ORIGINAL RESEARCH STUDIES

Intergenerational Connections: US College Students' Attitudes and Expectations Toward Older Adults and Aging in an Online Critical Community Engagement Project

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Abstract: We present a critically focused, semester-long community engagement project entitled *Intergenerational Connections* as a form of critical interpersonal and family communication pedagogy (CIFCP). The project utilized Zoom to connect small groups of undergraduate students in the US enrolled in a course on relational communication with older adults in a long-term care facility to dialogue about close relationships. We were interested in how dialogue across generations maintained or altered students' attitudes and expectations about communicating with older adults and analyzed student reflections before, during, and after the dialogues using a turning point analysis. The study was framed using Social Identity Theory (SIT) to show how young adults may label older adults as an outgroup contributing to negative stereotypes. We discuss two turning points related to *Perceptions of Aging and Developmental Changes* and *Understanding and Expectations of Relationships* and identify practical implications of the project for universities and communities.

Introduction

Many people hold misconceptions about older adults and aging that lead to stereotypes (Burnes et al., 2019). Young adults and older adults represent distinct identity groups who may view one another as different and part of an outgroup leading to interactions based on stereotypes (Lytle & Levy, 2017). To address stereotypes about older adults when held by young adults in US colleges, courses at the university

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can engage myths about aging and introduce students to older adults' life experiences (cf. Faulkner, 2022). Including community engagement projects in courses can facilitate interactions between old and young adults to address stereotypes (cf. Chase, 2011; Martin, 2019). In addition, technology is a tool that can be used to dispel myths about older adults and technology use and to connect young and old virtually, which was important during the period of COVID lockdowns when many older adults, particularly those in long-term care facilities, experienced isolation and loneliness (Seifert et al., 2021). In this article, we present a critically focused, semester-long project entitled *Intergenerational Connections* as a form of critical interpersonal and family communication pedagogy (CIFCP). The project utilized Zoom to connect small groups of US undergraduate students enrolled in a course on relational communication with older adults in a long-term care facility to dialogue about close relationships. Our goals for the project were (a) to facilitate intergenerational dialogue between young adult students and older adults, (b) to ease social isolation, and (c) to have students critically assess their stereotypes and attitudes about older adults through class readings, discussions, and interactions with an older adult. We were interested in how intergenerational dialogue maintained or altered students' attitudes and expectations about communicating with older adults and analyzed students' written reflections before, during, and after the dialogues.

Intergenerational Contact and Dialogue

This project connected older adults with college students for interaction that would benefit both generations through a critical community engagement service-learning project. Our project represented a collaboration between the university and community partners at a long-term care facility. The Director of Activities at the facility was a graduate from the university and expressed a need for residents to have social interaction, and the course instructor was looking for a way to engage students in an online course, so we co-created and implemented a mutually beneficial dialogue series. We chose to use online interaction via Zoom with older adults in this long-term care facility given the COVID lockdowns prevented in-person interaction. Many older adults who reside in long-term care facilities experience loneliness (Boamah et al., 2021), and they often report feelings of isolation due to limitations with their social connections and lack of access to technology for engaging with those outside their place of residence (Seifert et al., 2021). In addition, using technology to connect with older adults can also dispel myths that young adults might hold about the use of technology by older adults (Chase, 2011).

Research supports the approach that intergenerational contact is an effective way to dispel myths and stereotypes that young people hold about older adults and aging including older adults as boring, slow, conservative, uptight, and different (see, e.g., Burnes et al., 2019). Lytle and Levy (2017) conducted two online experiments that examined how education about aging and engagement with older adults impacted attitudes about older adults with 354 US undergraduates (study 1) and 505 participants from a national US sample aged 18–59 (study 2). Both studies demonstrated that attitudes toward older adults improved with increased education about aging and exposure to positive intergenerational interaction. In their meta-analysis examining 63 interventions that had been conducted to reduce ageism, Burnes et al. (2019) determined that programs that combined an educational component and intergenerational interactions had the largest impact on ageism. For both adolescent and young adult participants, this combined approach was associated with reduced ageism toward older adults. In another meta-analytic study with 713 independent samples, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found that intergroup contact reduces intergroup prejudice. The type of contact does matter as Cadieux et al.'s (2019) research with young adults showed that positive contact with older adults led to inclusion of the outgroup with the self. Thus,

closeness, relationship quality, questioning of negative stereotypes, and positive interactions influence intergroup communication.

Critical Interpersonal and Family Communication Pedagogy (CIFCP)

Interpersonal and family communication (IFC) teaching and research remains dominated by "postpositivist standards of theory, research design, analysis, validity, and writing" (Moore, 2017, pp. 1–2). Given that contemporary classrooms are culturally, linguistically, and developmentally more diverse, they require flexible and inclusive approaches to meet student needs. However, the IFC curriculum has historically privileged "the perspectives, experiences, and bodies of the majority" (Droser & Castaneda, 2021, p. 232). As a result, IFC textbooks and materials exclude the perspectives, experiences, and bodies of historically marginalized individuals and/or groups, including older people. The current project infused critical material and community engagement into the IFC classroom as a constitutive approach to IFC; students not only read about older adults' relationships, but they also reflected on their previous perceptions and expectations for interacting with them making sense of, critiquing, and building "better futures for their relationships and relating" (Faulkner, 2022, p. 1). We asked students to decenter what they thought they knew about older adults as "constitutive approaches to interpersonal communication studies allow students to connect the personal identities, relational interactions, and cultural understandings that are so vital to understanding the totality of interpersonal communication" (Manning, 2022, p. xiv). Moore and Manning (2019) make an argument for the use of politics in IFC work to develop the critical side. We adapted their idea of critical identity politics to highlight older people as a group worthy of study in the IFC classroom.

