

INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND PARTNERSHIPS IN COMMUNITY PROGRAMS: PURPOSE, PRACTICE, AND DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

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This article serves as an introduction to the special issue and to the emerging topic of intergenerational relationships and partnerships in community programs. Our aim is to offer a frame in which to consider theory and practice on the topic. Toward that end, we focus on the multiple purposes of intergenerational relationships, adult strategies for creating strong relationships, and the organizational supports necessary to support relationships and partnerships. This analysis highlights program examples from the 10 articles included in this volume. We conclude by identifying key issues that researchers may explore to further enhance our understanding of youth–adult relationships and partnerships. © 2005 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Youth are largely isolated from non-family adults—spatially, socially, and psychologically—in almost all spheres of United States society. Yet, research indicates that strong relationships between youth and adults serve protective and developmental functions. They can help prevent youth from engaging in problem behaviors, while

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concurrently, they can help promote knowledge, competency, and initiative among youth. Organizations, coalitions, and communities also derive benefits when youth and adults work collaboratively toward a common cause, and society benefits when youth are connected to adults (Kirchner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2002; Scales, 2003; Zeldin, 2004).

Community programs, including out-of-school and after-school programs for youth, are an important context where this intergenerational isolation can be bridged. These settings are fairly unique in the United States, as places where youth and adults have the potential to form sustained, meaningful relationships. At their best, these programs offer structured opportunities and shared projects through which adults and youth learn each other's points of view, develop common goals, and create intergenerational ties. Through these interactions, it becomes possible for a transition to occur from the kinds of hierarchical and paternalistic relationships that occur between youth and adults in other settings toward relationships characterized by close bonds and collective purpose. In brief, youth programs provide a unique microcosm for adults and youth to jointly explore and experience relationship and community (Larson, 2000; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002).

This special issue examines intergenerational relationships among youth and different categories of adults—youth workers, program staff, community residents, and leaders—as they occur within these types of community programs. We particularly are concerned with identifying the interpersonal processes through which close emotional and instrumental relationships can be formed, with a special emphasis on partnership-oriented relationships. Our additional aim is to identify key organizational structures and administrative practices that support these relationships.

This volume contains research articles and field-based analytic essays from scholars, nonprofit managers, and providers of technical assistance. By combining the insights from several types of scholarship—discovery, integration, and application (Boyer, 1990)—we hope to enrich research and theory, as well as to make research-based knowledge salient and accessible to those adults who work with community-based youth organizations and after-school programs.

This opening article has four parts. The first section presents the purposes and range of benefits of intergenerational relationships to youth, adults, and communities. The next section identifies effective strategies that adults employ to engage youth in strong relationships and partnerships. The third section discusses the ways in which organizations can support the practice of adults. The article concludes by identifying priority directions for future research aimed at informing theory and practice.

PURPOSES OF INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Adults have traditionally formed relationships with youth for the purpose of protecting, counseling, and instructing young people as they move through the tasks of adolescence (Hine, 1999; Hollingshead, 1949). Over the past 15 years, however, with the integration of youth and community development perspectives into youth programming, the rationale for establishing strong intergenerational relationships has broadened. Analysts now focus on relationships as a foundation from which youth can be active agents in their own development, the development of others, and the development of the community. Reflecting on this trend, Zeldin, Camino, and Calvert (2003) identified three contemporary purposes for youth–adult relationships: ensuring youth rights of participation in decision-making, promoting the positive develop-

ment of youth, and building community and civil society. These purposes are brought to light by the authors in this volume.

The first purpose—ensuring youth rights of participation—centers on the assumption that all youth are capable of expressing a view and have the right to have their views taken seriously. There is a growing recognition, explicit in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, that adults often cannot be counted on to represent youth needs and concerns (Lansdown, 2001). Not surprisingly, therefore, youth representation and decision-making is highlighted in the intergenerational relationships analyzed in this volume. The authors also emphasize the positive outcomes emanating from active participation. At the individual level, for example, the inclusion of youth voices in relationships is found to provide young people with opportunities to experience respect and be acknowledged as important by adults. This is especially important for those vulnerable youth who are being left behind by societal institutions (Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Krueger, 2005). At the program level, the active participation of youth in group decision-making is important, for it helps keep programming focused on the interests, experiences, and concerns of young people (Denner, Meyer, & Bean, 2005; Libby, Rosen, & Sedonaen, 2005).

