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Intergenerational Engagement and Challenges: Participants' Perspectives on Intergenerational Activities in Hong Kong

Daniel W.L. Lai PhD [iD][a], Jia-Jia Zhou PhD [iD][b], Xue Bai PhD [iD][b], Rebecca Y. K. Lam BComn[a], and Yong-Zhen Li PhD [iD][b]

aHong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, Hong Kong; bThe Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

This study examined the motivations, perceived benefits, and challenges of engaging in intergenerational programs from the perspectives of older adults and university students. A narrative interview approach was employed, involving a sample of 38 older adults and 20 university students who participated in intergenerational programs in Hong Kong. The motivation to reinforce intergenerational contact, strengthen social cohesion, and previous productive experiences were driving forces behind individuals' participation in intergenerational programs. Moreover, participating in intergenerational programs enhanced mutual understanding between generations, and expanded knowledge and social circles of participants. However, participants found it was challenging to cope with intergenerational conflicts, role conflict and ambiguity, inactive engagement, and difficulty in establishing meaningful connections between generations. It is suggested that program designers and organizers should establish collaboration between various institutions, provide appropriate training sessions, and incorporate meaningful and purposeful components in program design to improve the quality of intergenerational programs.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD

- Motivations of participation included strengthening intergenerational contact and social cohesion, and previous positive experiences.
- Intergenerational programs enhanced mutual understanding, mental well-being, knowledge sharing, and social circles.
- Enhancing program preparations and design, facilitating skills, and quality interactions are important for intergenerational programs.

CONTACT Daniel W.L. Lai ✉ daniel_lai@hkbu.edu.hk 🖅 Faculty of Social Sciences, Hong Kong Baptist University, Room 1325, 13/F Academic and Administration Building, Baptist University Road Campus, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong

Introduction

With an increasing population of older adults and longer life expectancy, people interact across generations more than ever before (United Nations, 2022). However, the technological innovations and shifting social norms have resulted in increased segregation between generations (Graves et al., 2022). Engagement in intergenerational programs exhibits significant potential in bridging intergenerational divide and fostering cohesive communities. Promoting relationships and interactions between the young and old generations have been considered as an integral component of social policy. Correspondingly, the World Health Organization (WHO) proposed "respect and social inclusion" as one of the eight important domains to the well-being and participation of older people in the Global Age-friendly Cities Guide (WHO, 2007). The implementation of intergenerational programs has beneficial societal implications for enhancing mutual respect and inclusion across generations.

However, most studies have focused on the conceptual rationales and benefits of intergenerational programs (Cohen-Mansfield & Jensen, 2017; Gamliel & Gabay, 2014; Murayama et al., 2015). There is a dearth of literature exploring the perceptions and experiences of participants involved in intergenerational programs within East Asian societies. From a practice perspective, it is crucial to scrutinize the motivations and obstacles encountered by older adults and younger people when engaging in intergenerational programs. As suggested by Roodin et al. (2013), evaluations of intergenerational programs in gerontology should include the perspectives of all stakeholders to gain a comprehensive understanding of participant feedback. The commonalities and differences identified would assist practitioners to effectively develop future programs. In addition, this study investigated the elements that motivated and challenged participants' engagement in intergenerational programs.

Literature Review

Intergenerational programs are defined as purposively organized social services, involving an ongoing exchange of resources, knowledge, skills, and experience between younger and older generations (Cohen-Mansfield & Jensen, 2017). According to Erikson's lifespan theory, the developmental needs of individuals vary across different life stages (Gross, 2020), which may not be limited to specific age groups but can be met through intergenerational interactions (Vanderven, 2004). The concept of intergenerational synergy posits that individuals from different life stages can fulfill each other's developmental needs through meaningful connections and mutually beneficial relationships across generations (Gross, 2020; Vanderven, 2004). For instance, younger individuals who are in