Thus, we used a CIFCP framework stemming from Critical Communication Pedagogy (CCP; Fassett & Warren, 2007). Critical communication pedagogy gained significant attention in the Communication discipline in the 1990s. Educators who use a CCP approach "begin with a premise of equity, inclusiveness, and reflexivity–arranging paradigms for disciplinary spaces to foster advancements of theory and pedagogy in concert with each other" (Zoffel, 2016, p. 162). CCP urges educators to examine and adapt practices that privilege some identities and perspectives, and at the same time, marginalize others. CCP also asks educators to consider why and how broader cultural discourses such as gender, race, sex, sexuality, and age continue to support and normalize traditional pedagogical practices to create a more inclusive academic space (Zoffel, 2016). Given that classrooms—whether face-to-face or online—are relational spaces, CIFCP draws on the broader tenets of CCP and uses them to focus on three considerations: transforming the status quo of teaching, challenging the idea that public and private domains are mutually exclusive, and engaging in reflective practices to make education more inclusive (Moore, 2017).

We designed *Intergenerational Connections* using CIFCP to increase students' critical consciousness about older adults and aging. In accordance with Kahl's (2010) argument about the importance of classroom-community connection, this project applied critical communication pedagogy so that students could see how communication scholarship matters through community engaged service learning beyond the classroom environment. Using CIFCP as a basis for this project means that dialogue can be used "more directly to solve the problem of responding to power . . . it will be able to accomplish the important goal of helping to make students more critically engaged citizens who recognize hegemony and work to respond to its presence in society" (Kahl, 2017, p. 120).

As a guiding pedagogical framework, CIFCP provides a way for IFC instructors to address the limitations mentioned above and transform their classrooms in diverse and inclusive ways. By combining IFC teaching with a critical perspective, instructors can transform the curriculum in a way that explores the diversity of relationships, challenges existing systems of privilege, and reconstructs what students learn and how they learn it (Droser & Castaneda, 2021). Instructors do this by teaching to transform, creating reflexive classrooms, and abolishing the public–private binary (Droser & Castaneda, 2021). These ideas guided the *Intergenerational Connections* project and in the section that follows, we discuss how we critically oriented Social Identity Theory and how community engagement projects are a form of CIFCP.

Social Identity and Intergroup Contact

Scholars who want to engage in critical work can do so in a multitude of ways. Moore (2017) notes that one of those ways encourages scholars to merge the tenets of critical theory with existing theories. Therefore, we joined critical theory with Social Identity Theory (SIT) in this project. SIT focuses on how individuals identify with distinct social groups and seek to maintain positive self-concepts through a process of categorizing ingroups and outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to Hogg & Reid (2006), "people derive a part of their self-concept from the social groups and categories they belong to" (p. 9). CIFCP's focus on dismantling the binary between public and private provides a unique lens to examine how one's self-concept and sense of belonging are shaped by discourses that circulate in their lives. SIT assumes that (a) individuals seek a positive self-concept (b) based on their social identities, which are established by feelings of belonging to distinct social groups, (c) individuals want to belong to groups that bolster their self-concept and will change their perceptions of a group they can't leave or join alternative groups, and (d) group members want to remain distinct and may exaggerate outgroup difference and ingroup similarities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Given the importance of reflexivity in CIFCP, we use SIT as a sensitizing framework in the current study and focus on how young adults may label older adults as an outgroup contributing to negative stereotypes and communication. In interaction, when individuals downplay the importance of intergroup differences, prejudice can be mitigated (Bigler & Liben, 2006). According to SIT, when an individual meets another individual, they use the other's characteristics to determine if that individual is an ingroup or outgroup member (Giles et al., 1991). Relationship quality and closeness influence this process. For example, Pecchioni and Croghan (2002) found in their study of college students and grandparents that "knowledge of the other increases the likelihood that interactions will be more interindividual than intergroup, at least for an older individual who is not only well-known to the young adult, but also considered to be close" (p. 725). Thus, a critical approach to SIT allowed the researchers to examine the nuances of students' perception of older adults as it related to their own respective identities. The *Intergenerational Connections* project was framed from a critical communication perspective to allow students to engage with cultural discourses and stereotypes about older adults and potentially transform their own expectations and attitudes about intergenerational communication.

Community Engagement Projects

Community engagement is a collaborative and reciprocal process in which members of an institution work with community partners to co-create and implement mutually beneficial activities. We argue that community engagement projects are an integral part of CIFCP as knowledge is co-created between the students and the community benefitting all those involved (cf. Kahl, 2017). Participating in community

engagement projects makes students active members in the community. Connecting the intellectual, social, and emotional facets of learning, such as in the *Intergenerational Connections* project, benefits students and community members (Pasquesi, 2020). Additionally, community engagement projects are beneficial to the university because they often reflect university goals such as "developing and sustaining community-university partnerships built on co-knowledge production, dissemination and utilisation [of knowledge]; and an ethos of trust, respect, equal voice and deliberation, reciprocity, solidarity and mutual benefits" (Mtawa, 2019, p. 1). Other benefits of community engagement projects are the real-life learning students experience and the potential for transforming staid and stereotypical assumptions.

Based on our interest in intergenerational dialogue between students and older adults as well as community engagement projects as CIFCP practice, we offer the following research questions:

RQ1: Did the experience of engaging in intergenerational dialogue with older adults transform students' attitudes about aging and communicating with older adults? If so, how?

