

# Changing Attitudes toward Older Adults through Bachelor of Social Work Service-Learning Projects

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## Introduction

According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (2010), those who are 65 and older represent 13% of the total U.S. population and are the fastest growing population segment in the nation. Consequently, it is projected that by the year 2030, 22% of the total American population will be 65 or older. As these numbers are predicted to increase, so will the number of social workers who are needed to work with older Americans. However, an ongoing significant disparity exists regarding the number of older adults as compared to the number of social workers who have interest in and are prepared to work with seniors (Berkman, Gardner, Zodikoff, & Harroytan, 2005). It is reported that fewer than three percent of MSW graduates will work with seniors (Scharlach, Damron-Rodriguez, Robinson, & Feldman, 2000), and only 12% of social work students are taking social work aging courses (Council on Social Work Education, 2006).

Several research studies have explored how to increase the number of social workers in the field of gerontology, and one study found that positive attitudes toward older adults have been shown to predict future careers in working with this population (Gellis, Sherman, & Lawrence, 2003). Additionally, previous quality interactions and experiences with older populations through professional or volunteer experiences have been reported as factors that led to future career work in this area (Cummings, Galambos, & DeCoster, 2003; Kane, 2004b). Cummings, Alder, and DeCoster (2005)

## ABSTRACT

This evidence-based pedagogical approach encompasses service-learning projects via the lens of social exchange theory in working with older adults. The study's purpose was to examine if bachelor of social work students' attitudes changed positively after the completion of service learning projects that involved educational presentations for older adult audiences. Pre- and post-tests were administered to 90 students which indicated a statistically significant positive increase in measured attitudes. The process for the presentation projects is detailed and outlined as well as instructional advice and lessons learned regarding pedagogical intervention.

noted that ageist attitudes may decrease when interactive service learning is provided between older adults and social work students, especially when presented in an undergraduate curriculum. This has led to the purpose of this study, which was to assess whether bachelor of social work students' attitudes changed after the completion of service-learning projects with older adults. Furthermore, as service-learning promotes potential in personal development and altruistic behavior (Chou, 1998; Waterman, 1997), and role taking leads to new perspectives and understanding of social environments when interactions occur (Mead, 1934), the social exchange theory was employed. Through pre-and post-testing, using the Aging Semantic Differential Scale (Rosencranz & McNevin, 1969), we predicted that undergraduate social work students' attitudes would positively increase toward older adults after the group service-learning projects were completed.

## **Background and Significance**

Various reasons for the gap in the gerontological workforce have been noted, and one in particular was that negative attitudes toward older persons can lead to disinterest in working with older populations (French, Mosher-Ashley, 2000; Kane, 2004a; Olson, 2007; Tan, Hawkins, & Ryan, 2001). Socio-cultural effects can shape attitudes toward the aged as societies become preoccupied with being vibrant, indispensable, immortal, and sexy (Berman & White, 2013; Prieler & Choi, 2014; Starr & Ferguson, 2012). Accordingly, attitudes toward older adults can also be negatively affected by one's personal anxiety regarding growing old (Harris & Dollinger, 2001). For example, social work students who hold moderate views concerning their own aging indicate little desire to work with older populations (Anderson & Wiscott, 2003). As negative attitudes are a factor in addressing the social work gap in working with older persons, a theoretical implication for generating interest in this field was used that would maximize benefits to the students (e.g. reciprocity) while reducing costs (e.g. changing their perspectives).

## **Social Exchange Theory**

Social exchange theory is based upon the tenets of economic principles encompassing costs and benefits as related to an individual's desire to maximize rewards while reducing costs in social relationships (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). As applied to gerontology, a social exchange framework implies that each person brings something to the table, which may not necessarily be material, but would probably not be considered otherwise (Bengtson, Burgess, & Parrott, 1997). This theory has been used to promote intergenerational programs for older persons who have been negated the opportunity to participate in some degree of reciprocity as they become less independent in their lives (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2005) or in studies of

negative and positive social exchange impacts whereas older persons have become the recipient of benefits by family members or caretakers (August, Rook, & Newsom, 2007; Fiori, Windsor, Pearson, & Crisp, 2012; Lowenstein, Katz, & Gur-Yaish, 2007). Most recently, structured reverse mentoring programs have begun to make an appearance in the corporate world for workforce training and volunteer programs for younger persons reaching out to seniors (Ambrose, 2015). Conversely, Mead (1934) wrote that individuals are influenced by their interactions with social groups and conceptualized that engaging in new meaningful social support roles could have a positive effect upon human growth. The concept of role taking was summarized by Sprinthall and Thies-Sprinthall (1983) as a real world helping action that goes before intellectual consciousness, and when this piece was absent, the person would likely not initiate actions required to change. Such new role taking through real life experiences could also influence career development while promoting the perspectives of others as well as influence interpersonal and intrapersonal domains (Payne, 2012; Reiman, 1999). Similarly, Mooney and Edwards (2001) provided a generalized typology of international community-based placements for social work programs and posited that the opportunity for reciprocity was typically high for service-learning.