the process of establishing their identities and searching for life's meaning may benefit by the guidance, wisdom, and support from older generations who have navigated similar challenges. Simultaneously, older adults who have reached the generativity stage may find fulfillment by imparting their knowledge and experiences to younger generations. The recognition of intergenerational synergy provides the rationale for intergenerational programs. It aims to create interactive opportunities and nurture reciprocal partnerships in non-familial settings, including inter and skipped generations (i.e., non-adjacent cohorts) such as grandparents and grandchildren (Giraudeau & Bailly, 2019). Therefore, intergenerational programs were designed to increase mutual understanding, advance psychosocial growth, and promote community cohesion (Cohen-Mansfield & Jensen, 2017).

In practice, intergenerational activities encompass a variety of types, all encouraging reciprocal sharing and learning (Jarrott et al., 2021). The common types of intergenerational activities include (a) artistic programs: photographing, painting, making crafts, and singing; (b) programs involving physical-related leisure activities: dancing, health promotion activities, or play groups; (c) intergenerational learning programs: services or courses learning (e.g., smart technology) for older people or older people reading books or teaching lessons for school students; and (d) programs of interpersonal assistance: mentoring programs or programs designed for frail older people, through reminiscent activities, voluntary companionship, or friendly site visits.

Developing intergenerational programs brings numerous benefits at both individual and societal levels. For older people, intergenerational programs satisfied older participants' emotional and mental needs by increasing their self-esteem (Gamliel & Gabay, 2014) and decreasing loneliness and depressive moods (Murayama et al., 2015). Moreover, it positively affected the physical functioning of aging adults, including improved mobility and balance, and lowered the risk of frailty and falls (Fried et al., 2013). For younger people, participating in intergenerational programs increased their self-confidence and academic performance (Cohen-Mansfield & Jensen, 2017) and reduced anxiety (Park, 2015). Beyond individual benefits, intergenerational activities improved social interactions and inclusion across generations, thus attaching a greater sense of connectedness and social solidarity (Murayama et al., 2019). Therefore, intergenerational programs can serve as a useful policy instrument for critical social issues, such as social cohesion, public health, and lifelong education. Nonetheless, given the heterogeneity in program context, sample size, and duration, it is suggested that more research should be conducted to enhance the wider generalizability.

Although the benefits and policy significance of intergenerational programs have been extensively acknowledged, an emerging body of literature begin to shed light on the motivations and challenges associated with

participating in intergenerational programs (Cohen-Mansfield, 2022; Jarrott et al., 2022). However, in the Chinese context, a recent scoping review (Yuan & Wu, 2021) discovered that studies on intergenerational programs beyond familial settings have been almost non-existent over the past two decades, despite the diverse practices of intergenerational activities flourishing in Chinese society (Li et al., 2020). This notable gap between limited research and burgeoning practices necessitates a more in-depth examination of intergenerational programs within the Chinese context, particularly given the cultural expectation of younger individuals to display respect and exhibit humble behaviors for older adults. Moreover, previous research on intergenerational programs has predominantly focused on skipped generations such as older adults and very young children (Fried et al., 2013; Gamliel & Gabay, 2014; Park, 2015). Therefore, it is crucial to simultaneously explore the perspectives and experiences of both older and young participants in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of intergenerational programs.

Conceptual Bases and the Current Study

The conceptual bases of contact theory and relational theory were used to illuminate research objectives and facilitate the understanding of the subject matter in this study. Contact theory has been commonly applied to guide intergenerational research (Jarrott et al., 2019). It suggests that frequent social and interpersonal contact between disparate groups can lead to more favorable perceptions and reduce stereotypes toward their counterparts (Kuehne & Melville, 2014). For instance, the utilization of life stories sharing program amplifies intergenerational contact frequency between youth and older adults, thereby facilitating the transmission of the practical knowledge and advice, fostering positive attitudes toward older people (Pillemer et al., 2022). Theoretical perspectives (Jarrott & Smith, 2011; Pettigrew, 1998) outline five conditions (i.e., support from authority, equal group status, common goal, opportunities for friendship, and cooperation) to optimize constructive intergroup interactions. Hence, in an intergenerational setting, contact theory can be employed to support regular and frequent intergenerational contact that involving shared activities or life stories between different age groups.

