

The Impact of Intergenerational Reminiscences on University Students in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

As the aging population is growing rapidly in Malaysia, there is a need to enhance intergenerational communication to improve intergenerational understanding. Older people have accumulated vast experience in life, and their narrative sharing would be beneficial for younger generations. The purpose of the study is to explore the impact of an intergeneration reminiscence program on university students. The intergenerational reminiscence program was designed to facilitate intergeneration communication among older people and university students in Malaysia. We recruited a total of 52 undergraduate students from Abnormal Psychology course for this study. They were required to complete at least four sessions of intergenerational interactions with an older adult as part

of their coursework. At the end of intergenerational reminiscence activities, students developed a life history book for the interviewed older adult. Two focus groups were conducted for data collection. Three researchers were involved in the data collection and data analysis process. The findings from the thematic analysis show that the intergenerational reminiscence program was able to engage both older people and university students meaningfully. The impacts on university students include changes of perceptions, awareness of intergenerational difference, learning from older people, and meaningful for older people, and acquisition of new skills.

Keywords – Psychology, aging, Intergenerational reminiscence, thematic analysis, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Population aging is a worldwide phenomenon. According to World Health Organization (WHO, 2013), older people (aged 60 years or over) will increase from 11.7% in 2013 to 21.1% by 2050. Although Malaysia is a young country in which only 5.5% of its population aged 60 in 2013, this statistic will be doubled in between the year 2010 to 2040 (Department of Statistics, 2013). It was expected by the year of 2030, 15 % of Malaysian population will be aged 60 and above. The aging experiences of older people were found to be affected by the socio-economic and socio-cultural environment (Chan, 2006; Kok & Yap, 2014, 2015; Kok, 2015).

Neugarten (1995) claimed “nothing is as rich as human life” especially for older people as they have accumulated richness of experience while sailing through life. Their aging experience is a product of what he or she has been through in a particular socio-economic or political context. Intergenerational interaction helps to enhance intergeneration communication. Previous studies show that intergenerational activities debunk stereotyping views or myth such as elderly were always associated with physical decline, material insecurity, and poor intergenerational relations (Fivush, Bohanek, & Zaman, 2010). Engaging older people in autobiographical narratives is therapeutic for older people as they do interpretation and life review. Reminiscence activities provide a powerful frame for them to remember and give meanings to their lived experience (Fivush, 2008). In addition, reminiscence therapy has been found effective in minimizing depression in older people (Hernandez & Gonzalez, 2008). Sharing own life

experience with younger generation will help the young to be more appreciative of the old (Wang & Ross, 2007).

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to investigate the impact of an intergeneration reminiscence activity on university students in one of the universities in the Perak State of Malaysia. We would like to find out the learning experience from the students' perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

Experiential Discovery Qualitative Study

This study is an experiential discovery qualitative study. A total of 52 (22 males, 30 females) students from a university in the Perak state of Malaysia were recruited. The participants are students who registered for Abnormal Psychology course as one of their subjects during the semester. As part of the coursework requirements, they were required to work in pairs to interact with an older adult, who is 65 years old and above, regardless of cognitive abilities and health conditions. Specifically, students were asked to interview the senior citizens about their life history. The students were allowed to choose to work with either their own family member or an elderly from their community (e.g. acquaintances or strangers from *Pasar Malam* (in Malay means night market) that fulfilled the inclusion criteria, for at least 4 sessions (30 to 45 minutes per session). At the end of the interactions, students developed a life history book to capture the memories and stories of the older person's life. There was no standard format for the life history book. However, it was expected to be multisensory, attractive, and personalized. Both students and the older people were invited to do recollection together - to remember, to share and to engage with one another during the reminiscence activities. Original words and interpretation given by the older people were used in designing the life history book. Relevant photographs were included in the life history book. At the end of the activities, students presented the life history book to the elderly with whom they interacted

Focus Group Semi-Structured Interviews

Focus group semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteered students who participated in the intergenerational reminiscence project. This focus group interview aimed to understand how students' perceptions of older adults have changed after completing the project. Nineteen students volunteered to be interviewed. After a briefing about privacy and confidentiality of collected data, students were separated into two groups. Students who interviewed their family members were gathered and interviewed by a co-researcher, while the other students who interviewed strangers from the community were gathered in another group for the interview. The two focus group interviews took about one hour.