## **Service-Learning**

Service-learning is situated within the traditional pedagogy of John Dewey's (1933, 1963) theories of experiential learning; he proposed that knowledge could best be retained when directly applied to real life experiences. This form of pedagogy has been defined as connecting traditional higher education with structured student learning experiences in community venues or through various civic engagements (Horowitz, Wong, & Dechello, 2010; Waterman, 1997). Three essential components for service learning were named as "preparation for the service through study and discussion; involvement in the service project; and reflection on the service and educational piece, both during and after participation" (Lewis, 2002, p. 656). In working with older persons, experience and interaction are important factors in developing interest, and this has been a consistent finding in the literature as one of the strongest predictors for future work in this area (Wang & Chonody, 2013).

Furthermore, Wang and Chonody (2013) reiterated that ageist attitudes created barriers in recruiting social workers in the field of gerontology and provided a systematic literature review of 19 studies which measured the attitudes of social workers' attitudes toward older adults. However, their review of the literature did not uncover positivistic studies involving pre-and post-tests standardized measurements of undergraduate social work students' attitudes toward older persons when participating in service-learning projects. Utilizing the Aging Semantic Differential Scale (Rosencranz & McNevin, 1969) as the pre- and post-test, the hypothesis employed in this study was that the students' attitudes would positively increase after the completion of such

projects. The hypothesis was viewed through the lens of social exchange theory, meaning that the students would maximize their benefits (e.g. reciprocity) while reducing costs (e.g. changing perspectives).

## **Method**

### *Procedure*

The service-learning project with older populations was a course requirement in the capstone Senior Seminar course for all undergraduate social work students in their last semester of studies and was weighted as 40% of their course grade. The classes were composed of two cohorts each semester located on two campuses, one urban and one more rural, at a regional midwestern public state university. As taking part in the study was voluntary, the students were informed that their involvement, or lack thereof, in the study would not have any effect upon their grade for the project. The data were collected for three consecutive years; students who elected to be involved in the study were asked to sign a consent form and complete the pre-test prior to the project and the post-test of the Aging Semantic Differential Scale after the completion of the project (Rsenclanz & McNevin, 1996).

### *Preparation through study and discussion*

In the first weeks of the semester, the instructors randomly assigned the students to small groups of three to four individuals. In conjunction with a relevant literature review, the groups were required to meet outside of class and discuss which topics could be presented in a service-learning educational presentation to older adults. Over the course of the semester and with oversight by their instructors, the students formulated 30 to 45 minute educational presentations that were provided to an older adult audience in public (e.g. library with public newspaper announcement) or private venues (e.g. adult day center).

Choosing a presentation site was dependent upon such factors as personal connections through relatives and work, practicum placements, and geographic locales that were centralized to the group members' campuses, homes, and work. Furthermore, the presentation topics were conducive to the location of the service-learning site. For example, the public library locations had themes for a more independent and mobile audience, while presentations for persons in convalescent centers were directed toward needs associated with more advanced stages of care. See Table 1 for a listing of various settings and presentational topics. To prepare, a minimum of one student per group served as a preliminary contact to go out into the community venues to gain information and knowledge regarding the potential audience participants and setting prior to the formalization of the presentation. When possible, this would involve the student(s) interacting with the older adults through personal

invitation to attend the forthcoming event and passing out printed flyers that announced the topic, date, time, and presenters' names for the scheduled presentation.

Table 1: Listing of various settings and presentational topics	
Presentation Venues	Presentation Topics
Convalescent Centers	Physical Fitness for Less Mobile Adults, Maintaining Mental Health
Public Libraries	Parenting the Second Time Around, Re-Entering the Workforce
Senior Citizen Centers	Nutrition for Older Adults, Pet Therapy
Senior Housing Projects	Taking Prescribed Medications Effectively, Positive Mental Health Factors
Senior Nutrition Sites	Living Wills and Advanced Directives
Local Churches	Dementia and Alzheimer's 101, Volunteering to Make a Difference

*Involvement in the service learning project*

On presentation day, the students were encouraged by their instructor to allow at least thirty minutes prior to and after the presentation to socially interact with their audience. This created initial meaningful engagement with the audience that assisted in reducing stress and anxiety for the presenters, many of whom had never before experienced a professional presentation outside of the classroom. In a similar vein, an often curious audience was provided the opportunity to learn more about the students while discovering that they were helping them with their coursework and grades by their

participation. Along with this interface, the audience was invited to score their review of the presentation on a disseminated assessment that asked them to rank the relevance of the topic, the delivery of the presentation, and how useful they found the information.