RQ2a: What expectations did students have about engaging in dialogue with older adults?

RQ2b: How were these expectations met, challenged, and/or transformed after engaging in dialogue with an older adult?

RQ3: How did students' reflexivity about their communication with older adults disrupt cultural discourses about aging?

Method

Undergraduate students in a Relational Communication class participated in a community-based engagement project during Spring 2021 called "*Intergenerational Connections*" in which they met with older adults in a long-term care facility via Zoom for four themed 75-minute dialogues about close relationships (see Faulkner et al., 2022). The project was a collaboration between a gerontologist (fourth author), a communication professor (first author), and the Director of Activities at a long-term care facility. The team discussed the needs of residents and students for social interaction and collaboratively designed a mutually beneficial dialogue project. In addition, the instructor wanted students to get actual experience talking with older adults to make course content relatable and to infuse criticality into the curriculum. The director asked for volunteers at the facility and the instructor built the project into the course design. The first author randomly placed students in six small groups of four to five people and assigned them an older adult conversation partner ($N = 9$) from the long-term care facility. The themed dialogues, which reflected class content, included (1) Getting to Know You, (2) The Importance of Relationships and Communication, (3) Friendships, and (4) Romantic Relationships and Relational Maintenance. Before the first dialogue, students and older adults filled out questionnaires that they shared with one another to help build rapport. Sample questions asked about hobbies, vocation/career plans, favorite animal, and skills. Before the second, third, and fourth dialogues, in their small groups, students wrote out around 10 questions related to the dialogue theme that they could talk about with their older adult partners, though students were able to ask other questions and respond to the flow of the dialogue. This planning helped students to get conversations going and to feel more confident in the dialogue sessions. Examples of preplanned questions follow: Who is in your social network? How often

do you talk to those people? How would you describe an important relationship versus a less important one? Let's talk a little about your childhood. Tell me about your friendships when you were a child. How have you kept in contact with friends during COVID? How has that affected your relationships?

During the dialogues, students took turns asking questions and took notes to use in their reflections. For privacy, the dialogue sessions were not recorded.

As part of the Relational Communication course in which this project was situated, students read research about older adults and close relationships, older adults and social support, relationship processes in social networks, friendships, and romantic relationships and dating in later life. The fourth author, a gerontologist, gave a lecture on working with older adults and elderspeak (i.e., stereotypical age-adapted speech style) before dialogues began. Students used this material in class discussions, in the individual reflections they wrote after each dialogue, and at the conclusion of the project. We were interested in students' experiences of interacting with older adults in addition to their attitudes and expectations about older adults; therefore, we examined their reflections about their perceptions of the interactions and the *Intergenerational Connections* project. We obtained IRB approval to examine students' reflections. To conduct this examination, we downloaded student reflections from the online course management system and used a case number for each set of reflections to maintain student anonymity.

Reflection Journals

Given our interest in how dialogue across generations maintained or altered students' attitudes and expectations about older adults, each student wrote an individual reflection journal after every Zoom dialogue they had with their older adult partner. In these reflection journals, students reflected on the dialogue and on their experiences, beliefs, and attitudes. When students wrote their reflections, they did not know we would ask to include these in a research project as we wanted to minimize social desirability. Before the project began, students completed the Fraboni Scale of Ageism (FSA) as an attitude pre-assessment (Fraboni et al., 1990). They also completed the FSA after the dialogues were over and used their scores on the scale and their reflections to critically examine stereotypes, expectations, and attitudes about older adults, noting how their attitudes about communicating with older adults were confirmed or challenged during the project.

In the reflections, they provided a dialogue summary, their expectations before the dialogue and if and how they were challenged, surprising occurrences, anticipated challenges and how they dealt with them, what they learned about the dialogue topic, and if they considered the dialogue to be successful. We asked students to provide details from the conversation through direct and paraphrased quotations and to reference research and class material to help them support their observations and assertions.

After the project ended, students wrote an individual final self-assessment reflection in which they discussed their experiences with the project and reviewed their four reflections. Specifically, students wrote about what they learned about relationships and their older adult partner, rewards and challenges, how the dialogues influenced their attitudes about aging and communicating with older adults, and advice they would give to students completing a similar assignment. In addition, students answered questions about their attitude change, change in perceptions about older adults, and if and how their expectations about interacting with older adults were confirmed or challenged.

Participants

We asked the 34 students in the Relational Communication class taught by the first author if we could use their five reflections from the "*Intergenerational Connections*" project. All students consented and received extra credit. Seventy-four percent of students (n = 25) completed a voluntary demographics survey; participants included 12 men and 13 women aged 19–25 years old (M = 21.44 years), and none of our participants had children. There were 10 third-year students, 13 fourth-year students, and 1 fifth-year student. Six participants identified as Black/African American, and 19 students identified as White. Twenty-one students identified as straight/heterosexual, two students identified as bisexual, one student identified as queer, and one student identified as asexual. Most students (n = 23) majored in Communication; one student majored in Tourism, Hospitality, and Event Management; and one student majored in Business Administration. These two non-Communication majors minored in Communication. There was one Army veteran in the class.