The interview questions covered sub-topics on the impression towards older people before the project, their learning experience during the project, and the benefits of the project. Some examples of the questions are - (1) Before participating in this project, what is your impression towards older adults?; (2) What were the things that strike you most while doing this project?; (3) How has this project benefited you and the older people you have interviewed? The interview was recorded with participants' permission and later transcribed for data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our findings echoed the previous studies in that reminiscence activities benefited both the older people and university students. Watt and Cappelieux (2000) have identified reminiscence as intervention strategies by gerontologists working with depressed old people. However, it benefits ordinary older people with no mental health issues as it offers a platform for interpretation of life events (Hernandez & Gonzalez, 2008). Snodgrass and Sorajakool (2011) held that the wisdom gain through life experiences serve as a resource to self and others, especially for young people. Fivush and his associates (2010) held that young people gain benefits in terms of intergenerational connections and perspectives taking. This paper reports only the learning points from the students' perspectives. From both of the focus group discussions, five themes emerged. Each theme is discussed in the sections below.

Change of Perceptions

Most students shared that it was an eye opening experience. They mentioned that there was a change of perception. Previously they thought older people were traditional, naggy, stubborn, forgetful and overly anxious (e.g. always reminding others to be careful when driving, not to forget their keys). However, after the intergenerational interactions, they found that older people could be cute and were kind. They were able to remember details about their life history and were also capable of giving good advice. This reminiscence process enabled students to view aging from multiple perspectives, which helps them to improve their relationship with their grandparents. And for those students who did not have grandparents, they reported that they had gained new insights that will help them to understand their parents better when their parents grow old.

For those students who interacted with elderly strangers, they shared that they felt comfortable interacting with them as there was no barrier. They were not affected by preconceived ideas of their grandparents. It was observed that students still use similar descriptions for elderly before and after this project (such as nagging, stubborn), but their perceptions have changed. They learned that older people seem to nag or be stubborn for a reason. They perceived older people as naggy and stubborn with good will, as they “do not want you to experience the same pain as they did.”

Awareness of Intergenerational Differences

Students reported that they have become more aware of the intergenerational differences. They realized that the older people live in a different era. One student mentioned that the old lady she interviewed was 91 -year-old but she is still very healthy and can take care of her grandchildren. She got married at the age of 14, was a mother at the age of 15. She gave birth to 13 children, and now she has a total of 190 family members. The student was amazed how she managed to care for so many people. She found out that the older siblings would take care of the younger siblings when their parents went to work. They also supported their family when they were old enough to work.

Most students were amazed that the elderly they interviewed got married at the age of 15 or 16 for women, 18 or 19 for men. They were surprised that their grandparents resumed responsibility of taking care of their parents and family members at such a young age. By contrast, the students being above the age of 21, all of them were dependent and still receiving financial support from their parents. While on the other hand, their grandparents at 21 years old had

to work for survival

Lim shared the stories of his interviewee who had worked as a plantation guard (plantation of rubber, mango, rambutan) for 17 years since 1956. After obtaining precious practical experience, he started to buy his own plantation. Daniel concluded, “The on-site experience was really valuable and it was so different from the memorizing of content”. This point arose much discussion among the focus group members. Students continue to reflect on how to incorporate experiential learning into their university life.

Learning from the older people

Jane shared her interaction experience with her grandmother. She has been living with her grandmother since she moved to Perak state for further studies at the university. Her grandma was very active: cycling to market for grocery before 7 am in the morning, playing *Mah Jong* with neighbors, collecting things to recycle so that it could be sold off. Being an illiterate old lady who does not speak any other language except for her dialect, she uses sign language to communicate with recycling materials buyers who speak other languages. Another student shared about an 81-year-old lady who frequently quarreled with her husband but they would stop and prepared food for each other when it was meal time. Jane described this scenario as the most romantic scene she had ever seen. She was amazed how effective it was for her grandparents to get married after one month of dating (once a week for four consecutive weeks). And their marriage was successfully sustained for life-long. Jane commented the older generation tends to solve their problems by facing and resolving the difficulties, while the younger generation tends to run away from their difficulties.

