desire for stimulation*. Ranked by item mean, the highest to lowest scoring intrinsic motivation constructs were *desire for stimulation*, *learning for a sense of accomplishment*, *generativity*, *emotional regulation*, and *learning for new knowledge*.

A number of studies have confirmed the strong intrinsic motivation of older adult learners (Bye et al., 2007; Bynum & Seaman, 1993; Fujita-Starck, 1996; Kim & Merriam, 2004; Scala, 1996). This notion is consistent with the findings of this research as evidenced by the comparatively high means of items measuring each of the five constructs in this study. The strong intrinsic motivation of these older adult learners might be explained by the cultural context of Taiwan, which is rooted in Chinese culture. Li (2002) argued that Chinese learners were influenced by Confucian principles to view learning as a lifelong process and thus continued to learn all their lives. Their cultural values lead Chinese learners cultivate a strong and stable inner desire and disposition for learning. They are motivated to improve themselves continuously. Therefore, the cultural context provides insight that allows us to better understand Taiwanese older adult learners' strong intrinsic motivation.

Additionally, the results of multiple regression analysis indicate that *desire for stimulation* and *generativity* did not decline with age at a statistically significant level. This finding is supported by the literature. With regard to *desire for stimulation*, research has shown that cognitive interest provides the primary motivation for old adult learners (Bynum & Seaman, 1993; Kim & Merriam, 2004; Scala, 1996). Also, in Erikson's (1950, 1997) and Vaillant's (2002) theories in psychosocial development, generativity is the main life task for older adults. More recently, Lang and Carstensen (2002) argued that in old age, the two subtypes of the category emotionally meaningful goals, namely regulation of emotions and generativity, increase in importance from later adulthood into old age. Specifically, generativity goals have been found to be the most prominent in later adulthood (McAdams, Harts, & Maruna, 1998).

Second, results of the forward multiple regressions indicated that the models which most effectively predicted the five intrinsic motivations all included teacher support and peer support. Specifically, the result showed that the best model for predicting the total intrinsic motivation (including five scores of intrinsic motivations) included teacher support, peer support, family support, and age. This four-variable model explained 52.6% of the observed variance in the dependent variable, total intrinsic motivation. The statistics on this model are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1.
Best Model for Total Intrinsic Motivation

Parameter	Unstandardized Coefficients (b)	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	*t*	*p*	R^2 *Change*
Teacher support	1.419	.398	11.813	.000	.440
Peer support	1.669	.332	9.494	.000	.077
Family support	.407	.101	3.457	.001	.007
Age	-.097	-.05	-2.060	.040	.003
Model Statistic: $R^2 = .526$; $F = 211.808$; $p = .000$					

This study demonstrated the importance of teacher support and peer support in older adults' learning motivation. In fact, prior research has documented the benefits of supports in learning settings for older adult learners. Chappell, Hawke, Rhodes, and Soloman (2003) and Fry (1992) indicated that a climate that is safe, nonthreatening, and less formal, as provided by facilitators, is beneficial to older adult learners. Also, Delahaye and Ehrich (2008) mentioned that older learners report finding peer support, mentoring, and tutoring helpful. However, not many studies consider the influence of supports on older adult learners' motivations. The findings of this study showed that providing such supports for older adult learners is the best strategy to enhance their motivation to learn.

Implications

Instead of drawing on a framework derived from all adult learners for this research, a composite theory based on an intrinsic motivation perspective was proposed in an effort to articulate older adults' motivations to learn. As discussed previously, current adult learning theories and adult development theories were found not to describe older adult learners sufficiently, rigorously, or with enough depth. Therefore, this study provides supplemental and deeper insight into older adult learners' motivations and posits a way to operationalize the framework for empirical study.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this review and the resulting framework will enable educators, as well as educational providers, to become more aware of the motivations of older adult learners and thus to facilitate optimal motivational learning contexts. By offering a deeper understanding of the motivations of learners age 65 and over, this work provides a foundation for improvements in instructional design of learning activities to enhance and sustain older learners' participation in education. Finally, this study provide the rationale for and suggests ways policy makers can provide learning activities for older adult learners, with a view to the joy and meaning that increased participation in learning activities contributes to their lives.

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