

Generations Journal

Achieving an Equitable Society Through Intergenerational Programming and Research

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Abstract

Intergenerational programs hold tremendous promise to achieve an equitable and peaceful society in an ever-diversifying nation. This article reviews theoretical perspectives and key concepts to systematically dismantle stereotypes, namely psychosocial and critical race theories. We provide examples of intergenerational programs undoing racist and ageist structures across the micro to macro continuum. We conclude with implications for research, practice, education, advocacy, and policy.

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Societies worldwide are becoming, and will continue to be, increasingly diverse in terms of race, age, and a confluence of intersecting identities. Yet, mistrust and discrimination are at the highest levels seen in recent history (Terrell et al., 2009). Racial injustice and intergenerational conflict are undermining a longevity opportunity: to live a long and healthy life with a solid economic foundation; with strong social bonds to family, friends, and community; in a diverse, loving, and peaceful society.

Racism and ageism result in deleterious health outcomes among individuals, families, and society. Racist and ageist policies set the stage for health inequities to endure. Studies have made a clear link between interpersonal and institutionalized racism and ageism with negative impacts on chronic health conditions, cognitive health, and life expectancy.

Racism and ageism share common features: both are structural, endemic, global and internal, and interact across the micro to macro continuum over one's life span, one generation after the next. Across racial and ethnic identities, older adults in the Health and Retirement Study report they have much in common: ageism (Gonzales et al., 2021a). Blacks, Hispanics, and White older adults rank ageism as the first or second form of bias in their everyday lives. Moreover, emerging professionals (ages 18–30) report similar rates of age discrimination as older adults (ages 50 and older) in the workplace, with harmful effects on mental health, occupational well-being, job satisfaction, and commitment to organizations (Marchiondo et al., 2016). Ageism is a common experience across generations, races, and ethnicities.

This article has two aims to: 1)

review theoretical perspectives to inform interventions to systematically dismantle stereotypes, namely psychosocial and critical race theories, and 2) provide examples of intergenerational programs undoing racist and ageist structures. It concludes with implications for readers of *Generations*.

Programs connecting generations show incredible promise and should be expanded upon nationwide.

Theoretical Perspectives on Stereotypes and Interventions

Psychosocial Perspectives

Stereotypes have three universal mechanisms: *cognition* (e.g., stereotyping), *affect* (e.g., negative and positive attitudes), and *behavior* (e.g., avoidance, discrimination, violence), also known as the CAB model (Jhangiani and Tarry, 2022). Cognitive stereotypes, along with the affective component, inform behavior. All too often, corporate and legal policies punish a particular behavior (e.g., age or race discrimination in the workplace or educational setting) without addressing the root cognitive and affective beliefs that inform the biased *behavior*.

Rather than punishment and discipline, a more compassionate and humane approach is to facilitate an *empathic epiphany*—that is, enable participants to critically reflect on their worldviews and associated assumptions about race and age—to consciously deconstruct a stereotypic perspective.

Participants who say, “I didn’t realize we had so much in common,” are demonstrating that an empathic epiphany occurred. An unprejudiced mind can lead to fairer treatment across groups, an open attitude for engagement with different people on common goals, and can



establish a starting point with respect and openness.

The Intergroup Contact Hypothesis by Gordon Allport (1954/1988) is an effective theoretical framework for undoing stereotypes and facilitating a context for empathic epiphanies. This framework suggests a person's mind is transformed when they encounter a person from the outgroup who is not representative of the stereotype, the pair engages in a shared activity with equal status, and the interaction is endorsed by a higher authority. Although there are more than 25,000 scientific articles informed by this framework, only 27 have a random assignment with delayed outcome measures (Paluck et al., 2019).

Findings suggest contact typically reduces prejudice. The theory has been used to successfully disrupt ethnic or racial prejudice, as well as bias toward people because of their religious orientation, sexual and gender identities, gender, neuro-diversity, and age (Paluck et al., 2019). There is some evidence to suggest that effects of the intervention can extend into real-world interactions where we live, work, and play. In our scoping review of this literature (which is underway), we have not yet encountered one intervention that intentionally targets two -isms simultaneously (i.e., ageism and racism).

