Community Development through Leisure Adult Learning: The Role of Mature Adult Groups

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Abstract

Community education groups can play an important role in reducing social isolationism among mature adults. The current study describes one such organization that has played an important part in the lives of about 30 mature women who have an average age of 76. Through semi-structured interviews, a thematic analysis showed that the organization has played a critical role in their social interactions, creating deep bonds among the women. What began as a group dedicated to education evolved into a strong social support network that has provided important social capital development for participants.

Key Words: community education, leisure education, mature adult learners, adult education, community organizations, community development

Introduction

Community is a critical element in the determination of how older citizens experience their lives and can be instrumental in determining an individual's well-being. Van Orden et al (2020) argue that the social interactions present in 'community' assist mature adults in their perspectives about the future, their life choices about health and personal care, and in their decisions to contribute to the communities around them. The socialization of a mature adult embedded in the interactions of a community is vitally important to quality of life, life expectancy, and life contributions. Additionally, a residual benefit from this greater independence and dependence on peers is a lower expenditure for health care.

Community includes some shared experiences, beliefs, or values, and a willingness and openness to communicate (Zetterberg, et al, 2023). Communication is critical in the construction and maintenance of community (Fletcher, 1989; Postman, 1985). For mature adults, communication can be challenging, depending upon the agility and mobility of the

individual or, conversely, fluency in the use of technology. Important carrying vehicles for communication are social organizations, including clubs, societies, and associations; civic-based organizations, religious bodies, philanthropic organizations, or clubs focused on a particular interest or broadly open to citizens. These organizations can be action oriented, such as raising funds for a local charity, or they might be educational, such as bible study. The focus of the current study is one self-sustaining, local organization, populated by a group of mature women, devoted to leisure, self-interest education programs.

There is a need to understand how leisure education tied into organizations works to build and emphasize community for multiple reasons. First, such organizations can have a positive impact on mature adults' quality of life and personal care. Second, such organizations can reflect community policy and resource distribution in creating opportunities for interaction. Third, organizations have the potential to improve an overall community through their work or, indirectly, through education and, fourth, organizations can be important for creating philanthropic and altruistic habits in society. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the study was to identify and describe how mature adult learners make use of leisure learning to develop themselves and their role in their community.

Background of the Study

Community Cohesion

Putnam (2000) and Postman (1985) argue that the intersectionality of individual entertainment and self-interest, combined with the power of media to entertain, has distracted individuals in such a manner that individualism has replaced collectivism. This impacts society, as the civic and community organizations struggle in previously unseen ways for membership, particularly among younger citizens. This means that a community's capital grows increasingly limited in its ability to maintain unity, promote civil, social dialogue, and work for the benefit and welfare of the community members at large.

The role of communities and community education is important for society, as the demonstration of collective interest outweighing individualism has the power to result in decision-making, policy formation, and a set of behaviours that uplift many. This occurs in multiple ways, including formal philanthropic and altruistic actions, some of which are tied to

formal organizations and to the informal behaviours that result in community members expressing a caring attitude toward their fellow community members.

Elements that are reflective of a community's strength include close personal networks, associational and community networks, and governance networks (Pope, 2006). These networks allow for individualized connections to others, potentially resulting in greater personal investment and involvement in community actions, resource development, and agency. Szreter (2002) notes that the different elements of community are important in that they allow for greater access to community engagement, whereby individuals have more opportunities to have voice in decision-making and priority setting.

How the concept of community is constructed has also been an important consideration, as it can be both a formal community development activity that results from specific actions or activities (Pope & Warr, 2005), or it can be the result of informal actions, events, and attitudes that arise, given some unplanned stimulus (Miller & Tuttle, 2006, 2007)

Leisure Education in Community

Individuals engage in learning for many reasons throughout their lifetime, including the functional aspects of what is needed for working, navigating life as a citizen, and for personal interests (Li et al, 2021). Much of this education is formalized through providers like schools, colleges, and government offices (Barry, 2014). But, outside of those environments, individuals can participate in education that helps them improve their quality of life by enhancing or creating a sense of leisure.