Concepts stemming from the relational theory are centered around building relationship, establishing connections, sympathy, and the capacity to develop meaningful connections from diverse networks beyond family settings (Kuehne & Melville, 2014). Based on the relational theory, previous studies have examined the intergenerational connectedness and empowerment between older women and adolescents through the sharing of life stories (Hinchman & Hinchman, 2001; Portman et al., 2010). Thus, relational theory implicates that both younger and older generations are able to draw upon their

unique life experiences to foster self-confidence and openness toward others (Portman et al., 2010). In this study, we employed the conceptual bases of both contact theory and relational theory to provide a rationale, analyze emerged themes, and inform the future development of intergenerational programs.

Drawing on contact theory and relational theory, this study examined the perspectives and experiences of aging adults and young people who participated in intergenerational programs within a lifelong learning unit affiliated with a public university in Hong Kong. The objectives of this research include: (a) understanding the reasons and motivations behind the engagement of young and older participants in intergenerational programs; (b) understanding how older adults and young people perceive the benefits of participation in intergenerational programs; and (c) identifying the challenges associated with the participation in intergenerational programs for both older adults and young people. Consequently, this study attempted to bridge the existing gap between research and practice in intergenerational programs in the Chinese context. This study advances the understanding of the motivations behind participation, their perceived benefits, and the obstacles impede further engagement in intergenerational programs. The findings provide valuable insights and inform practitioners and policymakers on how to satisfy the demands and expectations of participants while improving the quality of future design and implementation of intergenerational programs.

Methods

Narrative interview research approach

This research used a qualitative research method, based on individual in-depth interviews with 38 aging adults and 20 young people who participated in the intergenerational programs and activities. This study adopted a narrative research approach to capture stories that represent the experiences and perspectives of participants. The focus of narrative interview is to utilize the process to generate stories of experiences rather than generalized descriptions (Riessman & Quinney, 2010). Narratives might range from "tightly bounded" stories to recounts of past events that consist of structured beginnings, middles, and ends. In narrative interviews, participants are engaged in an evolving conversation in which the participant and interviewer collaboratively create the meaning of events and experiences reported by the participant (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012).

The utilization of participant-led visual process has increasingly gained recognition for fostering participatory approaches in narrative research (Pilcher et al., 2016). Participants were allowed to take photographs to capture the process of participation in the intergenerational programs. During the interviews, 9 older participants and 7 university students shared photographs or other visual items related to their participation in intergenerational activities. These visual mediums

served as catalysts for stimulating verbal discussion by evoking participants' deep emotions, memories, and ideas (Pilcher et al., 2016). By incorporating visual aids as reference points, participants were enabled to construct a visual diary of their experiences, enhancing their ability to recall their experiences across various programs. Notwithstanding, the materials shared were not treated as the focal point of the analysis but only as memory aids.

Research participants

This study occurred in a university-based lifelong learning unit that provides a variety of service platforms to promote active aging. The unit focuses on the development and facilitation of intergenerational programs, in which aging adults and young people participate in various types of activities, such as intergenerational cultural tours, helping young people to learn English, mentorship programs, and intergenerational leisure activities. These intergenerational programs fall under the unit's "practice and empowerment" strategic area. It seeks to build on the knowledge, wisdom, and experiences of older adults, actively involving them in the development of lifelong education and community services for Hong Kong's aging population (Institute of Active Ageing, n.d.).