Analysis

We analyzed the five reflections (Journal 1 N = 34; Journal 2 N = 33; Journal 3 N = 31; Journal 4 N = 32; final reflection N = 31) using inductive thematic analysis, which is "the process of identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling primary patterns in data" (Faulkner & Atkinson, 2023, p. 71). This process entails discovering, uncovering, and creating meaning from data through a process of engagement. The authors met in three sessions to discuss analysis and coding. First, we engaged in an open coding procedure in which we used our research questions based on our theoretical framework as sensitizing concepts to guide our initial read-through of a set of 10 student reflections (n = 50) noting themes that could be used for further analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). "The analyst brings a sensitizing concept to the data to use as a reference point and directions for sorting through data; the concept helps guide a researcher by focusing their attention on how the concept is manifested in the data as they code" (Faulkner & Atkinson, 2023, p. 79). Using SIT as a theoretical framework, we focused on expectations that young adults—as a social group—have about older adults as a different social group. We asked if and how students' attitudes and expectations changed after engaging in intergenerational dialogues and noted the topics that students discussed in the dialogues, their expectations, surprises, and what they learned about close relationships. We found that their reflections contained turning points, or shifts, in their attitudes toward older adults; therefore, we framed the analysis from a turning point perspective because it allowed us to illuminate student attitude change about communicating with older adults.

A turning point is a type of occurrence, situation, or event that relates to changes in relationships and centers on a critical moment or moments of importance (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Graham (1997) suggests that "turning points provide insight into important relational dynamics by bringing certain characteristics of the relationship into focus" (p. 351). Further, turning points can prompt individuals to re-evaluate what a relationship means to them. Through this re-evaluation and reflection, individuals can determine their continued role and investment in a relationship (Graham, 1997). By having students practice reflexive journaling throughout the duration of the project, we had a record of students' perceptions on aging and relationships over time. Therefore, after doing open coding, we used the concept of turning points to identify and examine the moments of change that students experienced about aging and communicating with older adults in further coding. The identification and examination of these turning points allowed us to witness the evolution of students' critical consciousness, which is necessary for social transformation.

During the second coding meeting, we used our initial coding and observations about turning points to develop a code book with theme definitions and examples. The codes included *turning point themes* (aging, relationships, expectations, developmental change) that involved *dialogue change* (a move from Q and A to more conversational), *experience with older adults* (past and present), *attitude change* (about older adults, ageism), *expectations* (aging, communication patterns, stereotypes and how they were challenged), and *developmental changes* (conceptualizations of relationships and aging). Using the turning points we identified, we developed the following three questions to guide our subsequent analysis: (1) *How have the dialogues helped students see themselves and their relationships in a different way?* (2) *What are turning point themes related to aging, relationships, expectations, and developmental change?* and (3) *What changes are present in student attitudes about communicating with older adults?*

Next, we coded the same set of 10 reflections from the first meeting using the code book and our three guiding turning point questions. In the third meeting, we discussed our coding process, compared our coding, and worked out any disagreements in discussion. We then divided the remaining reflections and conducted a turning point analysis to identify moments of transition (i.e., moments of surprise, challenged expectations) along with a spectrum of turning points ranging from broad cultural discourses and stereotypes related to aging and ageism to specific personal experiences.

Findings

During the dialogues, students had the opportunity to share their experiences with someone from a different age group and hear older adults' perspectives on friendships, maintaining relationships, death, children, dating, marriage, love, and the importance of close relationships over the years. Students talked with their dialogue partners about topics such as meeting friends and maintaining those relationships, how you know if you are ready for an intimate relationship, and the importance of taking chances to do the things you desire. For example, one student wrote that Louis talked about his wife, children, relationship advice and how to maintain a long relationship and what he did throughout his relationships to maintain them and keep a strong relationship. A few more subtopics were relationship advice on how to know if it is infatuation or love, weddings, and children (6461). Overall, students found the dialogues to be rewarding, challenging, and worth the effort as reflected in this student's comment:

> The most rewarding part of these interactions is . . . how this . . . truly changed my mindset on the topic of building relationships with older adults . . . I will use these experiences and what I learned and connect it to my personal life to try and build better relationships with the older adults in my life. (692)

Many students told us that they intended to seek out opportunities to interact with older adults in the future after having participated in the dialogues. Their attitudes about communicating with older adults and aging changed to be more positive because of the engagement that the project provided.

We organize our findings around two turning points, which were moments when students experienced transition, surprise, and challenges to their assumptions and expectations about close relationships and communicating with older adults. These turning points were related to aging, relationships, expectations, and developmental change moving from broad cultural discourses and stereotypes related to aging and ageism to specific personal experiences.

Turning Point: Perceptions of Aging and Developmental Changes

We asked in **RQ1:** Did the experience of engaging in intergenerational dialogue with older adults transform students' attitudes about aging and communicating with older adults? If so, how? Students experienced turning points when they realized that some of their beliefs and stereotypes about older adults did not mirror their actual interactions. This turning point centered on how interaction with older adults challenged students' perceptions of age and aging and includes the themes of *confrontation and challenging of stereotypes* and *stereotypes of aging as barriers to developing close relationships.* Students found that older adults were not stereotypically boring, slow, and uptight; none of the students' stereotypes about older adults were confirmed. Over the course of the dialogues, students learned to enjoy the interactions with their dialogue partners as they discovered they shared similarities in interests, concerns, and emotions. They found that interacting with older adults who were not their grandparents was meaningful and different in positive ways. They wrote about the value of respecting older adults and their perspectives and embracing difference rather than being afraid of it or dismissive.