Strong intergenerational relationships also may be aimed at facilitating positive youth development. In an apprenticeship program described by Halpern (2005), and in four youth programs analyzed by Larson, Walker, and Pearce (2005), positive relationships with adults were found to provide a rich context for youth's growth and development. Over time, these relationships facilitated youth's engagement in learning concepts and skills relevant to careers, in addition to improving their self-management abilities and developing capacities to function effectively in the world around them. Youth also may benefit from the information, encouragement, and contacts they gain from developing relationships with highly resourced adults in the community (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005). In brief, strong relationships can promote youth empowerment—youth become more confident, skilled, and connected, and they find adult support to achieve personal goals.

Third, strong relationships among adults and youth can be explicitly oriented toward building community and civil society (Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). This can occur through multiple pathways. For example, when adults and youth work together effectively, they are able to provide vital services to other organizations and the community at large. This is seen in the organization profiled by Libby et al. (2005), which offers training and philanthropy services through youth–adult partnerships. The organizations have adopted this approach, not only because it enhances the quality of service, but also because staff believe that modeling youth–adult partnership to local community leaders and organizations facilitates community building. Camino (2005) and Ginwright (2005) observed that when adults are engaged as partners in collective action, it is the adults, not only the youth, who meet their own developmental needs. The consequence is that both adults and youth become more competent and confident in working for community improvement.

These three purposes—ensuring youth rights of participation, promoting positive youth development, and building community—overlap. These different purposes, however, reflect different underlying assumptions, and as Camino (2005) pointed out, the assumptions of adults have a strong influence on the quality of their relationships with youth. Different purposes also require somewhat different organizational structures. Relationships for the primary purpose of ensuring youth rights, for example, tend to emphasize the processes of democratic deliberation and often require the creation of program structures, policies, or forums for shared decision-making. Relationships for

positive youth development often require and emphasize the provision of opportunities and scaffolding consistent with the developmental needs of participating youth. In contrast, relationships aimed at contributing to building community and civil society generally require a partnership between youth and adults and a focus to be directed outside of their own programs to focus on meeting the needs of a broader community.

It is possible, indeed desirable, for a given program to seek to concurrently meet these diverse purposes of strong youth–adult relationships. However, given that these different purposes place different requirements on the relationships, and different structural demands on the organization, the challenges in doing this successfully should not be underestimated. Explicitly addressing one purpose in a high-quality manner may be a more effective strategy than attempting to address multiple purposes with insufficient organizational structures, resources, and attention. Research indicates that this caution is especially warranted when an organization is first beginning to focus on strengthening intergenerational relationships through its programming (Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005).

ADULT STRATEGIES FOR CREATING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Even with a clear purpose established, the creation of quality intergenerational, non-familial relationships can be demanding. As has been noted at the beginning of this article, adults and youth in the United States have limited experience in forming these relationships. Moreover, there is no simple formula for creating strong youth–adult relationships. They are a complex, multifaceted phenomenon incorporating the dimensions of voice, emotion, instrumentality, and partnership, and once created, they need to be nurtured over time through joint activity and discourse. The articles in this volume highlight some strategies through which these challenges can be effectively met.

Consistent support for youth voices provides a foundation for strong youth–adult relationships over the long term. Put simply, it is hard to imagine youth forming strong relationships unless they feel that their ideas are considered in discussions and their experiences are valued by the adults around them. Adults who are successful in forming relationships are those who genuinely demonstrate respect for youth voices by making the time to solicit the views of youth, listen to their ideas and opinions, and respond in non-judgmental ways. It also is important that adults give youth a say in decisions in ways that are consistent with the model of youth–adult relationships employed in the program (Larson et al., 2005; Denner et al., 2005).

Adults also must focus on the affective component of relationships. Krueger (2005), for example, concluded that youth workers are best able to form relationships when they are attuned to the emotional state of youth, in synch with youth capacities for trusting and relating to adults, and when they engage in deliberate processes of shared meaning making and resolution with young people. This approach is especially important in work with youth who are alienated from community or not engaged in mainstream activities. Diversi and Mecham (2005) reached a similar conclusion based on their analysis of Latino/a youth in an after-school mentoring program. The youth reported that they had benefited from the program because staff were able to bridge cultural divides and create a context where the young people felt safe and cared for. As a result, youth felt more confident to navigate issues of acculturation.