Eligible participants were aging adults and university students who previously participated in any of the intergenerational programs offered by the lifelong learning unit. To recruit participants, purposive and snowball sampling methods were employed. Eligible participants were contacted and recruited by telephone and e-mail. Participants who had engaged in the study were also invited to refer other potential candidates who met the eligibility criteria. Theoretical saturation guided the sampling process during data collection. Theoretical saturation refers to the point that no additional issues or insights emerge so that further data collection is redundant, indicating that an adequate sample size is reached. According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022), a sample size of ranging from 9–17 is generally sufficient to achieve theoretical saturation. In the recruitment of participants, gender balance was also considered for the samples.

As shown in Table 1, the final participants included 38 older adults between 55 and 80 years old, and 20 third-year university students. The average age of

Table 1. Demographic information of older adults and university students.

	Older adults (N = 38) M (SD)/N (%)	University students (N = 20) M (SD)/N (%)
Age	66.34 (6.14)	21.20 (0.91)
Gender		
Male	12 (21.58%)	9 (45%)
Female	26 (68.42%)	11 (55%)
Educational attainment		
Middle school	7 (22.58%)	
Post-secondary education	26 (68.42%)	
University or above	5 (13.16%)	20 (100%)

M = mean value; SD = standard deviation.

older adults was 66.34 (SD = 6.14), and 68.42% of them were female. The majority of older adults ($n = 26$) had accepted post-secondary education. The university students had an average age of 21.2 (SD = 0.91), and 55% of them ($n = 11$) were female. Participants had the experiences of participating in at least one of the intergenerational programs, including Intergenerational English Study and Learning (IG ESL), Life Mentorship Program (LifeM), Intergenerational Study Tour (IG Study Tour), and Toy Design (Toy Design), in the two years prior to the interview.

Data collection strategies

Narrative interviews were conducted following the process suggested by Gubrium and Holstein (2012). Participants were provided with the option to choose either individual interviews or focus groups, depending on their preferences and availability. A total of 27 aging adults and all 20 university students participated in individual interviews, while an additional 11 aging adults engaged in focus groups. For aging adults, three focus groups were conducted, with each encompassing 3–5 participants. Each interview lasted approximately 1–1.5 hours. The qualitative interview questions were used to cover the scope of the study topics and prompt further sharing of experiences and stories during individual and focus group interviews with older adults and young people participating in the intergenerational programs. These interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview guide. However, the interviewers were not supposed to only use the asked questions in the interview guide. Depending on the initial responses of the participants during the interview, additional questions could be used to further probe the participants to share deeper responses. Questions used in the interviews were shown in Table 2.

Data analysis strategies

Written informed consent were obtained from all participants and all the interviews were digitally audio-recorded. The audio files were verbatim transcribed into

Table 2. Interview guide questions.

Focus areas	Specific questions
Types of IG	• In what types of IG are you currently participating? • Have you participated in other types of IG in the past?
Motivations of engaging in IG	• Why did you decide to participate in these intergenerational activities? • What were you hoping to gain from the participation?
Benefits of engaging in IG	• What benefits have you perceived in the participation of IG? • How have you benefited from the participation in the IG?
Challenges related to participating in IG	• What challenges have you experienced concerning your participation in the IG? • What caused these challenges during your participation in the IG?

IG = intergenerational programs.

transcripts for coding and further data analysis. Stories were identified and detailed perspectives of the participants were analyzed according to the plotlines and roles of characters (Nasheeda et al., 2019). Researchers in the team independently participated in the process of coding and generated initial codes in their code manual. To enhance code reliability, two researchers separately examined the manual, and inconsistencies were resolved through discussion with additional researchers. Based on the code manual, researchers assigned individual codes to the pieces of raw data, and transcripts were crosschecked. Team members further discussed the connections between the codes and identified preliminary themes. During this process, various concepts and themes were generated from the stories shared by participants, so that analyses were performed in an organized and systematic manner. Experiences revealed through stories were cited to illustrate perspectives and ideas emerging through data collection and analysis.

