BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS THROUGH THE POWER OF SPOKEN WORD: ORAL HISTORY AS SOCIAL WORK PEDAGOGY

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Introduction

• Each day in the United States, 10,000 people are turning 65 years old and this trend is projected to maintain for the next 15 years (Heise, Johnsen, Himes, & Wing (2012).

• Increased demand for services is coupled with ominous findings that older adults will face inadequate care due to workforce shortages (Bartels & Naslund, 2013)

• It is imperative that effective teaching methods are implemented to educate, familiarize, and connect incoming generations of social workers with the older adult population

• Documenting life stories (oral history) provides an opportunity to inform the practice of social work of older adults from disenfranchised groups and immigrant or refugee backgrounds and address the intricacies of working in diverse and complex contexts (Lenette, Cox, & Brough, 2015)

• The purpose of this study was to assess student learning outcomes of an oral history project and gather insight into the project experience for students in a Master’s level Human Behavior course
Social Work Relevance

- A pretest-posttest study, using oral history interviews, evaluated BSW student attitudes towards older adults, future career plans, and geriatric social work competencies (Maschi, MacMillan, Pardasani, Lee, & Moreno, 2012):
  - Students who both conducted and presented the oral history interview on the older adult were significantly more likely to report future career plans to work with older adults and higher levels of geriatric competencies
  - This study demonstrated the benefits of experiential learning using different formats for different learning styles (Maschi et al., 2012)
  - Overarching goal of this study was to improve pedagogy in social work education, with respect to human behavior in the social environment
    - Conducting the oral history interview fosters a connection between the older adult and student, thereby demystifying the aging process and opening the gap for incoming social workers to consider a career in working with the aging population
    - Increasing the health care workforce for older Americans begins with our educational system and the critical evaluation of social work teaching methods and curricula
Cross-cultural Relevance

• “Stories, you see, are not just entertainment. Stories are power. They reflect the deepest, most intimate perceptions, relationships, and attitudes of a people. Stories show how a people, a culture, thinks” (Keesig-Tobias, 1990, p. 92)

• Youth is fetishized in American culture; a study by Santiago (2013) found that aging was associated with limitations pertaining to physiological functioning, attractiveness, respect from others and society, and physical and cognitive abilities.
  • Millennial students perceived that older adults experienced a loss of respect from others in contexts, such as occupational settings, health care settings, and overall (Santiago, 2013)
  • However, evidence indicates that millennials’ respect for their elders is higher among African-American, Latino-American, and Native-American millennials (Santiago, 2013):
    • In [my country] we don’t have nursing homes for the aged…a nursing home is not a place where people live unless they are very sick. We live, how do you say, in multi-generational homes. We take care of our aged. (p. 101)
Methods

• A Mixed-methods Design

• **Sample:** secondary data was used in the form of oral history projects written by first-year MSW students enrolled in a two-semester human behavior sequence at Long Beach State. Non-probability sampling was conducted using purposive and convenience sampling procedures. A total of 51 projects were reviewed both quantitatively and qualitatively by the student researcher and a faculty researcher, who functioned in the role of second reviewer.

• **Qualitative methods** extracted overarching themes from the final section of the oral history project, which pertained to student reflections on the overall learning experience, applying human behavior concepts to the older adult interviewee’s lifespan, the oral history interview process, and its relevance to the field of social work.

• **Quantitative Instrument:** the Record Review was an electronic questionnaire designed by student researcher using Google Forms and was divided into three sections: life transitions, theories, and culture.
  - Record Review used a Likert scaling format of 0-4 to measure student learning outcome, where 0=no discussion of the topic and 4=full description of topic (from course content) and behavioral connection to it (from oral history interview).
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<th>Methods (cont’d)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Quantitative</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Data gathering:</strong> there were two sets of data per subject (i.e., oral history paper), as it was reviewed by student and faculty researcher to allow for interrater reliability testing</td>
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<td><strong>Data analysis:</strong> data were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. One-way ANOVA was used to assess variability in ratings across the four most frequently used theories</td>
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<td><strong>Qualitative</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Data gathering:</strong> relying on inductive inquiry, open coding was used to record words, themes, and characters. Content analysis was used to explore manifest and latent content</td>
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<td><strong>Data Analysis:</strong> data were analyzed for themes using constant comparative analysis. Prevalent themes were extracted if they appeared in both reviewers’ qualitative data analysis. Results were reported using frequencies and percentages and supplemented by verbatim quotes</td>
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Quantitative Results

- Older adult interviewees comprised a diverse sample of at least 18 different ethnic/racial backgrounds, with 45.1% Hispanic/Latino, 31.4% White, 13.7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3.9% African American, and 5.9% biracial/other. Majority (60.8%) were female and 54.9% immigrated to United States at some point in their lives. These data are comparable to CSULB student demographics.

- Most prevalent theories students chose to analyze: Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development, Attachment Theory, Lifespan Theory, and Systems Theory. Students performed better in applying Theory 1 than Theory 2: 82.4% and 62.5% respectively scored 4.0 (out of 0-4). Students appeared more knowledgeable about Erikson’s Theory and students who analyzed Lifespan Theory as Theory 1 of their project scored significantly lower ratings (F=5.47, p=.004).

- Majority of students (96.1%) achieved a Life Transition Rating of 4.0 (out of 0-4), indicating a positive learning outcome regarding ability to integrate course material into older adult’s oral history.

- Cultural Ratings were predominantly 4.0 (88.2%), followed by 3.5 and 3.0 (7.8% and 3.9%, respectively). No project received a Cultural Rating below 3.0 and 96.1% of students addressed oppression in their paper.
Qualitative Results

- The most prominent overarching theme extracted from data was change in student perceptions towards aging (80.4%) after completing oral history project. Students articulated increased level of respect for older adults (39.0%), followed closely by a more positive view of aging (36.6%).

- The second theme found was that the oral history project enhanced learning of human behavior course content (74.0%), specifically around social work theory (42.1%) and human development/life transitions (39.5%).

- Students learned how to age well from older adult interviewees (71.0%), by either following their examples or learning from their mistakes. Both internal and external factors were mentioned:
  - Notable external factors included staying active with physical exercise and routine health maintenance (47.2%)
  - More noteworthy internal factors mentioned were mindfulness and acceptance (45%)
  - Resilience of the older adult was found as the fourth major theme by researchers (65.0%)
Discussion

• “This interview helped reinforce many beliefs regarding the aging process, as well as additional core values. Racial/Cultural Identity Development Model helped to explore values and beliefs within J.’s cultural identity…What this interview has taught me regarding the aging process is, for one, it really does depend on how you handle aging. Like J., I hope that when I get to 55 years of age, I am as active with work or other activities. There are many times I get concerned when thinking about aging, but from the many lessons that I have learned from J., one would be to take it one day at a time.”

• Results of this study were consistent with the literature, supporting interactive learning (i.e., the oral history project) as an effective teaching method

• Learning outcome regarding theoretical application was the most salient across both quantitative ratings and qualitative extractions

• Results endorsed oral history as an interactive and enlivened learning method that bolsters the need to restructure social work curricula for both undergraduate and graduate social work programs. This may motivate BSWs and MSWs to subsequently choose an aging concentration, which can lead to a career working with older adults.
References