Strong relationships, the authors remind us, also have an instrumental component to them. Halpern (2005) describes an apprenticeship program in which strong rela-

tionships emerged, not primarily from the adults' attention to youth emotional needs, but from a shared focus on the work at hand: a problem to be solved or a task to be completed. He observed a "jointness" when professionals work side-by-side with youth and teach their crafts and occupations to young people over a sustained period of time. The youth are focused on learning, whereas the adult is attending to teaching and guiding, with the result being a shared intensity and bond between the two parties. Similarly, in the two arts programs analyzed by Larson et al. (2005), strong relationships were formed as youth were taught and practiced new skills and talents. Within this context, the adults nurtured strong working relationships by setting high standards, providing high-quality learning experiences, and reinforcing the youth's enthusiasm for the work.

Half of the authors in this volume use the phrase "youth-adult partnership" to conceptualize the relationships that they are analyzing. This phrase reflects that strong relationships emanate from reciprocity in leading and learning between youth and adults, especially when the two parties are engaged as partners in community building or activism (Camino, 2000; Segawa, 1998). Youth-adult partnerships open new and exciting possibilities for change within schools, youth organizations (Zeldin et al., 2005) and larger, place-based communities (Libby et al., 2005). In analyzing these settings, the authors emphasized that partnership-oriented relationships tend to focus on building community, typically in places outside of their immediate group. Consequently, adults must learn to work collaboratively, not only with youth, but also with adult residents and local organizations. Forming such partnerships represents a new challenge to many adults, one that requires them to engage in reflective discourse as a prerequisite to effective action. Ginwright (2005), for example, detailed strategies through which adults initiate neighborhood revitalization work by creating a shared socio-political vision and establishing clear role delineation with young people. Camino (2005) made a similar case, observing that adults must question and reflect on their own assumptions about youth and their own roles in promoting development and community before being able to engage in successful community change efforts with youth as partners.

Looking through the articles, it can be seen that adults need to take on multiple roles to strengthen the different aspects of intergenerational relationships. Promoting youth voices, for example, requires adults to be advocates for youth, to consistently invite and encourage young people to be active and empowered participants in all their relationships. To strengthen the affective component of the relationship, adults may take on the role of a nurturer, a compassionate guide. To strengthen the instrumental component, it is necessary for adults to take on the role of a teacher, coach, and, sometimes, task master. To strengthen the partnership aspect of the relationship, adults need to be facilitators and co-managers with youth. In brief, the challenges to adults can be daunting. Indeed, the ability to balance, negotiate, and creatively adapt adult roles to changing situations is likely to be the most important skill in the art of sustaining relationships with youth.

ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR RELATIONSHIPS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Strong relationships do not emerge spontaneously in youth organizations. They result, foremost, from the intentionality of adults as they interact with skill and compassion on a day-to-day basis. Consider the case study by Krueger (2005), in which a youth

worker purposely follows a frustrated youth out of a recreation center into the neutral territory of a park; the aim was to find a safe space where they could reflect on their shared experience while concurrently deepening their emotional bonds. However, adults cannot do it themselves. They require, and deserve, organizational support. Indeed, it is unlikely, as illustrated by the articles in this volume, that such strong youth–adult relationships can flourish without supportive organizational cultures, norms, policies, and structures.

It is believed that the challenge is for organizations to match the intentionality of the best youth workers. Intentionality begins with clarity in organizational purpose and with consistency in purpose across all aspects of the program (Zeldin et al., 2005). The apprenticeship program observed by Halpern (2005), for example, is based on the assumption that strong relationships and youth competency emanate primarily from the planning and completion of tasks and projects. Thus the organization provides staff a program structure and high-quality resources that allow staff to provide the best possible instrumental-oriented instruction to young people. Because the emotional needs of youth are not a direct focus of the program, the organization provides less attention to helping youth with their personal struggles. In contrast, inconsistencies in organizational and program purpose can diminish the potential and strength of youth–adult relationships. The after-school mentoring program observed by Diversi and Mecham (2005) had clear goals and realized success toward their purpose of empowering young people. However, the potential of the program was not fully realized because the sponsoring school held a different ideology from the program, an ideology that was itself reinforced by national policies that further constrained the efforts of program staff.