The trustworthiness of the results was achieved by performing data analysis in a precise and exhaustive manner to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). In order to maintain credibility, member checking was employed after the interview, whereby respondents were invited to review and re-confirm the interpretations presented in the transcribed verbatim transcripts, thus ensuring that the representations were identical to their views. Detailed descriptions and quotes were extensively used to enrich and support the specific themes in this study, thereby enhancing transferability of findings. To ensure that the research process was logically and clearly documented, different research members were involved in verification during data collection and analysis. The interview and coding by one researcher were mutually audited by another researcher on the team for dependability. Confirmability was achieved via the examination of raw data, transcript, field notes, and reflexive comments to provide team members with robust rationales for identifying and adopting the codes and themes.

Results

Motivation of participation

To increase intergenerational contact

Older adults and young people anticipated to have more opportunities to get along with different age groups through participation in intergenerational programs. In their usual daily routines, people often found themselves limited to interacting within their family circles, which restricts their opportunities for cross-generational connections beyond familial settings. Therefore, engaging in intergenerational activities could satisfy participants' inherent need to connect with people outside their own generational cohorts.

> I would like to interact with young people . . . I hope to have more chances to communicate with young people, and it makes me happy . . . On the other hand, we heard a lot of

negative information about young people nowadays … So, I want to have a deeper understanding of this younger generation … their family, their friends, and their study and life. (A 58-year-old female in IG ESL program)

Young participants also held expectations of gaining new perceptions of older adults as many of them are well educated and knowledgeable. Therefore, university students hoped to learn more from the personal experiences and life wisdom of older adults.

I hope to get along with the young-old people and get to know them better … Since they just retired for a while and are not very old … Probably their knowledge and experience from past life and work could provide me with more insights in the future. (A female university student in IG Tour Study)

To enhance social cohesion – From the perspective of older participants, helping university students is meaningful through imparting knowledge and sharing life experiences. Older participants believed that it is their social responsibility to enhance intergenerational solidarity by bridging the gaps that exist between generations. Therefore, they aspired to strengthen social cohesion and foster intergenerational inclusion by engaging in dialogs with young generations.

Because I think this (intergenerational program) is important as a way to contribute to society … I hope my experiences could bring confidence and encouragement to the young generations today because they generally have depressed emotions. Therefore, I hope that I could contribute to promoting intergenerational cohesion and inclusion when I am still capable to do so … This is a social responsibility for me. (A 75-year-old female in IG LifeM)

Inspired by previous volunteering and working experiences

Another reason that motivated participants to engage in intergenerational programs stemmed from their previous productive activities (i.e., volunteering and working experiences). For example, some older adults, who used to serve as social workers, expressed a strong desire to continue their commitment to support either seniors or young people after retirement. Previous professional background equipped participants with the confidence to effectively engage and interact with the target groups.

I worked as a social worker before retirement … And I am confident in my language capacity because I often used English in my previous workplace … I hope that I could continue to work with young people like I used to … Besides, the site where I participate in the programs belongs to the same education group as my secondary school … (Therefore,) I have an emotional connection to that place. (A 71-year-old female in IG ESL program)

Similarly, young participants were motivated by prior voluntary experience in elderly centers or intergenerational programs. In addition to their own

intrinsic motivation, peer influence emerged as another factor shaping their choices and considerations.

> I had the experience of interacting with older people in the intergenerational English study and learning program previously. Such experience gave me confidence that I can handle the relationship with senior adults flexibly … Also, I and my friend signed the program together. (A male university student in IG Tour Study)

Benefits of participating in intergenerational programs

Reinforced mutual understanding between generations

Participation in intergenerational programs reinforced mutual understanding, respect, and appreciation between older and younger adults. The ongoing conversations and interactions among participants facilitated the exchange of attitudes, values, and experiences, which played a crucial role in bridging generational gaps and building deeper understanding across age boundaries.