Critical Race Theory

While critical race theory (CRT) acknowledges the importance of confronting stereotypes, and many interventions addressing race and racism are situated at the interpersonal level (Paluck et al., 2019). CRT takes the psychosocial perspective (e.g., Intergroup Contact Hypothesis) further with three observations.

First, psychosocial interventions assume *social conditioning* is the mechanism to achieve a just and equitable society. The theoretical assumption is that if everyone could see the individual before them, rather than judging behavior based upon stereotypes of race or age, we would move closer to a peaceful and just society. Critical race theories argue that changing stereotypes are important, but do not go far enough.

CRTs argue racism and ageism are *structural*, meaning cultural norms and historical practices (upstream factors) are the mechanisms by which economic, social, and political factors result in inequitable outcomes.

They further argue that *resource hoarding* is another important key mechanism to enduring inequity—and until minoritized populations have equal access to education, affordable housing, healthcare, good jobs with pensions to build health and wealth, as well as time for leisure and retirement, we will continue to live in inequitable conditions. Interventions are needed at the structural level, not just the interpersonal level.

Multilevel Approach to Achieving Equity

Clearly, ending ageism is already a grand challenge unto itself. Folding in the objective to end racism is, admittedly, a herculean effort. Yet we argue the time is now. Efforts to end ageism and racism, as well as other forms of bias, have been siloed far too long. Oppression has many unique edges, but its roots and effects are commonly felt.

So where to begin?

Interpersonal Intergenerational Interventions

There are many interpersonal intergenerational interventions that have proven to be effective at changing stereotypes, worldviews, and eliciting empathy (Burnes et al., 2019; Paluck et al., 2019). Changes in stereotypes often can be achieved within 8 hours total of face-to-face interaction. These interventions are low-cost, low-intensity, and low-commitment, and can be carefully designed via an intersectional lens for diverse communities nationwide. Vital Visionaries, for example, was one federally funded program by the National Institute on Aging (National Institutes of Health, 2006). The goal was to change medical students' stereotypes toward older adults in the hopes that with a less ageist mindset, they would choose geriatric practice.

Informed by the Contact Hypothesis by Gordon Allport (1954), medical students were paired with a healthy older adult at a local museum in several cities nationwide (Gonzales and Morrow-Howell, 2009). The dyads met for approximately 2 hours on a Saturday for 4 sessions. The pairs created art together and there was some time allotted for informal discussions to get to know one another. A quasi-experimental design resulted in medical students' stereotypes shifting toward more neutral and positive assumptions about older adults (Gonzales et al., 2010).

The majority of medical students said Vital Visionaries reinforced the idea of person-centered care, rather than operating from inaccurate stereotypes. Admittedly, we missed an opportunity to measure changes in stereotypical beliefs on race, ethnicity, and gender.

Changing Stereotypes Through Social Media

While the Intergroup Contact Hypothesis has been effective at changing stereotypes with in-person interventions (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006), the parasocial contact hypothesis



(PCH) shows much promise to do the same but through social media.

At New York University's (NYU) Center for Health and Aging Innovation (CHAI), we are exploring the use of social media to disrupt stereotypes toward older adults and aging. The (PCH) is an extension of Allport's Contact Hypothesis and uses mediums such as social media, television, advertisements, and other forms of digital content. PCH suggests positive portrayals of minoritized individuals in virtual settings and mass media can reduce prejudice (Schiappa et al., 2005). When people form emotional bonds with characters, celebrities, and media representations, their view of the "out group" can alter if the characteristics do not align with their stereotypes (Lissitsa and Kushnirovich, 2021; Zickuhr and Madden, 2012). Parasocial contact has been shown to affect interpersonal relationships (Wong et al., 2022).

It is hypothesized that the more varied visibility a community has representing a positive or neutral message (as opposed to negative portrayals only), the less stereotyping and discrimination it will encounter (Lissitsa and Kushnirovich, 2021). Importantly, producing media that portrays aging as solely a positive experience may establish a different set of unrealistic expectations (Halberstam, 1998).