The course instructors attended each community presentation, and each group was graded via a formal oral presentation rubric that was provided to the students in advance to assist them in development of the presentation. To purposely address student motivation through cooperative learning and engaged pedagogy (Kim, Kim, & Svinicki, 2012), each member's success was dependent upon the group's success, and each student was required to take a part in the oral presentation. A group score was given with an assigned weight for each of the following: organization, content, adaptation, language, and delivery. To assist with reducing the possibility that one or two members would inherit the majority of the work, each group member confidentially scored their peers' participation in the process. Factors assessed were reliability, contributions, knowledgeability, and overall impression of each members' performance. The group score and the individual's peer score were then averaged by the instructor for the final individual scores for the project.

### *Reflection on the service*

Students were provided the opportunity to reflect upon their involvement in the educational projects during every stage of the service learning. Particularly, after the service-learning occurred and the post tests were administered, the instructors set aside class time for student reflections regarding their experiences. Discussion points involved what the students found as the rewards and challenges of their participation in the service learning to the personal meaning that this held to each individual, and whether or not they felt as if this assignment should continue to be a part of the course.

### Measures

*Attitudes toward aging adults.* The Aging Semantic Differential Scale (ASD) was used to measure participants' attitudes toward older adults in this study (Rosencranz & McNevin, 1969). Even though there is an updated version of the ASD scale redefined by Polizzi (2003), this study used the original version of the ASD (Rosencranz & McNevin, 1969) as Polizzi's scale was not able to prove its validity (Gonzales, Tan, & Morrow-Howell, 2010). The ASD is the most widely used instrument to measure peoples' perceptions and attitudes toward older adults (Matarese, Lommi, Pedone, Alvaro, & De Marinis, 2013). The Likert scale consists of a total of 32 bipolar adjective questionnaires in a 7-point scale from 1 as the most positive to 7 as the most negative. The range of ASD score is from 32 to 224, and lower scores indicate more positive attitudes, whereas higher scores represent negative attitudes. The neutral point for this scale is 128, which represents a neutral attitude. In terms of internal consistency for the ASD scale, the Cronbach' alpha was to be sufficient at 0.89 for this study.

## Results

Table 2 presents descriptive information on the participants ( $N=90$ ). The majority of participants were female (93%,  $n=84$ ) and ranged in age from 21 to 72 with a mean age of 33 years old ( $M=33$ ,  $SD=12$ ). The racial/ ethnic background of this study participants were: Caucasian ( $n=45$ , 50%), Native American ( $n=22$ , 24%), African American ( $n=13$ , 14%), Biracial ( $n=7$ , 8%), Hispanic/Latino ( $n=2$ , 2%), and Asian ( $n=1$ , 1%).

Forty-two participants (47%) reported that they had previously lived with their grandparents. Furthermore, 52 of the participants (58%) also had previous classes that addressed working with older adults, and 58 participants (64%) had previous assignments that addressed working with this population. In terms of work experience with older adults, 43 participants (48%) reported that they had experience in working with older adults and 16 participants (18%) were doing their practicums with this population. Twenty-two participants (24%) reported that they intended to specialize in social work practice with older adults after graduation.

Table 2 : Demographic information for participant (N=90)

Characteristics	Number (%)
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	6 (6.7%)
Female	84 (93.3%)
<b>Racial Background</b>	
African American	13 (14.4%)
Asian or Pacific Islander	1 (1.1%)
Caucasian	45 (50.0%)
Hispanic/ Latino	2 (2.2%)
Native American	22 (24.4%)
Biracial	7 (7.8%)
<b>Have you ever lived with your grandparents?</b>	
Yes	42 (46.7%)
No	48 (53.3%)
<b>Have you had previous classes that address working with older adults?</b>	
Yes	52 (57.8%)
No	38 (42.2%)
<b>Have you had previous assignments that addressed working with older adults?</b>	
Yes	58 (64.4%)
No	32 (35.6%)
<b>Do you have work experience in working with older adults?</b>	
Yes	43 (47.8%)
No	47 (52.2%)



Are you doing your practicum with older adults?

Yes 16 (17.8%)

No 74 (82.2%)

Do you intend to specialize in social work practice with older adults?

