

Chapter 8

Decreasing Social Isolation in Older Adults and Stereotypes in Students: Experiential Learning Creates Gerontological Providers

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ABSTRACT

The aging of the world is creating unique changes, specifically in resource management, health institutions, and social services. The need for gerontological social providers is increasing; however, student interest in working with older adults in social services is low. This lack of interest is correlated to negative stereotypes commonly displayed in media and propagated by culture. Additionally, ageist actions increase social isolation in older adults, which is associated with negative physical and mental health outcomes. Fortunately, positive exposure to older adults through experiential learning activities has demonstrated promise in decreasing students' ageist beliefs, thereby increasing their interest in working with older adults in the future. Furthermore, experiential learning activities decrease social isolation and increase feelings of importance and continued contribution for older adults. The chapter will discuss the use of a biopsychosocial assessment and intentional conversations between university students and older adults, the positive outcomes, and future implications.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the multifaceted issues emerging from the aging of the world's population, specifically ageism, social isolation of older adults, age-based stereotypes commonly held by university students, and the resulting lack of student interest in gerontological-based jobs in the social service field. Fortunately, research indicates a positive correlation between student engagement in experimental learning opportunities and increased student interest in careers related to the population and/or topic of the project. Therefore, the key to expanding the number of future social service workers in gerontology may lie in exposure to older adults in a positive setting where students' ageist ideas can be challenged, resulting in a genuine interest to have a career working with older adults.

The chapter will begin with a discussion of the aging world population and the unique changes this creates medically, psychologically, socially, and financially for communities. The need for well-trained social service providers with specifications in gerontology will be explored, as well as the concerning lack of interest in university students to work with older adults in the future. Job growth in social services is projected to grow 25%, and the increase in older adults is one of the primary reasons (Gerontological Social Workers, 2020).

Secondly, the chapter will discuss age-based stereotypes, which are reinforced by commonly-held ageist ideas and social media. Unfortunately, these erroneous beliefs lower student interest in working with older adults (Lun, 2021). The chapter will also discuss the dangers of ageism beyond the classroom, examining the dangers of social isolation in older adults and related negative consequences across physical, psychological, cognitive, and social domains. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly exacerbated social isolation for older adults, creating an even greater need for community responses to intervene with this acutely vulnerable population.

Lastly, the chapter will discuss the benefits of experimental learning and the potential benefits of decreasing social isolation in older adults and students' ageist beliefs, while also increasing student interest in working with older adults in the future. Experiential learning has been shown to provide numerous benefits to students, including increased confidence in skills and self-efficacy for future work; interest in similar work in career settings; and a deeper understanding of theories and application of academic concepts to practice (Jewell & Owens, 2017). Additionally, the chapter will provide an in-depth review of one university's use of experimental learning with the biopsychosocial model as a guide for older adult and student interactions. The chapter will discuss a pre-COVID project involving students conducting biopsychosocial assessments with older adults living in an assisted living program, the modification of the project to a series of weekly phone calls between students and older adults due to the pandemic, and use of scheduled

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