Leisure education has been well studied (Stebbins, 2002, 2004) and can range broadly from casual leisure education that is self-directed to the highly formal, offered through organizations (Lohr, et al, 2021). Research on leisure education has shown that it often results in unintended consequences that can also be an intentional purpose of participating, meaning that an individual intentionally takes a class or engages in some learning activity for the express purpose of 'making friends.' This means that leisure education is a key variable in the construction and maintenance of community (Lohr, et al, 2021).

Another aspect of leisure education is that it can be a tool to reduce the problems associated with social isolation, particularly among mature adults. Research from the National Institute on Ageing indicates that approximately 25% of those over the age of 65 suffer from social isolation, and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) reports that social isolation is a key contributing variable in dementia and other health risks. Cottrell et al (2018) however, found that social isolation is relatively easy to combat, and creating social networks through activities such as leisure education can be one of the most effective ways to improve the health of mature adults.

The integration of members into a community can be a complex process of experimentation coupled with intentional behaviours by community actors. As Mattessich and Monsey (1997) noted, there must be the capacity of individuals who are willing to engage, to bring people together to form a community. But Sudjic (1992) opposed this thinking, arguing that self-interest has increasingly become the dominant individual doctrine and that it prevents community from organizing and, further, that the ideals of community have never truly existed.

Despite contention over the nature of community's ability to exist, there are individuals who willingly engage in activities and processes in the hope of finding a personal support network. The idea of a peer support network has been shown to be critical in different times in a person's life. For mature adults, for example, the role of a family may fade as children grow and find their own independence, leaving parents home alone. With ageing and death, mature adults may increasingly find it difficult to acculturate into their community, and the CDC reported that over 33% of adult over the age of 45 consider themselves to be lonely (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

Leisure education is one tool that has the potential to bring individuals together for either enhancing some personal interest or developing, building, and sustaining personal relationships. In this manner, education can fit into the larger life course of an individual, as it serves as a form of reconceptualization of self (Tennant & Pogson, 1995). Leisure education serves the intentional role of personal learning desire with the unintended role of community building. This means that it is critical to understand how mature adults interact in their societies and how this impacts personal health. This descriptive study provides important information on how an intentional group of participants in a leisure education group see the role of that group in building and sustaining their community.

Research Methods

Considering the descriptive nature of the purpose of the study, a qualitative research paradigm was selected for use in the research. Qualitative research seeks to identify phenomenon, identifying characteristics, elements, and themes that describe individual and collective experiences. Specifically, the current study made use of phenomenology, seeking to describe the collective lived experiences of the eight women who participated in the study.

The phenomenological framework of qualitative research allows for data collection through the description of everyday, common experiences and can "describe the essence of a lived experience" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 81). Specifically, transcendental phenomenology guided the data collection and analysis, as this framework emphasizes the systematic collection and analysis of data, and requires the researchers to remove their own personal biases and experiences, allowing the study subjects to freely respond to structured questioning (Moustakas, 1994).

Data was collected in a midwestern community of approximately 300,000 people that has experienced a slow out-migration over the past three decades. Within the larger city are a number of neighbourhoods, including a 'pocket' neighbourhood near a public university. This neighbourhood developed along with the university's campus and, historically, faculty members and their families lived along these streets. The four-block radius has primarily older homes, built 100+ years ago, and the ageing population of this neighbourhood was the population of the study.

As a qualitative study, a small, purposive sample was selected for inclusion. The individuals selected were all part of a women's club that originally was tied to the faculty members who taught at the local college. The association was initially comprised of faculty spouses, but has since evolved to include other women in the area with an interest in the neighbourhood, gardening, etc. The association charges nominal dues and has 28 members. The women in the group have an average age of 76, and a pseudonym for the association, Oak Tree Association, was suggested by a member. There is no national affiliation of the organization, and it is entirely a local, historically perpetuating group.