Yes 22 (75.6%)

No 68 (24.4%)

According to the study data, paired sample *t*-test indicated that there was a significant mean difference between pre and post test results,  $t(89) = 4.51; p < .001, d = 0.47$ . The sample means are displayed in Table 3, which shows the mean scores after completion of the service learning projects ( $M = 103.48, SD = 22.38$ ) were significantly lower than the mean scores before completion of the project ( $M = 113.27, SD = 19.61$ ).

Table 3 : Mean difference between pretest and posttest on the ASD

Outcome	Pretest		Posttest		95% Confidence Interval of Mean Difference		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Lower	Upper				
	113.27	19.61	103.48	22.83	5.48	14.09	89	4.51	<.001	0.47

## Discussion and Implications

The results of this study supported the hypothesis that a service-learning assignment incorporated into an undergraduate social work course could positively influence the attitudes of the student participants toward older persons. To expound, by taking on the role of educator, the students were able to create, prepare, and invest in educational projects that were meaningful and relevant to an older client population. Through their interaction with their audience, the roles became meaningful as these

exchanges allowed them to acknowledge the effects that their efforts had upon the service population.

The implication of including a service-learning project with older persons as part of a regular social work core course can impact gerontological social work education by increasing positive attitudes of students toward this population. This course assignment may be particularly influential on an undergraduate level when many students are still in the exploratory phase of the many facets of the profession. In addition, the benefit of creating a service-learning elective solely for the purpose of working with older adults would allow students the opportunity to explore a more in-depth, quality interactive, and reflective experience of the service-learning with older populations.

From a pedagogical perspective, Reiman (1999) stressed the need for educators to create a guided reflection framework for adult learners in role taking with attention given to combining knowledge and skills with caring and feelings through written discourse (e.g. students' journaling or portfolios). Moreover, Wang and Chonody's (2013) systematic review of the literature uncovered only one qualitative study regarding attitudes toward the aged. To include the students' perceptions of the rewards and challenges and the personal meaning that this project may have invoked for them is beyond the scope of the research design for this study. In this vein, we recognize that more insight is needed regarding qualitative and mixed method designs to capture the totality of service-learning and attitude influence toward older persons for social work students. Directions for future research would include a mixed methods design, which along with pre- and post-tests, would involve student focus groups designed to uncover major themes (Patton, 2002) of student service learning experiences. Additionally, advice and lessons learned offered by the course instructors include the following: First, be prepared to offer continued guidance and oversight as the instructor must be committed to the service-learning process and the quality delivery of the educational project. Second, as is a common dynamic with group projects, conflict between members can arise, which may result in an impasse that will need to be resolved earlier than later by the instructor. And finally, merging the knowledge, skills, and values of social work outside of the classroom into service-learning projects can be fun for students as well as instructors. Learning through new experiences can change attitudes; it can occur in a variety of community settings and does not have to be confined to practicum or internship.

## **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

The demographic data further support our hypothesis in that nearly half of the respondents had previously lived with their grandparents and had worked with the aged prior to participating in the service-learning project, yet there was still a significant mean difference in the positive attitudes between the pre- and post-test ( $t(89) = 4.51; p < .001, d=0.47$ ). Other significant strengths for this study included the diverse racial composition of the respondents, with half of the participants represented by Caucasians

and half of the participants represented by other racial identities. Of particular note is that nearly 25% of the respondents self-identified as Native American, a population that seldom has its own categorical representation due to low numbers of participants.

In spite of the strengths, there is a need for further improvement of the study. For example, the sample size of students was relatively small and may not be accurately generalizable to other regional social work program populations. Another limitation of the study was that the participants' responses were self-reported which could lead to the potential influence of socially desirable responses and various interpretations of the word item definitions (Amodio & Devine, 2006; Puhl & Brownell, 2006). Furthermore, the pre- and post-testing for each graduating cohort occurred in the same semester. Taking the same test repeatedly within a limited time could create a testing practice effect which may possibly improve our students' scores due to the familiarity with the measurements from the pre-test rather than our service-learning project (Bartels, Wegrzyn, Wiedl, Ackermann, & Ehrenreich, 2010).

## Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of evidence-based learning initiatives in gerontological social work education. As this population increases, more support is needed in social gerontological research, pedagogical development, best practices, and workforce recruitment and development. Moreover, this study has set a good example of how educational interactions with undergraduate social work students and older adults via service-learning projects, particularly involving role taking, could increase students' positive attitudes toward older adults and create an interest in working with this population. Although in its infancy, this study holds hope in making a contribution toward workforce recruitment with older adults.

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