Socrates Café for Older Adults
Intergenerational Connectedness Through Facilitated Conversation

ABSTRACT
Opportunities for social connectedness are important for older adults’ psychosocial well-being. Social connections through intergenerational engagement provide older adults benefits such as increased generativity, improved cognitive functioning, and a greater sense of self-worth. The facilitated discussion known as Socrates Café is ideally suited for bridging generation gaps and inviting self-expression. Socrates Cafés provide an alternative to more traditional social programming by promoting communal inquiry and substantive reflection on questions of value and meaning. In a study of an intergenerational Socrates Café with college students and low-income older adults, findings indicated reduced ageism and stereotyping from students, the formation of relationships between students and older adults, and a recognition from older adults that they had valuable insights to share with younger generations. Health professionals wishing to improve psychosocial health for older adults may consider setting up an intergenerational Socrates Café. [Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services, 57(1), 11-15.]

Conversation and fellowship with others are important activities for all human beings as part of a fulfilling, enriching life. Increased social connection through family and nonfamily relationships contributes to positive mental health and reduces vulnerability to chronic or pathological depression (Seedsman, 2017). Finding opportunities for social connection may become more difficult for individuals as they age. Due to factors such as decreased mobility, death of a spouse, or moving to a new location, older adults are more at risk for social isolation (Dinkins, 2017). Such isolation is likely to have a negative impact on mental and physical health. Loneliness has been linked to adverse health outcomes (Chen, Dattilo, & Frias, 2018), and depression and poor mental health have been found to increase long-term risk for dementia and suicide, worsen outcomes for patients with cardiac disease, and reduce overall quality of life (Hagert, 2017).

One way to improve social connectedness for older adults is to create opportunities for intergenerational engagement (Seedsman, 2017). Younger and older generations tend to assume they lack common interests, so discussion and social engagement can be difficult or anxiety-producing (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018). An effective way past this challenge is to invite intergenerational groups into facilitated conversation with an explicit purpose. The
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together for approximately 1 hour and engage in community inquiry around a subject of participants’ choosing, usually a question of value, meaning, or quality of life. Topics might range from “What is happiness?” to “What does it mean to be a good friend?” or “Does wisdom come with age?” Once a topic is chosen, the facilitator uses the Socratic method to guide the conversation, ask follow-up questions, and gently try to bring all participants into the conversation. The Socratic method is guided by Socrates’ historical principles of care for others and genuine shared inquiry in which no individual is an expert, and all are expected to learn from each other (Dinkins, 2015). Intergenerational Socrates Cafés are relatively easy to organize and can offer a great benefit to older adults. This article will explore an example of an intergenerational Socrates Café with college students and other options for intergenerational Cafés.

(Andreoletti & Howard, 2018, p. 54). Older adults interacting with students in an intergenerational program “recognized their value as educators” (Roodin, Brown, & Shedlock, 2013, p. 15).

Another important benefit of intergenerational engagement is its ability to counter ageism and ageist stereotyping. Negative effects from ageism and internalizing ageist stereotypes interfere with adults experiencing a good life (Chen et al., 2018). In one study, after college students participated in intergenerational service learning, many reported their negative stereotypes were disconfirmed (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018). Students also realized “how much younger and older adults actually have in common” (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018, p. 54). Another study of intergenerational service learning with college students found a significant increase in students’ positive attitudes toward older adults (Penick, Fallshore, & Spencer, 2014). Several studies have shown that youth who have intergenerational engagement experiences in settings designed for older adults, such as senior centers, assisted living facilities, and retirement communities, report improved attitudes toward older adults (Hahn, Kinney, & Heston, 2018).

Intergenerational engagement also provides generalized benefits. A literature review of studies of intergenerational programs found benefits to cognitive functioning, emotional health, and social well-being for participating older adults, helping them feel valued and respected with increased sense of self-worth (Park, 2014). Another literature review found multiple studies in which older adults reported “positive companionship, social stimulation, and better understanding of youth” (Roodin et al., 2013, p. 15). They reported that their interaction with students improved their quality of life and helped them develop “new points of view and activities, and newfound social and communication skills” (Roodin et al., 2013, p. 15).