Confrontation and Challenging of Stereotypes

Students wrote that they learned to enjoy their interactions with their dialogue partners because they discovered that they shared similar interests and values, and they learned that their stereotypes of older adults were wrong. Students shared how they had stereotyped older adults as uptight, reserved, uninteresting, and different and were often surprised and delighted to discover how wrong they were. Their dialogue partners traveled, watched movies, and enjoyed hanging out with friends, just like they did. One student was surprised to learn that their dialogue partner, Anita, hated cooking and did not know everything about her grandchildren, crushing the stereotype of grandma baking cookies for her grandchildren.

The project prompted students to confront the stereotypes they held about older adults. For instance, one student stated that "I did not hold older adults to a very high standard before I took this class. I just thought they were old and could not do very much" (3999). Similarly, another student noted:

> I had this mental image in my head that senior citizens were very uptight and reserved indi-viduals that didn't want to tell complete strangers about their personal lives . . . I can safely say that my perceptions on senior citizens have changed . . . for the better after having four dialogue sessions with Carol. (1796)

Students wrote that spending time with their dialogue partners changed their negative stereotypes.

> When we started the interview with Betty, I was not thrilled to talk to her. I thought that she would just express her opinions . . . and would be a snotty old lady . . . this attitude has changed. After getting to know Betty, I realized she was just like everyone else . . . an ordinary person with differences. (3952)

Some students claimed that their attitudes did not shift much as they liked talking to older people such as their grandparents before the project, though their attitudes became even more positive after the project. For example:

My attitude about older adults changed from the beginning to the end of the project because I had more sympathy and compassion towards them at the end. I had always talked to my grandparents but this was different to me . . . a complete stranger and getting to know him in his life. (6461)

Other students wrote that they found talking with older people was interesting and worth the time and effort and something they would seek out in the future. Their attitudes had changed for the better. No student indicated that their stereotypes of older adults were confirmed. One student wrote: "I learned that I find older people very interesting and enjoy talking to them about whatever it is that they want to talk about. I just find their history to be very interesting" (7834). Other students were interested to learn that older adults experienced some of the same vulnerabilities they did: "The experience of engaging in dialogue taught me that older adults are prone to the same things that younger adults are as far as emotions" (9692).

After confronting their stereotypes, many students learned to see the value in interacting and becoming friends with older adults. Students discussed how "old is just another label" (7633) and the benefit of seeing older adults as sources of knowledge because of their life experience. One student wrote that "we should be able to learn so much from them if they are given the opportunity to speak and the younger generations can actually take the time to listen to them" (7834). Another student stated that

the primary thing that I learned about older adults . . . is just how important and knowledge-able older adults are in our modern world. I feel that older adults . . . kind of get pushed to the backburner and deemed as irrelevant by society. (1736)

Once students recognized that they held these stereotypes, they experienced a turning point and started to adopt a more inclusive mindset relative to older adults. They learned to value their perspectives and see aging in a new and different light:

Some people judge and treat older adults a certain way just because of their age and I was one of them but that is not the right way to treat older adults . . . We must show them respect and I think we should always have an open mind while communicating with them. (3999)

In another example, a student discussed how their dialogues not only helped them question their perception of age, but also helped them form a new perspective:

I think that the most rewarding part about the interactions was being able to see someone who is much older than me share the same outlook on life as I do. I was always under the impression that most older people are largely religious, so seeing someone who was atheist/agnostic and thought about death the same way as I do was very eye-opening. It gave me a new outlook on getting older, and definitely gave me a new perspective of how some older people view life. (5395)

Stereotypes of Aging as Barriers to Developing Close Relationships

Students' attitudes changed for the better over the course of the semester because of the time they spent together with their adult dialogue partners. Over time, students became more invested in talking with their partner and learning more about their lives. One student remarked that "I felt as if we were doing

good to her by letting her know she's not just 'old' and 'forgotten' to us" (2041). They got to see their conversational partner as a person. Students learned about ageism and discovered an appreciation for hearing about the lived experiences of older adults. This student observed:

> I was surprised to learn that older people don't really play too big of a role in society. To me it seems that not a lot of people take them seriously most of the time, and just brush them off. Especially with COVID going on, they don't ever have any contact. However, it seems that whenever there is a sickness going around, the elders are put on the priority list, which I find to be a good thing, but in everyday life, it seems like they are not as acknowledged as they should be. (5331)

Additionally, another student reflected about how they felt comfortable talking to their dialogue partner even with the difference in age:

> I learned how communicating with people based on age can be different, but it doesn't have to be. We expect age differences to greatly affect our form of speech and topic discussion like night and day, but I was able to talk to Louis about things I talk to friends and family about. (3949)

Through these dialogues, some students realized how stereotypes and assumptions from cultural discourse shaped their attitudes about communicating with older adults. One student wrote about how they formed opinions about older people because of those stereotypes and assumptions rather than the individuals themselves: "I believe that my attitudes changed due to the fact that I largely did not know the reality of what older adults experience." Another student wrote:

> I think that my attitude changed because I was able to get a real experience that was enjoyable. Most of my perceptions and preconceived notions that influenced my attitudes came from societal stereotypes and lack of personal experiences, so when I was able to change that, my attitude changed as well . . . I would say my concept of "old" was anybody over the age of like 65, but then I got to meet John who is in his late 90's, and it changed my thought process. (4302)

Another example shows the power of media influences on stereotypes:

> This entire experience has shown that there is nothing wrong with having different mindsets and experiences than someone. I often see in the media that old people are always portrayed as full of hate and anger towards the world, so while I was defensive and prepared for that possibility, it didn't inhibit me from proving to myself that there was no possibility of that. The whole time with Bob he just talked about life and left an impression that his ideology was similar to mine: It's important to be who you are, and to not hurt anyone while you do. (5395)