The Oak Tree Association (OTA) meets monthly, except in the summer, typically in one of the member's homes. The women who participate walk to the meetings, often bring food to share, and a small subcommittee of the group sets the agenda for each meeting. Typical meetings include a speaker such as someone from the local agriculture extension office or a city council member. There are no written agendas for meetings, and although attendance at meetings varies, the current president indicated that about a dozen women typically attend, except for the holiday cookie-exchange program in December when all members attend.

The OTA uses a word-of-mouth program to share information about their next meeting and other topics. They also have an email list to distribute information. At the approval of the current OTA president, one of the researchers attended a meeting and described the research project and asked for participants. Of the 14 women in attendance, all volunteered and the researchers scheduled the first 8 who volunteered for interviews. As a disclosure on the bias of the researchers, both are middle aged, white individuals who have had no previous affiliation with the Oak Tree Association.

Findings

The eight interviews were conducted in the participants' homes over a three-day period in the summer of 2023. The interviews were audio-recorded only and averaged 64 minutes in length (the range was 47 minutes for the shortest, to 92 minutes for the longest). Each interview was transcribed and offered to the participant for a confirmatory review, with one participant making several changes to the text to clarify her comments.

Each participant was allowed to select a pseudonym and the average age of participants was 84. All lived independently in their homes (some with in-home assistance), five were widows, all were white, and two had adult children living with them. Through open coding, four themes were identified as recurring across participant data, including the role of the OTA in socializing, the importance of community, personal motivation, and the consequences of being involved in a small neighbourhood group.

Theme 1: Socialization

The OT was established in 1969 by several women who moved to the community due to their husbands taking faculty positions at the local college. These women faced similar challenges, including being in a new community and raising young families, and through faculty and neighbourhood events, the women came to know each other. None of the participants named the exact founders of the group, but the membership appeared to be fluid and open to anyone with an interest. The membership further evolved and included other women from the neighborhood, bounded by several blocks in what they called their "bubble," who had no affiliation with the college. Bess commented: "we were a pretty informal group back then, but we were close, know what I mean? We all had little kids in diapers and they all grew up together. It was a wonderful time." Agatha expanded:

> I wasn't a founder of this group, but I was in pretty early on. Back then we gave each other advice on everything from baby food to growing tomatoes, you know. We didn't have agendas or anything like that, we even just wrote down everyone's name and phone number on a piece of paper. One year that was a whole meeting but then somebody went into campus and typed it up and made copies. We were really about getting together and supporting each other and having a good time.

The concept of socialization was echoed in interviews, with individuals stressing that they enjoyed getting together and talking rather than specifically using their time to learn things. Mary noted that sometime in the 1980s the meetings took on a more formal tone, saying "we started to grow and I guess we became more formal. I remember one time we actually had an election for the president. Oh it was friendly, but around that time we started having agendas and scheduled speakers." Bess added "several of us were in PEO and I think we kind of started having our OTA meetings like those. It just kind of evolved, but the big thing was just getting together."

Several other participants reiterated that the group began for learning but evolved into a group of women who simply enjoyed each other's company. Their meetings became a mechanism to justify socializing, getting out of their homes and spending time together. Bess noted that, when

her children were little, having a 'meeting' was a key to getting out of the house. She said the meetings were "an excuse to get my husband to watch the kids and for me to go have adult conversation with other women."

Theme 2: Community

The meetings of the women provided an outlet or 'excuse' for socialization, but one result from those meetings was the emergence of a strong sense of community, that is, a socialized body of similar interests, reliance, and support. These women found that they could rely on each other to watch their children, lend them ingredients for cooking, share books and household materials, and emotionally and physically support each other. This was highlighted when Dorothy's son was killed in a car accident and Willa said "when [Dorothy] lost her boy, well, we were at her house and with her throughout all of that. That didn't have anything to do with OTA, but I guess that's how we got to be good friends. We were just there because she was our friend and we supported each other."

