Effectiveness of an Interactive Community Empowerment Program

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Abstract

Intergenerational, integrated, person-centered empowerment is essential for people in place. This study clarified the effects of a program that aimed to examine well-being and community empowerment in community-dwelling individuals. Focus group interviews were conducted to evaluate the outcomes of an interactive program and were developed by residents as part of a community empowerment program. The results indicated that these intergenerational activities engendered health-related awareness in participants. Further research is required to evaluate these issues over a longer period.

Keywords: *Intergenerational, integrated, person-centered empowerment*

1. Introduction

With an increasing number of aging societies worldwide, intergenerational practices are an effective means of preventing declines in elderly individuals' health (Stanton and Tench, 2003). The aims of intergenerational practice are to promote the well-being of not only elderly individuals but also other generations such as children (Raynes and Rawlings, 2004). Such practice promotes the establishment of relationships, changes in attitudes, and increased community cohesion. It also helps to encourage social behavior and supports learning (Abrams et al., 2006). In some cases, in which the main aims of projects were to encourage interaction between younger and older individuals, activities were of secondary importance (Pain, 2005). For example, a project that involved joint outings and aimed to improve understanding, well-being, and relationships between generations used the outings as a means of generating the necessary interaction to achieve the desired outcomes (Krout and Pogorzala, 2002). In contrast, in an intergenerational fitness project that focused on achieving health outcomes, activity was integral to achieving those outcomes (Reinders et al., 2015). In general, intergenerational practice in Japan is characterized by small-scale, intensive projects rather than large-scale

programs. There are three common areas within which such activities are performed: 1) intergenerational groups involving various types of event such as Christmas parties, 2) projects that bring younger and older people together via activities that promote positive health and wellbeing, and 3) types of education in history or story telling (Raynes, 2004).

Moreover, intergenerational activity is currently used for community empowerment purposes. It creates communities that can meet their own needs in an interdependent manner by drawing on many levels of contribution to improve participants' lives throughout the lifespan, regardless of where they live (Anme, 2015).

Since 2013, the "Happy Project" has been conducted in Joso city, Japan, which is a medium-sized city with a population of 65,200. This community empowerment program aimed to promote well-being in the area. The purpose of this study was to clarify the effectiveness of the intergenerational community empowerment program.

2. Method

2.1 Developing interactive community empowerment exercises

Interactive community empowerment exercises were developed mainly by residents living in the community and based on three factors: 1) medically proven exercises, 2) exercises for people of all ages, and 3) the exercise to music（Figure1, Figure2）. First, professionals developed exercises to prevent declines in health, which were then advertised and selected by the residents. Relevant lyrics were developed by many of the residents. In addition, exercises were developed for children's and samba versions of the program for children and Brazilians who lived in Japan, respectively.

Figure 1. Developing exercise patterns with community residents

Figure 2. Three types of activity were developed

Adult version (left), sitting version (upper right), children's version (lower right)

2.2 Effective use of the original exercises

A volunteer system was created to disseminate the exercises throughout the city, and volunteers acted as instructors for the original exercises for residents participating in the projects. Participants were taught the exercises once per month at the community center. The volunteers were aged between 50 and 80 years.

The exercises were included not only to prevent disability but also to encourage interaction between community dwellers. Many events were conducted to facilitate multigenerational interaction in the city. These exercises were used to foster interaction in such events.

2.3 Evaluation

Four focus group interviews involving 20 volunteers were conducted to promote the program. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. The interview content was as follows: 1) reason to attend the program, 2) factors promoting the program, and 3) ideas to enhance the program.

3. Results

Opinions were classified according to the seven essentials of empowerment, as follows:

3.1 Have Clear Objectives

Participants' statement included, "with intergenerational activities, we are sure to realize interdependence [in the] community, to help each other with warmth" and "our target is to help people to belong the community".

3.2 Enjoy Relationships

Activities strengthened the ties between participants, reflecting opinion such as "I feel confident that I am a member of the community," "I have self-efficacy [with regard] to helping other people," "I enjoy so much with this," and "I have more effective communication skills."

3.3 Create Networks of Empathy

Constructive ideas for creating networks of empathy, such as "nongovernment and government

organizations should share information and collaborate to ensure improvement" and "volunteers combine support the difficulties of participants" emerged.

3.4 Produce a Sense of Comfort

Opinions such as "use seasonal events to offer people comfort" and "I felt relax not sticking to one role of volunteer or family supporter." emerged.

3.5 Offer Flexible Forms of Participation

Participants stated, "flexibility is essential to keep going" and "it is easy to participate, because sometimes I am a leader and sometimes I am a follower."

3.6 Always Aim for Development

Opinions such as "songs are easy to sing" and "it is fun if we use the exercises as daily activities" were expressed by volunteers.