Intentionality also is grounded in clarity about the roles of adults and youth. This is highlighted in the four diverse and well-established programs studied by Larson et al. (2005). In each program, a culture was established that articulated and justified the roles of adults and youth. These cultures changed somewhat over time in response to the changing demands of the projects, but throughout, it was the transparency and consistency in roles that contributed substantially to positive outcomes. The challenges confronting adults in establishing roles should not to be underestimated, as demonstrated by Camino (2005). Many adults are confused as to their proper role and have retreated to the view that power in relationships is zero-sum, with the consequent belief that adult staff “need to get out of the way” or “give up their power” in order to empower youth. It is the responsibility of the organization as a whole to help guide adults in locating the appropriate balance in power in their relationships with youth.

Organizations seeking to promote partnership-oriented relationships are especially likely to face challenges. This type of relationship requires adults to significantly change their traditional roles and responsibilities *vis a vis* youth. Moreover, because partnerships are oriented toward making positive impacts on groups and communities rather than individual youth, adults are confronted with daunting tasks of system change and interagency collaboration. Within this context, organizations are beginning to employ innovative organizational strategies to assist adults in making transitions in their roles. In the case of the organization profiled by Libby et al. (2005), for example, the board of directors and executive director made an explicit policy decision to adopt a philosophy of partnership between youth and adults. Consequently, all of the programs and administrative procedures were refined to reflect that purpose, including the governance of the organization and the recruiting and training of adult staff. Ginwright (2005) highlighted an organization that intentionally fostered a “cul-

ture of wellness” among adults, the rationale being that staff needed adequate time and energy to form relationships and to “transform” their role from that of an authority figure to one of partner with community residents, local agencies, and youth. Similarly, Camino (2005) detailed how some organizations have created theories of change—cause-and-effect models of how programs are expected to operate—to provide adults with a detailed guide of the logic and activities that underlie successful youth–adult partnerships.

In sum, relationships among adults and youth evolve over time through shared activity and discourse. These roles need to be attended to consistently, cared about, and nurtured by all stakeholders. Therefore, it is critical that organizational support not be sporadic, but instead be offered in ways consistent with the evolving nature of strong relationships. Indeed, there is evidence that organizations that adopt strategies of continuous improvement are most successful in helping staff adopt new roles in their relationships with youth (Zeldin et al., 2005). While the organizational strategies vary tremendously, common to each is that they emphasize the creation of time, space, and structured opportunities for adult staff to come together—sometimes but not necessarily with youth—to reflect, dialogue, share information, and practice the application of new knowledge.

ROLES FOR RESEARCHERS

The divide between the youth and adult worlds is complex, multifaceted, and sometimes downright inscrutable for parties on both sides of the divide. Researchers have important roles in creating strong and sustainable relationships across generations. The important contribution of research—as illustrated by the articles in this volume—lies in careful observation, critical analysis, synthesis, and the systematization of knowledge regarding these relationships.

Below are some of the key contributions that we think researchers can make to the understanding of youth–adult relationships and partnerships.

Description and Taxonomy

The early stages in any field of knowledge need to include careful observation, categorization, and labeling. This descriptive work—which should include bringing to light the conscious and tacit knowledge of expert practitioners—can provide researchers with expanded foundations to develop theory and test hypotheses. Policy-makers and practitioners can benefit from research that clearly describes the complexity of what happens in youth–adult relationships and provides vocabulary that differentiate fundamental phenomena. The articles presented here contribute to this by identifying the different purposes behind youth–adult relationships, the strategies that adults use to create strong relationships, and the organizational structures that support them. Much can be gained from more work describing disparate types of successful youth–adult relationships. There is also a need for further examination of how different types of relationships are fitted to different situations and purposes. With such taxonomy and description, practitioners will be better prepared to choose the models and strategies most consistent with the needs of the youth, adults, and communities with whom they work.