**BENEFITS OF INTERGENERATIONAL ENGAGEMENT**

Intergenerational engagement has a variety of benefits for older adults and society as a whole. One primary benefit is older adults’ increased sense of connectedness to younger generations and the future of society. Older adults participating in intergenerational programs have reported increased generativity and noted that their interactions with youth gave them a more positive view of young people, countered their negative misconceptions about youth, and gave them “hope for the world” (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018, p. 54). Several studies have shown that youth who have intergenerational engagement experiences in settings designed for older adults, such as senior centers, assisted living facilities, and retirement communities, report improved attitudes toward older adults (Hahn, Kinney, & Heston, 2018).

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**BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY PHILOSOPHY FOR OLDER ADULTS**

Intergenerational or otherwise, community philosophy has its own benefits for older adults as a form of life-long learning. The benefits of life-long learning go beyond cognitive function to psychosocial well-being and overall health (Narushima, Liu, & Diestelkamp, 2013). Community philosophy is designed to be focused on process rather than outcomes (Gallagher, 2016). The process of discussing questions of value to one’s life is its own reward, even if no conclusions are reached (Gallagher, 2016). The power of community philosophy was promoted in ancient times. Socrates exhorted the Athenians that “the unexamined life is not worth living” (Plato, ~390 BCE/1981, p. 41) and encouraged everyone from elder statesmen and priests to youth in school to talk with each other and question their values and judgments. Likewise,
Aristotle (~340 BCE/2014) argued that human flourishing and happiness, eudaimonia, required engagement of the mind in the daily life of citizenship.

Community philosophy invites participants to reason and reflect on how to live a good life, which can be particularly beneficial for older adults. Key to communication and relationships is self-disclosure of “feelings, ideas, values, and perspectives,” and older adults tend to self-disclose these inner thoughts and experiences less than younger individuals (Strom & Strom, 2015, p. 45). Community philosophy, and especially Socrates Café, is ideal for promoting such self-disclosure because it invites participants into reciprocal learning and shared growth in a structured way. Without such a structure, older and younger adults are likely to have difficulty thinking of topics they can be sure they both want to discuss. Having a well-designed forum that “motivates self-disclosure by both generations” can help sustain dialogue (Strom & Strom, 2015, p. 48).

Participants in a Socrates Café at an elder day center in Ireland reported that the activity brought individuals together for stimulating conversation and let them “come to know and understand other people better” (Gallagher, 2016, p. 71). All participants found the Café to be worthwhile and said that they looked forward to participating each time. The main benefits described by participants were social interaction and mental and emotional stimulation. Participants reported that they continued to think about the issues from the Café discussion in the following days: “I pick over things; I mull over it” (Gallagher, 2016, p. 73). Participants noted the difference between the Socrates Café and other available activities: “It’s not like anything else that happens…parties or sing-songs or entertainment or quizzes, or maybe a computer course from time to time or art projects that happen…it’s quite different from all of those things” (Gallagher, 2016, p. 74). Of particular note in this Socrates Café study is that participants included individuals with sensory disabilities, mobility issues, and some degree of dementia, yet all were able to express themselves and “show their personality and tell about their lives” (Gallagher, 2016, p. 75).

INTERGENERATIONAL SOCRATES CAFÉ

In teaching a course called Philosophy in Practice at Wofford College, the current author implemented research to assess the feasibility and benefits of college students engaging with older adults in a Socrates Café. Students facilitated Cafés with low-income older adults in the local community. Knowing that students often feel unprepared to work with older adults and may struggle to get past “shyness, fear, and uneasiness” (Hahn et al., 2018, p. 2), the author prepared students not only on the techniques of facilitating a Socrates Café but in what to expect from interactions with older adults with a wide range of physical and cognitive abilities and varying levels of education from 8th grade to higher degrees. The author and students discussed how the guidelines for Socrates Café might have to be altered for this context, especially if older adults had trouble hearing or focusing on a longer discussion.

Research

Groups of three or four students went to low-income apartments with older adult community programs and community centers that cater to low-income older adults. In these settings, students engaged with older adults who chose to participate in a Socrates Café. The group sizes of the older adults ranged from five to 15. Students suggested topics that would engage older adults or let them suggest their own. Some topics they picked included “What is happiness?”, “What is a home?”, and “Why do young people want to talk to old people?”