Besides, other students also learned lessons from the older people: support and bless younger generation, values of self-sacrificing, perseverance, patience, etc. Here are some stories shared by students during the focus groups:

Tan shared the story he gathered from his intergenerational interview with an old man from his community. That old man married at 18 or 19 but at that time the wedding dinner cost RM100,000 as the whole village from the community were invited to attend the wedding dinner. Tan wondered how did the old man managed to save up for his wedding payment. He found out that actually, his parents helped him.

Lim shared that the passing down of family values amazed him. The parents of his grandparent helped them, and they are now helping their children (who are the student’s uncles and aunties). He witnessed that whenever his uncles and

aunties gave *Hongbao* (money put in a red package for older people as a gesture of appreciation) to the old grandparents, they always returned with an addition of money. He noticed that the old grandparents led a simple lifestyle, unlike the lavish lifestyle of the new generations, and they were willing to bless their children by giving them *Hongbao*.

Three students interviewed older people who had endured through the World War II. Students learned that many seniors had gone through hardship in lives. Some survived on sweet potato porridge for years during war time. One elderly man was even an activist during the World War II and fought for the rights of the minority Chinese. Students were touched when they heard about the hardships of an elderly woman who worked a tailor, who was a cancer survivor and who also had a son suffering from glaucoma

Other lessons learned include: Elderly were self-giving, most of them wanted to live longer to serve their family; they viewed life positively and had a positive attitude and acceptance of death, "When it's time to go, it's ok as I have lived my life." The student admired the elderly's positive view of death and wished to be like them when they are old.

Meaningful for older people

Intergeneration reminiscences have been used as a therapeutic tool for older people to make meaning of their live experience. Students shared that some elderly felt like a "celebrity" being interviewed. Some of them dressed up nicely before the interaction session. There was a sense of pride being chosen for the interview. They even brought bags of old photos and newspaper cuttings to tell their life story to the students. Students found the making of life history book was meaningful as it meets the need of the older people. These made the older people feel that they are appreciated and not forgotten.

Choy felt that elderly had very scattered memory. She noticed older people were disorganized in storing their photos, without sequential events or years of record. With the life history book he made, he helped the older people to organize the memory of their life experience. Jane's grandmother kept reminding her to return the "Life History" book to her. Jane included the photo of her grandma's first house on the first page of her life history book. Students fervently discussed how to improve on the design of life history book to make it more personalized and interactive to meet the needs of elderly. Some made the life history book with multisensory features, while some others turned it into

a novel. Students who interact with elderly from the old folk home shared that older people displayed more depressive symptoms if they were lacking of support from family members. They felt that this reminiscence process was meaningful for the older people.

Acquisition of new skills

Students gained new skills on how to interact and communicate with the golden-ager. They shared that the seniors have a different kind of personality as some of them were introverted who did not share much. But the students revealed that interacting with older people helped them to have a better and deeper understanding and acquire new ideas and skills on how to relate meaningfully with them. They were not sure if those skills could be generalized but they have learned to be patient and to be there to listen. Some students had the experience of being judged by their grandparents and they felt hurt. Misunderstanding happened due to the generational gaps. They realized the importance of listening to older people and have practiced listening skills throughout this intergenerational project. Students whose grandparents were no longer alive, shared that this intergenerational activity helped them to better understand their parents as they age.

CONCLUSION

This life history book project provided the opportunity for both older people and university students, to experience intergenerational reminiscences together. Intentionally spending time and effort to listen to older peoples' life experiences and perspectives have positively impacted the students' perception of the older generation. Not only did they deepen their understanding towards older people, but they have also gained valuable insights and lessons about life. The older people, on the other hand, received the time, attention and opportunity to pass down their legacy, sharing what is valuable to the younger generation. As both older people and university students share this special moment together, the process of sharing in itself is therapeutic and beneficial for all. Since the qualitative feedback of the present study was encouraging, it is recommended that similar study should be conducted using a randomized-controlled design that involved larger sample. A well-controlled trial will allow the researchers to learn about the causative relationship as well as the underlying mechanism of positive outcomes of this program. Also, the present focused only the feedbacks of the younger

generation. The outcomes of such program, from the older persons' perspectives, should be assessed in the future, to gain insights on its' impacts on the seniors.

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