

THEory into ACTion

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Can Community Engagement Promote Healthy Aging?

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As the lifespan of an average person increases in the nation, the retirement age remains the same (U.S. Social Security Administration, 2013). The repercussions of this discrepancy go beyond the economic strain of the nation as retired community members are at more risk of falling victims to age-related decline. Post-retirement stagnation and social withdrawal often lead to increased incidence of neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. Community engagement and mental and physical stimulation may serve a protective role in maintaining functioning of aging community dwellers (Willis & Schaie, 2009). This suggests an opportunity for community psychologists to design and build programs that can maximize the potential benefits for older adults and the communities in which they reside. This approach may further set the stage within community psychology for beginning to reduce the stigma associated with growing old portrayed in Western cultural values – an issue ignored by most of psychology (Sheung-Tak & Heller, 2009).

Decreases in functioning resulting from diminishing activity following retirement may eventually lead to premature loss of independence of older adults – a consequence that has an effect on individuals, families, and entire communities. Fortunately, researchers exploring factors leading to successful aging have demonstrated that environmental stimulation can lead to maintenance or even improvement in functioning (Willis & Schaie, 2009). For instance, Carlson et al. (2009) found that older adults demonstrated increased brain activity following participation

in an intergenerational program designed to help elementary school children with their reading skills and conflict resolution. This effect was still measurable six months after the completion of the study. The involvement of older adults in this research simultaneously incorporated social engagement as well as physical and mental stimulation. In another study, participating older adults underwent training targeting specific abilities: memory, reasoning, and speed of processing (Willis et al., 2006). Results demonstrated positive long-term effects of training on the targeted abilities of the sample of older adults. Consequently, the notion of the benefits of engagement late into old age presents a chance for community psychologists to emphasize the importance of remaining active beyond retirement. The positive effects of those types of programs and opportunities have the potential to not only impact the health of the retirees but also the broader communities in which they reside.

Participation in community life may increase sense of community through civic engagement. According to Rappaport (1987), greater civic engagement may be a protective factor, as it can lead to higher sense of community which, in turn, can stimulate increased activity. Brodsky, O'Campo, and Aronson (1999) found that older adults already tend to report higher sense of community as compared to their younger counterparts, regardless of the length of residence in a particular community. This knowledge may be useful in designing community interventions that maximize and engage older adults. Additionally, Berkman (2001) found that health promotion is not only an individual concern, but that it is a family and community matter. He encouraged professionals to base interventions on the network of already existing social relations as those connections form the desirable basis for sustained behaviors of community dwellers. He proposed that the actions of an individual are likely to be influenced by the values that the community sets for its members. Similarly, Moos (2003) focused on evaluating the

importance of social context and its potential to affect behavioral choices. He pointed to the dynamic reciprocal relationship of individuals within communities, while examining how the interplay of those forces can be used as protective factors in promoting wellness. He referenced “powerful settings” (p. 1) to indicate the potential of positive effects of community characteristics on the wellbeing of their inhabitants and suggested that interventions incorporating meaningful relationships, continuous personal enhancement, and stimulating nature may have the highest potential to serve a protective role against personal decline and stagnation. Not surprisingly, older adults tend to enjoy caring for their neighbors and friends in informal ways even more than they enjoy formal volunteering (i.e. community activism; Martinez, Crook, Kim, & Tanner, 2011). Thus, older adults benefiting from this approach to wellness may feel more empowered to continue to lead independent lifestyles and to regularly contribute to their own communities by taking advantage of specifically designed programs (i.e. volunteering with local libraries or community organizations, working with the youth through intergenerational programs).

Within the field of community psychology, individual empowerment goes beyond the personal sense of control, as it emphasizes community connectedness, participation, and relationship building – all of which have the potential to support the wellbeing of older adults (Rappaport, 1987). Prevention of the negative age-related effects on retired older adults’ health and independence should be grounded in these values. Designing community-wide interventions focusing on the mutual benefits of individuals and their entire communities will encourage a paradigm shift in how we approach post-retirement decline.

This is part of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Bill Berkowitz at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu.

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