> I felt that they (young people) are different from our generation. They are braver in expressing themselves, unlike us, and we were quiet at that age… I got to know more about their pressure and thoughts… I tried to understand them. (A 62-year-old female in IG ToyDesign program)

For university students, engaging in intergenerational programs reshaped their perceptions of older groups and the aging process. Some younger participants came to recognize that older adults are not only sociable and energetic but also curious, and optimistic about their future lives. This perceptual shift would contribute to improving the public image and reducing social stereotypes toward older adults.

> As I said, it (intergenerational program) changed my previous image of older people. I once thought that retired people would just aimlessly spend time, like hanging out. But actually, it could be full of possibility. (A female university student in IG ESL program)

Promoted mental well-being

The majority of participants conveyed noticeable improvements in their mental well-being as a direct result of participating in intergenerational programs. Engaging in intergenerational activities and connecting to the external world reduced loneliness, increasing happiness and positive emotions in older people. Notably, influenced by the vitality exhibited by university students, some older adults felt that their minds and spirit became younger and more energetic.

> For mental health … Taking myself as an example, I felt emotionally trapped if I always stayed at home. This would be problematic. Then, going out and talking with young people made me feel younger again … I became happier when interacting with them. (A 75-year-old female in IG LifeM)

For older people, engagement in teaching and mentoring programs facilitated the restoration of self-efficacy. They also obtained emotional satisfaction and personal growth from the progress and development of the students.

> At least I am glad to see that their oral English has improved. I am very satisfied because this is a big encouragement to me. I could still contribute to society though I retired. (A 71-year-old in IG ESL program)

Learned new experience, knowledge, and skills

Participation in intergenerational programs broadened participants' visions by facilitating the acquisition of novel experience, knowledge, and skills. For example, guided by university students, a number of older adults learned how to use diverse digital techniques pertaining to smartphones and the internet, such as online shopping, video calls, and social media platform.

> Actually, the computer … many issues … like e-banking, I could handle. But I never dare to shop on Taobao (an online shopping application). Then, he (the mentee) told me it's very easy and he was willing to teach me how to shop online. (A 67-year-old female in IG LifeM)

Young participants in the programs acquired practical skills, such as problem-solving ability and oral English, while also benefiting from invaluable advice and wisdom that can guide them to a more fulfilling life.

> He (the mentor) used to work in the welfare field. And I majored in psychology. For example, I learned about his working experience in the welfare industry. It may help me in terms of seeking a job, or overall development in the future. (A male university student in IG LifeM)

Expanded social circles

Participants, particularly older adults, encountered difficulties in expanding social networks following retirement. The intergenerational programs offered a unique avenue for both young and older adults to engage with individuals from diverse backgrounds, thus extending their social circles.

> I met different people … I could only access my colleagues previously. After retirement, my social circle became smaller … In the program, I am glad to make friends with people from different walks of life. (A 65-year-old female in IG ESL program)

Challenges of participating in intergenerational programs

Intergenerational conflicts

Conflicts or tensions between older and younger generations emerged as the most common challenges within intergenerational programs. Sources contributing to intergenerational conflicts encompassed dissimilar personalities, perspectives,

communication patterns, living habits, and lifestyles. Some participants found it challenging to establish interpersonal communication and foster meaningful interactions with others.

> The program requires cooperation, but some people were self-centered … They just decide everything based on their personal preferences. Like I want to do this, or I want to do that. They were resistant to listen to or discuss with you … Everyone had his or her unique personality or habits and it's hard to change. (A 67-year-old female in IG LifeM)

Intergenerational conflicts may arise as a result of divergent habits and lifestyles (e.g., variations in sleep schedules). These conflicts were particularly pronounced in the program of IGtour as older adults and young people were required to spend a large amount of time together throughout the journey.