3.7 Have Perspective on Evaluation

Opinions such as "evaluation from the participants is so positive" and "we are so healthy and happy to participate in this project" also emerged.

4. Discussion

The findings revealed that project participants maintained their interest in health and the motivation to support their communities one year subsequent to participation in the program. Their opinions reflected the essential factors involved in the effective promotion of empowerment, as shown below (Table 1; Anme and McCall, 2008).

Table 1. Seven tips for promoting empowerment (Anme and McCall, 2008)

1.Have clear objectives
2.Enjoy relationships
3.Create networks of empathy
4.Produce a sense of comfort
5.Offer flexible forms of participation
6.Always aim for development
7.Have a perspective of evaluation

4.1 Have Clear Objectives

In initiating a project, clear objectives are essential to encourage people to work toward goals together. In particular, the involvement of all relevant subjects is key. "Subjects" not only refers to individuals who are directly involved in the matter at hand but also includes everyone with

whom the subjects come into contact such as those in need of support, employers, consumers' friends and families, and residents of the community associated with the particular project. Clear objectives, which reflect the values of the subjects, should be established based on their needs. These values include standards and policies that must be maintained within the process of realizing the target conditions. Each and every member's values are combined with general guidelines, guidelines for shared action, and the group's basic thought patterns and principles.

Presenting subjects with results that match their values will often lead to a sense of unity and the will to participate; however, it is difficult to achieve a sense of satisfaction by simply sharing values to suit the occasion for a particular project or exercise. The reason for this is that we are able to affirm the meaning of our existence or work when we connect or empathize with our peers or others in society. Effective steps in the process involve attaching importance to individual values while recognizing those of the group or organization and affirming such matters verbally.

A need for values that are based on empathy will arise and enable members to understand and feel that they can exert an impact on issues, new ideas, and future activities, and knowledge worth sharing with others. Such values are determined by participating members.

Another recommendation is to ask someone other than the members of the group, such as an individual in a supporting role or an external expert, to establish such values. It is preferable to obtain multifaceted opinions from experts concerning the social values of a particular initiative and how it might be possible to draw out more capacities.

4.2 Enjoy Relationships

This refers to finding enjoyment in associations between people and communities, or the process of working on a theme. Sharing enjoyment with others is the most important principle of empowerment, as it relies largely on self-actualization based on empathy. The important factors that enable people to share enjoyment include an open atmosphere that invites voluntary involvement and prompts people to enjoy associating with others; a sense of reciprocity that gives people a sense that they are gaining something, although there is no need to identify what that something is; and above all, a sense of trust. Confucius said, "One who knows is no match for one who likes. One who likes is no match for one who enjoys." The most effective way to achieve something is to enjoy it.

Empowerment refers to empowerment through connections. There is a need to boost the ties between individuals and communities and create environments that enable people to enjoy those connections.

4.3 Create Networks of Empathy

Networks of empathy allow subjects to experience a sense of closeness and stimulation while feeling connected. Closeness refers to a relaxed sense of security, while stimulation refers to a sharp sense of tension. The combination of these factors is known to invigorate empowerment.

When personal relationships between individuals are strong with a high degree of closeness, activities within the community as a whole are enriched, as the trust that is nurtured via daily

personal exchange will be integrated into new activities. Close associations can also be developed via wider activities. In contrast, the sense of stimulation will increase with opportunities to belong to multiple groups, depending on the situation. Stimuli are encountered via new positions within a new group, outside the constraints of daily associations.

To promote the development of networks of empathy, regular and stimulating new activities can be combined and steps taken to boost personal relationships with new people and expand the scope of stimulating topics.

4.4 Produce a Sense of Comfort

Neuroscience has revealed that the brain experiences comfort from rhythm, which has been demonstrated in everything that exists in the natural world. From the rhythm of plants and animals during growth to the rhythm of the expanding universe, periods of growth or suspension, and repetition and change, rhythm is found in all processes of growth and development. The same may be said for the growth of individuals, communities, and society, or the growth of relationships between people, people and communities, or people and society.

Therefore, to promote growth and development, it is crucial to create rhythm. Whether the subject is an individual, community, or organization, rhythm promotes growth. For example, if a person is facing challenges and biding his or her time, when the situation is viewed from a long-term perspective, it is often considered an opportunity for the person to take the next major step in their growth. The science of lifelong development indicates that the presence of vulnerability enables people to develop the strength required to overcome difficulties and the empathy required to be considerate of others. Aquaculture occasionally introduces large fish to create a tense environment for smaller fish, which is said to invigorate the smaller specimens, extending their longevity or improving their reproduction.

Rhythm serves as a wave motion in the human body, affecting processes such as the heartbeat or brain waves, to ensure that energy is spread. It can also invigorate individuals and communities.