Turning Point: Understanding and Expectations of Relationships

We asked in **RQ2a:** What expectations did students have about engaging in dialogue with older adults? and in **RQ2b:** How were these expectations met, challenged, and/or transformed after engaging in dialogue with an older adult? We also asked in **RQ3**: How did students' reflexivity about their communication

with older adults disrupt cultural discourses about aging? Students experienced turning points when they experienced change in their understanding and expectations of relationships within and across generations after engaging in dialogue with an older adult. Students questioned their assumptions about relationships such as age differences being unusual and bad. They learned that building a relationship with their dialogue partners meant gaining trust and reciprocal self-disclosure. The dialogues challenged students' expectations, specifically the idea that older adults would share their experiences without a relational foundation and that interactions with people of an older age cohort would not be like interactions with individuals in their own cohort. Over the course of the dialogues, students shifted their view of them as just a course project to viewing the interactions as vital to developing relationships with older adults. This questioning of assumptions and expectations was a direct result of dialogue, which is a key component in CIFCP and community engagement where students develop their critical consciousness in actual interactions. Four key ideas emerged from this turning point: *relationships as a process*, *dialogue as a mutual endeavor*, *challenges to relationship assumptions and expectations*, and *transition from project-mindset to relationship-mindset*.

Relationships as a Process

The first thing that students remarked on was how building a relationship with their dialogue partner was a process that began with the first meeting and progressed through repeated interaction. By the end of this project students understood that building relationships takes time. Before the first dialogue, some students assumed that their first meeting would be full of self-disclosure and that their dialogue partner would just regale them with funny stories:

> Going into the dialogue, I was expecting to have more of a conversation than we did. Norma took a little time to warm up to us and understand that we were there to have a conversation with her and get to learn about each other. (3913)

Students realized that they first needed to work to develop a relationship with their older adult and learn about one another before the relationship could progress. For example, one student reflected:

> I feel as if my group members and I are starting to build a relationship with her. I can see the conversations with her flow more smoothly. At first the conversations were harder, sort of awkward, and dry. I can see so much growth with these dialogues from the first one to now. (3923)

In another reflection, a student explained how they began to understand the process of developing a relationship while embracing the differences between themselves and their dialogue partner:

> I have been learning what it takes to build a true relationship with someone from scratch and what steps you should take to create that comfortability with each other that then can lead to a friendship. Betty and I are complete opposites. She is old, I am young; she's white and I am black. She grew up [with] a privileged life. I did not. She is a woman, I am male, and the list goes on. Despite us being opposites and living different lives, I have learned there are still ways to find commonalities between people who are different from you and ways to connect and build that friendship. (692)

Dialogue as a Mutual Endeavor

Students learned that dialogue is a mutual endeavor and that sharing their own experiences led to better conversation. After the first dialogue, students experienced a turning point when they realized they were expecting their partner to do all the relational work. For instance, students reflected about their decision to also be open about themselves during the dialogues by stating that "I am willing to share with her a bit about myself as well so that it won't be so one-sided" (3923), and "I'd also recommend putting in the effort to make the conversation free flowing, as it helps the dialogues not seem as rigidly structured interviews and awkward" (3949).

In another reflection a student wrote about the evolution of their dialogues, specifically their shift to two-way communication: "I think we will keep making improvements when talking to Ms. Anita. My favorite part about it is that we share our relationship experiences with her as well, so it doesn't just seem like an interview, more conversation-like" (3362). Similarly, we can see in the following reflection that this student gained a better understanding of the reciprocal nature of relationships: "I learned that relationships require work from both sides of the party and that it is important to keep in touch with the people that you really care about because you might regret it in the future" (6152).

Challenges to Assumptions and Expectations About Relationships

The dialogues challenged students' assumptions about what a relationship looks like, from age differences to who can be friends. For instance, one student reflected about how the dialogues challenged their assumption that relational partners would be the same age: "I typically think that people are fairly close in age when they pick their lifelong partner, so it was surprising that there was almost 10 years between the two of them [dialogue partner and their spouse]" (4057). Students also learned that friendships could occur across generations. We can see this emerge in the following reflection excerpt:

> I believe the dialogue was successful in terms of getting to know someone of older age and the experiences they went through. I think during these dialogues . . . [we] were able to teach some things to older people, and they taught us things as well. So, I think the dialogues were very productive and gave both parties the opportunity to kind of go out of their comfort zone and attempt to build a relationship with someone that is separated by years of age. (9692)

Students learned that while it is normal to have expectations of relationships, those expectations should not restrict the growth of the relationship:

> The most important thing I learned about relationships from these dialogues is first how you should not judge how a dialogue will go until you put in the effort to talk and get to know the other person you are having a dialogue with. It is extremely important also to be open before engaging in dialogues attempting to build a relationship. It's important to be open because everybody is different, and you never truly know how a person is until you attempt to learn. (9692)

Another student wrote about how relationships, and the roles of the people in those relationships, can change over time:

> I do think that the relationship he shared with his daughter was one that will stick with me. He told us that he began to see his daughter differently over the course of their lives. At first,

he saw her just as his daughter, and showed her the love that came with a healthy relationship between a father and daughter. However, he told us that this changed over time, and as they got older, he started to see her more as an equal, and even as a friend. (5395)

The students' experiences with older adults prior to this project, such as their relationship with grandparents or a visit to a nursing home, influenced their expectations of the dialogues. For instance, one student reflected about how their relationships with their grandparents shaped their expectations about their partner prior to the dialogues:

Most of the older people that I have talked to, like my grandparents, seem to just love to talk about anything, everything, and sometimes nothing in particular. I expected the same kind of thing from Betty which is why I thought the whole thing would be much smoother. (4057)

In another example, a student reflected about how their expectations about the way older adults converse did not match the dialogue partner:

I always thought that older adults loved to talk about anything and everything, but I felt as if that was not the case with Anita. However, she did a great job at creating conversation with us, asking us our names, majors, and what we do for a living. (9692)

At the start of the project, students expressed feelings of nervousness about older adults, skepticism about finding value in the dialogues, and doubt about having similarities with someone from a different age cohort. One student wrote that "going into this whole idea of communicating with elders in a nursing home frightened me. I love talking and getting to know people, but there is something about older people that makes me nervous" (5331). By the end of the dialogues, one student realized that their expectations of their dialogue partner did not match up with reality: "These older adults are not as intimidating as you might think. They just want to have a conversation with you" (3952).

Students also learned about how relationships are influenced by various factors. These factors, whether situational or personal, can cause challenges that prevent a relationship from meeting one's expectations. For instance, a student reflected about how their dialogues helped them to better understand the complex nature of relationships:

I think the biggest thing that I learned about relationships from engaging in these dialogues is that sometimes they are hard, because of differences in proximity, differences of opinion, different likes and/or dislikes, but they always seem to be worth the work that you put into them. (4057)

Another student reflected on how their relationship with their dialogue partner ended unexpectedly because of health reasons: "I thought we would be talking with Betty until the end and the fact that she was put on hospice prior to us finishing the project was definitely unexpected and a little off putting and sad for me" (7834).

Transition From a Project-Mindset to Relationship-Mindset

As the project progressed, some students shifted from viewing the dialogue as merely a class project to viewing the dialogues as a means to develop personal relationships. Over time, students experienced less

nervousness and became comfortable talking with their dialogue partners. Many students wrote that they looked forward to the dialogue sessions and even enjoyed them. The class project became more than just a class project as this student noted:

> I looked at the whole project as just a class project and nothing more. But after a couple meetings and actually just talking, it changed my attitude to wanting to know more in a way of all sorts of things instead of just staying on a script of questions and themes and talking about even other things like a casual conversation. (2041)

Looking back on the project, students realized how their mindsets changed from the first to final dialogue. One student reflected about how they initially did not have much interest in the project because of their other obligations, however, that perspective changed over time:

> I was not too interested at the beginning because I had other things in my life going on with school and work and just my own social life. However, by the end of all this and even by the third meeting I started to enjoy it because not everybody just gets to be able to meet someone they have never met before with an age difference and learn things from them. (2041)

Similarly, a student reflected about how their approach to the dialogues shifted from uncertainty to excitement:

> Going into the third and fourth meetings I definitely felt comfortable in talking to Carol, from there on out I knew we would have great conversations the rest of the semester. It was definitely a formative experience from the first two conversations to the last two. My opinion changed drastically, I went from being on edge and unsure, to being excited to see what we would talk about that day. (3932)

Another student described how much they gained from the dialogues despite their initial view of the dialogues as *just a project*:

> I kind of just saw [this project] as another assignment that I was doing for class, and I'd have a decent time but that was all. However, now I feel that I was able to gain more knowledge objectively and subjectively when it comes to older adults and life. (3994)

Additionally, a student reflected about their investment in their relationship with their dialogue partner and how they wish that their relationship with their dialogue partner could continue:

> Before I started the interviews with Betty, I was not looking forward to the interviews. I didn't think that anything could come from the interviews. I thought that they were just something I had to do in order to pass the class. By the end of the interviews, I realized that I learned a lot from them. I started to wish that we had more interviews. I didn't realize that we had invested ourselves in Betty. These interviews became something I wanted to do. I wanted to learn more about people, and to know other people's stories. (3952)

As these reflections show, the dialogues with older adults prompted students to alter their approach to the project as merely *class work* and really focus on the chance to connect with someone that they would not ordinarily have the opportunity to connect with in their day-to-day lives.

To summarize, we found that students experienced turning points in their assumptions and expectations about close relationships and communicating with older adults throughout the *Intergenerational Connections* project. These findings demonstrate that community engagement has the power to help people challenge and transform their perspectives about people they perceive to belong to different social groups.

Discussion

The goals of the *Intergenerational Connections* project were to facilitate dialogue between young adult students and older adults, to ease social isolation, and to have students critically assess stereotypes and attitudes about communicating with older adults. We were interested in how intergenerational dialogue maintained or altered students' attitudes and expectations about older adults and aging and analyzed student reflections before, during, and after the dialogues. We designed the project using the CIFCP goals of (a) teaching to transform, (b) creating reflexive classrooms, and (c) abolishing the public private binary to foster transformation by encouraging students to question dominant stereotypes of aging and older adults and their assumptions about close relationships (Droser & Castaneda, 2021). We also critically situated SIT to better understand the complexities of identity when communicating with individuals in different social groups.