Diverse Cultural Models

Scholarship and practice will benefit from knowledge about models of youth–adult relationships in other parts of the world by drawing on the treasure trove of diverse cultural norms for framing interactions between youth and adults. The importance of this task is redoubled by the increasing presence of immigrants from these cultures within the U.S. population. Although there is a stereotype that traditional cultures structure youth–adult relationships as hierarchical, many cultures, in fact, give youth major roles and responsibilities earlier than in Western society (Rogoff, Sellars, Pirrotta, Fox, & White, 1975). Youth from immigrant groups in the United States sometimes take on major responsibilities and are treated as adults in their families by age 15 or earlier; we need to understand how these cultural norms condition their relationships in youth development programs (Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003).

Adult Roles and Use of Power

Issues of personal and institutional power are embedded in all aspects of youth–adult relationships and often become a stumbling block (Camino, 2005). Sometimes these relationships reproduce larger relationships of oppression in the community. As a result, some adults are ambivalent about the exercise of power in relationships with youth, and while the abuse of adult power is certainly a concern, ambivalence also can lead to inconsistencies and problems in how adults relate to young people. The reality is that adults have knowledge, experience, and social capital that they can bring to relationships, resources that often are not available to youth and that are necessary for the sustainability of programming over time. The field of practice would benefit from further analysis that helps clarify the boundaries between legitimate and manipulative exercise of power. Key questions include: Under what conditions can and do adults use their greater power and knowledge for the benefit of youth? How can institutional structures be created that provide appropriate checks and balances for both adults' and youth's exercise of power?

Outcomes of Relationships and Partnerships

Demonstrating accountability for practice is an ongoing concern for practitioners. Government and private foundations are most likely to provide resources when they see “hard” evidence that a given strategy is effective. Researchers can support practice and advance knowledge by documenting the outcomes—youth, adult, organizational, community—that emanate from different types of youth–adult relationships and partnerships. To be effective, this research needs to identify mediators and moderators of program effectiveness. What are the processes whereby a given type of relationship is effective? How do these processes differ by culture, age, type of organization, and numerous other factors? Research needs to articulate the path of associations between organizational context, types of youth–adult relationship, and types of outcomes.

Organizational Support for Relationships and Partnerships

Researchers need to consider the organizational context as well. The articles in this volume underscore the complexities—in terms of purpose, role, and power—that adults face in forming relationships and partnerships with youth. Most succinctly,

adults will have to strengthen their skills in relationship building, especially in terms of learning how to balance youth needs for autonomy and voice, while concurrently providing instrumental and emotional support. Toward that end, training and professional development opportunities will have to become organizational priorities. Moreover, most organizations, especially those that seek to emphasize youth and adult partnerships for community change, will find it necessary to modify or adapt policies, operating procedures, and program strategies. The issue facing organizations is how to initiate and manage such changes (Zeldin et al., 2005). The issue facing researchers is to bring scholarship to bear on the issue. Future research can contribute to practice by identifying the management practices that spark innovation and by carefully assessing the impacts of such changes on youth, adult, and organizational development.

Compiling a useful body of research is by no means easy, of course. Good research needs to take into account the multiple layers of relationships, including the day-to-day interactions between youth and adults, program structures, and governance at the organizational level. Understanding relationships also requires carefully evaluating the distinct motives and point of view of the parties involved—youth, adults, and administrators. Multiple disciplinary perspectives are needed to analyze issues at these different levels, as are the contributions of diverse research paradigms. In addition to carrying out the standard forms of studies, researchers can contribute through the scholarship of synthesis in which they collate and evaluate research published in academic journals, professional journals, and evaluation report databases.

Further progress requires that researchers see their role in terms of a dialogue in which they communicate with practitioners. Like the relationships between youth and adults, this involves the creation of partnerships among people with different world views, ways of knowing, and priorities. We think it important to stress that researchers modes of knowing—ranging from descriptive observation to analytic evaluation—can complement and support, but do not necessarily trump or supplant the type of knowledge practitioners gain and then use in their work. The implication is that the future efforts of researchers should be focused not only on achieving a general understanding, but also on generating and synthesizing knowledge that directly supports quality implementation of relationships in community programs. Most fundamentally, this also means that future research should explicitly respond to and integrate the distinct voices that practitioners and youth bring to the table.

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