The following types of initiative are effective in generating a sense of comfort:

1) Maintaining a balance between stimulation resulting from contact with a large number of people and opportunities to create close relationships

2) Maintaining a balance between debates designed to generate new ideas and training sessions aimed at disseminating existing knowledge

3) Creating a rhythm reflecting the movements of various people and performing an array of activities

4) Developing an awareness of the pulsation felt in response to actions such as personal interaction or development

5) Intentionally generating a rhythm that matches the occasion

To promote empowerment, rhythms should be created for periods of change and the maintenance of order. In this context, change refers to an individual's acute sensitivity to changes in his or her surroundings, and order reflects the effort required to organize methods that have been developed to adapt and expand changes more effectively and efficiently.

Efforts to cope with change should begin with a review of the standards and values of individuals and communities without identifying this as the basis of decision making. An assessment should be made regarding whether they are desirable or require modification and flexible adjustment according to need. The clarification and review of such bases is necessary.

In dealing with change, it is necessary to eliminate past concepts and methods. However, in reality, many individuals and communities are unskilled with respect to discarding conventional beliefs and tend to adhere to what they are familiar with, particularly if things have been going well. Rather than changing the course of their direction as necessary, they attempt to continue to use the same concepts and methods in a more efficient way.

It is essential to identify the factors that should be modified and those for which order should be maintained. Change is the opposite of order and leads to the destruction of preconceptions, or is itself the object of destruction.

Initiatives for coping with change include the review of the preconditions and frameworks underlying concepts, actions, and decision making in individuals or communities, an assessment of desirability, and modification as required. Initiatives for order include the dissemination of shared values and provide an opportunity for individuals and communities to demonstrate their skills and the beauty of rhythm, which can be interwoven to bring empowerment to life.

4.5 Offer Flexible Forms of Participation

A fundamental rule for the roles and states of individuals' participation is that of flexibility, which ensures that periodical changes are recognized. Examples of different forms of participation include the following (Fig. 3):

1) Coordinator: a person who accepts responsibility for the organization and adjusting plans

2) Core member: a person who is proactively involved in planning and operations

3) Active member: a person who is involved in activities on a daily basis

4) Cooperating member: a person who takes part in activities that interest them

5) Consulting member: a person who offers expert information and technical skills according to need

Activity planning should be considered to ensure that members at each level feel that they are able to fulfill their roles at any time. Rather than enforcing participation, an effective means of exercising successful empowerment is to create a mood that attracts people and enables them to participate in a casual, natural way. The forms of participation are made flexible and interchangeable to allow any member to be a core or active member according to need.
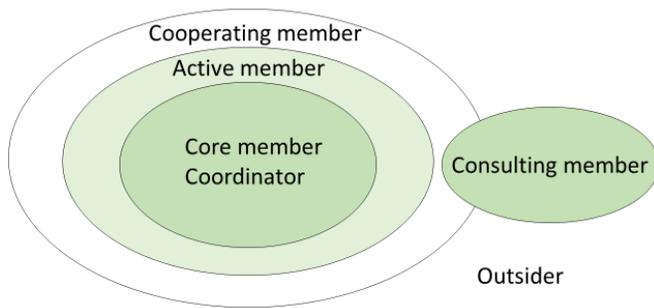
Figure 3. Types of participation

4.6 Always Aim for Development

Neither people nor communities remain unchanged in a single state. They are invigorated by moving toward the future, always aiming for growth. Rather than becoming fixed, various members are accepted in a flexible manner, with dynamic activities underway while they adapt to their environment.

Empowerment aims to invigorate individuals and communities by encouraging them to generate their potential power, which facilitates change. Charles Dederich, who founded a self-help community for drug abusers in the United States, introduced the expression, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." To maintain a positive perspective on the future, it is important is to be prepared, establish a plan, and continually aim for development.

4.7 Have a Perspective of Evaluation

To appreciate the significance of performing activities, it is necessary to have a perspective on their meaning and be able to evaluate them. It is possible to achieve a sense of satisfaction and develop a positive outlook for the future by being aware of the meaning of factors associated with the community and their activities and understanding the community's objectives and the results, impact, and cost of activities.

To promote empowerment, it is necessary to determine the value of the activities performed. This is assessed over the course of the activity, as required, to perform objective evaluation. Both apparent and potential strength levels—the extent of observable and potential strength—should be clarified. Furthermore, new methods are proposed and predictions made concerning issues that may arise in the future.

Presenting values based on assessment facilitates the identification of individual and community motivation for proactive participation. Effective assessment is performed by both internal and external parties who are able to recognize the essence of the community.

The purpose of evaluation is to apply the findings at the next stage. A positive attitude similar to that of Edison, who stated that he had never failed but found 10,000 ways that would not work, is required to use assessment as a means of further growth.

5. Conclusion

This original project was effective in developing participants' health-related awareness. However, further studies are required to evaluate these issues over a longer period.

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