Stereotype Challenges and Attitude Change

This project transformed the classroom space by allowing students to talk *with* older adults and not only *about* them. Given that older adults remain a primarily silenced group in the United States, this project centered the relationships and relational perspectives of older adults so that students gained a better understanding of the lived experiences of this marginalized group (Chase, 2011; Martin, 2019) as well as an increased awareness of ageism (Kogen & Schoenfeld-Tacher, 2018). *Intergenerational Connections* increased students' critical awareness about older adults and aging by having them engage with course content alongside real-life interactions. When students engaged in dialogue with older adults, they found there were more ingroup and outgroup similarities versus differences. For example, students were pleased to learn that their dialogue partners liked some of the same movies they did, and some even liked drinking beer. These dialogues helped students to challenge the stereotypes that they had about older adults which supports research by Burnes et al. (2019) that education *and* interaction together had the greatest impact on intergenerational interaction. In addition, this project supports findings that engaging in positive interactions with older adults can result in reduced ageism and prejudice (Lytle & Levy, 2017; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Over the course of the semester, the interactions that students had with older adults became more intergroup because of the relationships they developed (cf. Pecchioni & Croghan, 2002). Through these dialogues, students heard real-life stories about friendships and their importance for personal growth.

We identified and examined turning points where students experienced moments of change and the transformation of critical consciousness about aging and communicating with older adults. As the project progressed, students gradually experienced turning points or shifts in mindset and attitude. Students reported changes in attitudes that were *more positive*, even students who began the project with positive attitudes toward older adults. This supports research that the best way to dispel stereotypes is to have interactions with people who are members of the stereotyped group (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The main reason student attitudes changed was getting to spend time with an older person, learning about

their experiences, and learning that older adults are real people with whom one can have a relationship. Because the dialogues allowed students to dispel the stereotypes that they held about older adults through direct engagement with an *individual* rather than an *idea* (e.g., older adults are boring), students were able to critique their identity as a young person (ingroup) and the identity they initially ascribed to older adults (outgroup) (Giles et al., 1991). By breaking down the barriers of these perceived social groups, students were able to learn about older adults and their identities in ways that were not constrained by negative stereotypes.

Students learned about relationships from their own subjective interactions with older adults. The stereotype that older adults love to talk and share their experiences fueled some students' assumption that they would not need to work to make their dialogue partners comfortable. A CIFCP approach to community engagement teaches students that by being vulnerable and sharing in the discomfort of a new relationship with the dialogue partner "they showcase their humanity" which can encourage partners to do the same (Droser & Castaneda, 2021). Students discovered that they had to work to develop relationships with their dialogue partners and learn about one another just like with other relationships in their lives. Many students described how the first dialogues made them nervous and how they were sometimes awkward. They felt nervous about interacting with someone new, but even more, someone who was older. After a dialogue or two, students saw their relationships grow and conversations flowed more smoothly.

CIFCP and Community Engagement

As Johnston and Taylor (2018) note, one of the biggest strengths of community engagement projects is the ability to have students interact with disempowered and silent community groups for the greater good. Droser and Castaneda (2021) suggest that coursework that focuses on identity and implicit biases can collapse the public–private binary. Therefore, we asked students to reflect on their identity and examine the biases they held before interacting with their older adult as well as after each interaction and the end of the project. Many students acknowledged that they held biases against older adults. Community engagement projects can equip students with tools to confront these biases, such as self-efficacy, commitment to activism and service, and leadership (Astin et al., 2000). This project enabled students to confront their biases and dispel myths regarding aging and older adults (Chase, 2011; Martin, 2019). Many students remarked that older adults were more interesting, vibrant, and similar to them than they had thought. Overall, students learned about the importance of listening across age and experience, the benefit of connecting with those who are not your age cohort, and the fact that we all need connection to ease social isolation and loneliness.

Practical Implications

The *Intergenerational Connections* project collapsed the binary between classroom and community and bridged the gap between academic learning and praxis. Students connected with older adults in their community and created meaningful relationships which led to co-created knowledge between the students and their dialogue partners. Students challenged stereotypes about older adults as they began to see older adults as people and intergroup communication predominated. Given the importance of connecting classroom content with real-world issues, our findings can be applied in university and community settings. For instance, instructors can design intergenerational dialogue projects in person or online that encourage positive interaction and relationship development. Our project design of

education and interaction demonstrates how connecting relationally with someone of a different group can help individuals embrace the difference between those groups. By embracing these differences, people can identify similarities and question stereotypes. Beyond fostering positive intergenerational connections, instructors can implement this type of dialogue project in classes that seek to dispel stereotypes of other marginalized groups. In the community, instructors and community members can set up monthly dialogue groups where conversations can be used to confront the stereotypes that people have about other social groups.

Limitations and Future Directions

This project had several limitations. Given that students received grades for this project, it is possible that the self-report data reflected what students assumed their professor wanted to read. To mitigate this potential weakness, students were not graded on the specific content of their reflections, but the thoughtfulness and depth of their responses. In addition, students did not know we would ask to analyze their reflections for research when they were writing to minimize social desirability. Another limitation is that we only explored the stereotypes that students held about older adults. Future research can also examine the stereotypes that older adults hold about aging and young people and how these stereotypes inform their interactions.

Conclusion

The pedagogical purpose of the *Intergenerational Connections* project was for students to examine stereotypes, practice reflexivity, and apply class concepts outside the classroom. Students experienced how communication scholarship matters through community engagement beyond the class context (Kahl, 2010). Further, this project served the community by increasing interpersonal interactions to combat COVID-19 isolation and loneliness in individuals who live in long-term care facilities. This project allowed students to understand how their stereotypes provided the foundation of their interactions with older adults and to challenge and dismantle those stereotypes in real time, which is foundational to a critical communication pedagogy approach (Kahl, 2017). Students had a space to acknowledge and examine stereotypes and ways that they might manifest in their interpersonal interactions beyond the classroom. By bridging the gap between classroom and community, students reflected on how their own experiences, perspectives, and worldviews influenced their engagement with a marginalized population.

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