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COMMENTARY

Intergenerational program processes impact outcomes

Intergenerational programs (IGP) intentionally link younger persons (usually 24 years of age and younger) with adults (usually 50 years of age and older) through shared programming intended to achieve mutual benefit for members of nonadjacent generations. They frequently involve skill-building, mutual support, and friendship formations. IGP are diverse, reflecting the varied participant and community needs leaders aim to achieve by uniting the generations. For example, a NY Times article (Stern, 2021) recently highlighted Bridge Meadows in Portland, Oregon, which offers affordable housing to low income older adults in exchange for support to others in this residential community – grandfamilies and families adopting foster children. While intergenerational housing remains unique, other IGP frequently involve the colocation of a childcare or preschool with an adult day services or residential care program. Increased interest in IGP among the public, funders, and policy makers is building intergenerational momentum (Butts and Jarrott, 2021). Those looking to join the movement should be equipped with evidence-based practices, but these can be hard to find.

While benefits of IGP predominate in the literature (Jarrott, 2011), studies are often limited by small sample sizes, lack of valid measures, and inattention to implementation protocol. Some theoretical frameworks predominate, such as Allport (1954) and Pettigrew's (1998) contact theory, but there is not one agreed upon set of processes for successful IGP. Cohen-Mansfield and Muff's (2021) "Processes and structures in intergenerational programs: a comparison across different types of programs" adds to the literature with its study of different types of IGP operating in Tel Aviv, Israel. The greatest strength of the paper lies in the consideration of process variables that influence outcomes of IGP. Using multiinformant interviews and surveys from youth and older adult participants and program leaders, authors explored features that facilitated or hindered achievement of program goals. Triangulating stakeholder reports, the authors concluded that, across IGP content, procedures addressing: (a) preparation, (b) guidance, (c) monitoring of stakeholders, and (d) program duration influence program outcomes. Results align with recent recommendations of other intergenerational scholars (Gardner and Alegre, 2019; Jarrott *et al.*, 2021) based primarily on US and European programs, and they point to strategies that can be applied with each stakeholder group to increase chances of IGP success, sustainability, and expansion.

Mechanisms of IGP success, as recommended by Cohen-Mansfield and Muff (2021) include (a) preparing participants with information on IGP goals and role descriptions for younger and older participants and program stakeholders, (b) guiding participants to fill their role, including with age-specific training, and (c) monitoring participants to ensure expectations are being met (e.g. consistent attendance) and address any concerns. Authors suggested that these processes can be achieved via focused trainings. Groups like Generations Working Together and Generations United have developed a range of free online training resources over the past year. They offer synchronous and asynchronous training that covers topics such as planning IGP and how to connect generations through the arts. Experience would suggest that extensive synchronous training may be difficult to achieve for all stakeholders (Weaver *et al.*, 2019), yet organizations may offer general training for all participants and focused training for a subset of stakeholders, such as program leaders. Access to free, asynchronous online training delivered in discrete units can increase the feasibility of stakeholders, particularly younger persons and program leaders, completing training. The World Health Organization is currently partnering with Generations Working Together to develop additional online resources for planning and delivering IGP (A. Clyde, personal communication, 2021).

The concerns that stakeholders described in Cohen-Mansfield and Muff's (2021) illustrated a larger issue beyond processes and structure of IGP. Data revealed that older adults' needs exceeded what youth participants and program leaders could provide. Although some IGP do involve one participant group providing significant help to another (e.g. TimeOut), IGP typically cannot substitute for formal support services. Program leaders described having insufficient time (i.e. funding) and space to support the IGP. Creators may not have intended use IGP to supplement or replace caregiving supports for older persons, but the gap between older adults' needs and available

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community resources strained intergenerational relationships. If the gap is not addressed, older adults will continue to feel frustrated with inadequate services by the youth and the young persons will continue to feel overworked and underappreciated, which will ultimately threaten IGP sustainability. In this situation, IGP could end up doing more harm than good by straining stakeholders and reinforcing ageist stereotypes of youth and older adults (e.g. Seefeldt, 1987; Weaver *et al.*, 2019). Other intergenerational scholars have addressed the need for authority figures to demonstrate support for IGP, such as by providing adequate materials and space for programing (Norouzi *et al.*, 2019) and giving program leaders dedicated time to prepare for, monitor, and document the IGP (Weaver *et al.*, 2019). Cohen-Mansfield and Muff's findings echo the critical need for this contact theory tenet to characterize Tel Aviv IGP.

The Tel Aviv-based study is valuable for incorporating a range of program settings and younger and older participants. Most intergenerational research involves a single site or type of programing (Jarrott, 2011). Categorizing the programs into a taxonomy of art, learning, and assistance programs may have supported data analyses for the purpose of the study but was arguably superficial; diverse learning, helping, and creative goals could have been achieved in any of these programs, depending on how they were implemented. Still, identifying the commonality of mechanisms and structures across programs lends weight to the researchers' conclusions that certain processes must be attended to in IGP, regardless of programing content.

Reducing ageism is a common reason for offering IGP. By identifying commonalities as well as differences, younger and older participants can build relationships that enhance empathy and self-efficacy (Breck *et al.*, 2018). Cohen-Mansfield and Muff described IGP as a means to address common concerns via IGP, yet this strengths-based perspective falters in some sections of the paper. For example, they concluded that IGP structures and mechanisms should address generational differences and vulnerabilities. Youth participants also have vulnerabilities, yet society emphasizes the differences of older people from young people and the vulnerabilities of older participants. Cohen-Mansfield and Muff's recommendations were grounded in data provided primarily by young and middle-age adults, which likely explains the emphasis on needs of older persons. Moving forward with their recommendation of preparation, guidance, and monitoring for all stakeholders, Cohen-Mansfield and Muff can encourage training for older participants to learn about the needs and vulnerabilities of youth as well, which could enhance program outcomes and sustainability.

Cohen-Mansfield and Muff offer further evidence of what often goes unsaid when IGP discontinue; IGP do not risk failure because they are a bad idea but because they are implemented without attention to processes and structure. While organizations often aim to achieve a quasi-kin relationship through IGP, successful interactions are not necessarily instinctive to those involved. IGP require careful cultivation and ongoing maintenance. Authors concluded that "IGPs can make valuable contributions." While their data indicated lots of challenges associated to program success, IGP administrators and leaders who act on Cohen-Mansfield and Duff's recommendations to prepare, guide, and monitor program stakeholders can see IGP achieve myriad goals.

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