Because the Socrates Café was a new experience for all older adult participants, the author wanted them to engage in that activity and be able to enjoy it without being discouraged by having to participate in research. Therefore, the assessment of the Café was indirect through student reporting. Students were trained in phenomenological participant–observer techniques. Each student wrote a reflection within 24 hours of participation in each Café. The names of the older adults have been changed to protect anonymity. The study was approved by the Wofford College Institutional Review Board.

One student’s report of a Socrates Café at a low-income apartment building gives a sense of how the Cafés tended to proceed:

We had everyone stay in the seats they already had and face the front of the room, where two of us facilitated. Since this was our first Café with this group, we suggested a question to start with: “What is success?” This question then led to follow-up questions such as, “What does it take to become successful?” and “Is not succeeding the same as failure?” There was a great deal of participation in that room filled with wisdom and experience. The points that the residents made that stuck out most to me were that success requires setting goals, we must be motivated to be successful, and that we must know how to be patient and interdependent in order to succeed: success does not occur in isolation. That final point surprised and struck me best. This room was filled with people who worked hard to simply survive for all their lives, yet they chose not to credit it to themselves, but always to relationships with other people and relationships with the Divine. As I was leaving, I knew without question that I ought to come back for the sake of future engagement with these residents. I do not feel like this interaction should be isolated to merely the scheduled two occurrences. In fact, I think it would be a shame to do so.

Even in this first meeting of students and older adults, older adults were engaged and actively participating, and students found they appreciated older
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Setting up and facilitating an intergenerational Socrates Café can involve formalized arrangements with students in high school or college, but such arrangements are not necessary. Any Socrates Café that is accessible to older adults can easily become intergenerational by inviting the community. For instance, the current author runs a monthly Socrates Café at a local library open to anyone who wishes to attend. Most participants are retired and bring with them their experiences as teachers, engineers, military officers, parents, and community members. The Café is also joined by library staff ages 30 to 40 and young members of the local high school’s philosophy club. Every month, participants from these different generations share their experiences and discuss their values and how they find meaning in their lives. It is clear
in this setting that older adults can offer especially valuable contributions to the conversation because of their accumulated losses and joys, their witnessing of many cultural and technological changes over their lifetime, and years of experience in self-reflection. Even with this wealth of experience, older adults appear to be genuinely interested in the perspectives of the youngest participants and frequently will ask them directly, “What do you younger folks think on this issue?”

Even with the advent of online communication and social media, individuals of all ages can struggle to feel connected, and members of each generation tend to communicate within their own generation (Strom & Strom, 2015). Intergenerational programs can bridge this gap for older adults and are likely to be beneficial to mental and physical health, with very low risk for harm. A survey of multiple studies showed that interventions implemented in smaller groups that allowed greater opportunity for meaningful interaction, such as small group discussions, were more effective in achieving desired psychosocial outcomes than activities for larger groups such as attending a play performed by the local youth (Park, 2014). Furthermore, community philosophy “adds an important dimension of lifelong learning...in elder care settings and...can make a qualitative difference in participants’ lives” (Gallagher, 2016, p. 75). Public health professionals may want to create opportunities for older adults to participate in Socrates Cafés as an alternative to other more simply recreational or social activities available. Older adults may forget that they can learn new things and develop new viewpoints, and the opportunity to do so can be empowering and energizing.

Facilitating a Socrates Café requires no formal training. Anyone who wishes can read Phillips’ (2002) accessible book that provides all the necessary guidelines. Any adult reasonably comfortable in social settings could run a Socrates Café at no cost or with a small cost for coffee and snacks. Nursing homes, daycare centers, churches, libraries, community centers, and low-income housing can all serve as effective locations for a Socrates Café. Nurses or other health care professionals wishing to start a Café could facilitate it themselves or invite a local community leader or college professor to do so, or they could approach a local university or high school to ask if any teachers want to set up an intergenerational opportunity with their students. Socrates Cafés tend to be fun and engaging for all involved, regardless of age or ability. Thus, health care professionals who start a Socrates Café may find that it helps older adults involved and is enjoyable for themselves as well.

REFERENCES

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