The PCH has informed CHAI's approach to social media. CHAI's Instagram, Facebook, and homepage create virtual contact between intergenerational organizations locally and nationally. We identify and repost varied content (e.g., age, race, ethnicity, sexual and gender identification, activity portfolios) across platforms. Our aim is to portray various ways of aging that include sociodemographic identities and other personal characteristics. We also help disseminate news from other organizations that provide intergenerational programming in a weekly "shout out."

Increasing awareness of issues related to intersectional ageism + racism + sexism + isms aligns with our goal of decreasing discrimination at large. CHAI provides a new psychological framework for audiences to imagine, thereby subtly challenging viewers' stereotypes and presenting new possibilities.

In full transparency, our social media approach has not been tested. Stay tuned for more information.

Intergenerational Programs Targeting Upstream Factors

Tutoring programs, such as AARP's Experience Corps, and intergenerational home-sharing programs, such as those at NYU, are examples of intergenerational programs that focus on essential access to quality education and affordable housing.



AARP's Experience Corps program was designed to recruit older adults, many of whom are African American, to tutor minoritized children in under-resourced communities. Recruitment, training, supervision, acknowledgement, and ongoing supervision were institutional mechanisms that shaped the mentor-mentee relations. Importantly, volunteers who received a stipend committed to 15 hours per week, and research shows that stipended volunteers were more likely to complete the academic year when compared to those without stipends. The body of research on this high-intensity intergenerational tutoring program is compelling. Older volunteers, especially those who committed to higher levels of hours and months, showed reductions in depression, risk for falls, improved cognitive functioning, and reported higher levels of purpose and life satisfaction (Hong and Morrow-Howell, 2010 see also AARP's Impact Research) Children's reading outcomes also improved with a volunteer (Gattis et al., 2010).

Importantly, this intervention targeted reading and math comprehension at a sensitive developmental period, during second and third grade, which predicts attendance in and completion of high school. Positive outcomes also were identified in the families and neighbors of the older tutors (Morrow-Howell et al., 2008). Clearly, this program is intergenerational, yet its focus is ensuring minoritized children have access to high quality education, while simultaneously improving various health dimensions among older minoritized adults. From a critical race perspective, this intergenerational program targets upstream factors: access to quality education and social resources that bolster health.

NYU's intergenerational home-share program (CHAI at NYU), which matches adults ages 60 and older with graduate students in affordable, safe, and secure housing, is another example that looks at upstream factors. The benefits to emerging and older adults are compelling: increased housing and economic security, socialization, reduced financial stress and improved mental health (Gonzales, 2021; Gonzales et al., 2020).

We intentionally recruit minoritized graduate students (i.e., first generation students, racial and ethnic minorities, international students) as well as minoritized older adults (i.e., women, racial and ethnic minorities, sexual and gender minorities). All good intentions aside, we quickly learned of many structural barriers, such as federal policy barriers pertaining to public benefits such as SSI, SNAP, Medicaid, and SCRIE (Gonzales et al., 2021b; Merz et al., 2022). Policy advocacy efforts are necessary to address these issues of inclusion if we are to tackle the nation's housing and affordability crises (Merz et al., 2022). We also learned that recruiting older adults was most effective, and cost the least, with social media as opposed to community listening sessions (Merz et al., 2023).



Conclusion

Intergenerational programs hold tremendous promise to achieve an equitable and peaceful society, in an ever-diversifying nation. The challenges facing us today are dynamic, situated in complex historical and political contexts. Many articles in this issue of *Generations Journal* describe powerful intergenerational programs that are happening nationwide. The challenge now is to organize ourselves, critically reflect upon various theoretical frameworks and interventions that show promise, be inclusive in the work, and advocate for changes to national policies. We hope the ideas in this article spark innovation, and that researchers, practitioners, funders, and policymakers are inspired to bring diverse generations together to achieve an equitable and peaceful society.

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