Similar, less dramatic, occasions were also reported for the women as they supported each other through raking leaves in the fall to shovelling snow in the winter. Betty said "we're just good friends. I think we got that way through OTA initially, but now, we're all just close friends." Examples of the expression of community included yard-work and help with children but, more recently, activities such as setting up Facebook accounts, using an iPad or Zoom, and perhaps most of all, just getting together for conversation. Willa commented "[Betty] will stop over to make cookies or something like that, but really it's a chance for us to catch up with each other."

Theme 3: Motivation

The women of OTA often reported being motivated or inspired by each other. Whether for home decorating, walking in the neighbourhood or getting physical activity, or trying new things like Facebook, the women seemed to support each other taking chances. On one occasion Agatha reported that she had hip surgery and her OTA friends had their monthly

meeting at her house so that she could attend, saying "I just really kind of laid there on the sofa, but it was great for them all to be here."

At more than one meeting, topics were determined based on something that one of the women had started to do that the others wanted to do but were not certain how to go about it. Technology adaptation and use was hugely popular among them, but so was experimenting with canning, growing different garden vegetables, and staying physically well. "I draw a lot of inspiration out of my [OTA] friends" Lorraine said. She continued "you know, having someone to do things with makes a big difference, and that's made all the difference for me."

Theme 4: Consequences

The women of OTA all lived within a four or five block radius and are visible to each other on a regular basis. The result is that all of the women interviewed indicated that they feel the consequences of having such good friends in such a localised area. Lorraine said "oh, if I don't do something like have my yard mowed, [OTA] will let me hear it. Not in a bad way, but if its two or three weeks and it hasn't been mowed, someone will call over and ask if everything is okay."

The idea of consequences could also be interpreted as accountability, as the women seemed to be aware of how each one is doing and what they might need or need help with. "We just keep an eye out for one another" Agatha said. Betty elaborated:

> Having friends of 50 years all in the neighbourhood makes a huge difference I think for all of us. We keep an eye out for each other, but we also mind our own business if you know what I mean. At the end of the day I think any of us would do anything for each other, but we don't pry. We know what's going on, oh yes that is true, but we also really care for each other. I could have moved to [an assisted living home] a couple of years ago, but I feel like I get better care right here on my street.

Discussion

The creation of the OTA was based primarily on the desire of the participants to learn more about their roles at home and their local community. For some of these women, the community

was their new home and represented a difficult transition, moving from other places. For other women, their location in the neighbourhood represented a relatively minor move from near-by neighbourhoods or towns. What the OTA provided, though, was an opportunity for these women to connect while relatively young in their lives and with new responsibilities and opportunities.

Women who participated in the interviews stressed that, while their early participation in group 'meetings' were to learn things relevant to managing home lives and raising children, the meetings quickly became opportunities for new-found friends to socialize. Sometimes this socialization was an opportunity to relinquish child-care duties and, as children and families grew, the meetings became spaces for the women to share their life's circumstances with others with whom they shared a common history. The OTA evolved from leisure education to social capital construction.

Interviews also suggest that the women who met regularly found a strengthened bond with their neighbourhood and a collection of friends (their fellow 'classmates') who improved their quality of life. Through these deep connections with others who lived in near proximity to each other, their social support network was strong and deep, and supported them through difficult life circumstances. This support included the loss of a child's life, several divorces, the COVID pandemic, multiple snow and thunderstorms that brought down tree branches, the marriages of children, and the welcoming of grandchildren. Through this initial connection in a community education organisation, the lives of these women were transformed.

The OTA played a critical role in the creation of community for these women for several reasons. First, the learning opportunities had direct relevance to their lives, providing education about issues and elements of their current life situations. Second, the learning that was initially designed as part of the group carried direct relevance to the time-in-life of the women. And third, the women all shared similar characteristics and experiences, having similar backgrounds that may well have eased their transition and encouraged participation in the group. The OTA has illustrative power for understanding the importance of small, community-based leisure education. In this example, the content of the program has relevance and is important, but it is the by-product of participation that results in community building. And it is important to consider in the future how groups such as these can help build community across individuals'

groups that have less in common or share fewer experiences. Through such understanding, leisure education could well become an important asset to promoting a more cohesive society.

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