> One midnight, my roommate locked the door when I returned home late. This was so odd because last night I was very careful and tried not to bother his rest... Since then, our relationship became awkward. Both of us did not try to communicate or discuss the issue during the trip. (A male university student in IG Study Tour program)

Role conflict and ambiguity

Role conflict and ambiguity may arise when expectations are incompatible or insufficient to guide behaviors (Biddle, 2013). For older adults, the complexity of role sets in later life is compounded by the accumulation of various lifestages (e.g., childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age) and contextual dynamics (e.g., school, workplace, family) (Vidovićová, 2018). Moreover, the Chinese cultural tradition highlighted role ethics in social interactions that respecting and obeying older people who were regarded as authoritative figures because of their wisdom. However, participating in intergenerational programs introduced a process that reassigned novel social roles, such as mentors, friends, or playfellows of younger generations; but not all older participants were able to adapt well to the role shifts.

> Personally, I struggled with the change in roles when participating in the intergenerational program. For me, it was difficult to act like friends of young people, which was different from my previous experience … (Because) I perceived myself as parent or senior, so I have to behave in line with my roles in the daily routine, instead of friends of young generations. (A 63-year-old female in IG ToyDesign program)

However, university students experienced more role ambiguity in comparison to older participants. Young people felt confused about the specific roles they were supposed to fulfill in the programs due to a lack of clarity. The ambiguity of role responsibilities also impeded participants' active engagement in the programs.

> I did not clearly recognize my role that to what extent I should involve in the activities … I was also worried that if I intervened much in the study group, older participants may feel unhappy … I felt confused … So, this was a challenge for me to participate in the program. (A female university student in IG ESL program)

Inadequate engagement of young participants

In some programs, university students may have exhibited limited interests to engage in certain activities, consequently impeding the proactivity of their counterparts. For example, in the English teaching program, the teaching activities became ineffective and challenging due to the passive responses of students.

> Some students were not interested in the class since it was compulsory for the students to take part in the English teaching program, and their involvement in the class was low . . . Older adults were disappointed when they received inactive responses from students . . . Eventually, it became an issue in developing intergenerational relationships. (A male university student in IG ESL program)

Frustration in establishing intergenerational connections

Despite intergenerational programs fostered contact and mutual understanding between generations, participants found it was challenging to maintain a deep and enduring intergenerational relationship. The crucial point for establishing such a connection appears to be the mutual attainment of trust between different age groups.

> The biggest challenge was gaining young people's trust. They may not be willing to share their private things or deep thoughts inside their minds because of their defensive mechanisms. Therefore, even though the interaction between me and my mentee seemed harmonious during the activities, it was hard to build a deep relationship. (A 72-year-old male in IG LifeM)

Table 3 summarised the similarities and differences among older adults and university students participating in intergenerational programs.

Table 3. Similarities and differences among older adults and university students participating in intergenerational programs.

	Older adults	University students
Similarities		
Motivations	• To increase intergenerational contact; • Inspired by previous working or voluntary experiences	
Benefits	• Reinforced mutual understanding between generations; • Learned new experience, knowledge, and skills; • Expanded social circles	
Challenges	• Intergenerational conflicts caused by different communication patterns and lifestyles; • Frustration in establishing intergenerational connections	
Differences		
Motivations	• To enhance social cohesion	
Benefits	• Promoted mental well-being	
Challenges		• Inadequate engagement
	• Role conflict	• Role ambiguity

Discussion

Using a narrative research method, this study examined various perspectives and experiences of older adults and young people participating in intergenerational programs within the Chinese context. The study found that the intention to reinforce intergenerational contact and strengthen social cohesion and previous volunteering or working experiences motivated participants' engagement in intergenerational programs. Moreover, participants acknowledged that intergenerational activities reinforced mutual understanding across generations, promoted mental well-being, facilitated knowledge exchange, and expanded social networks. However, this study also identified several challenges related to the participation of intergenerational programs, including intergenerational conflicts, role conflict and ambiguity, passive interactions, and trust building within intergenerational relationships. Overall, this study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the motivations, benefits, and challenges associated with intergenerational programs participation from a cross-generational perspective. The findings reveal participants' practical demands and requirements in the process of designing, organizing, and implementing intergenerational programs. The results can inform the quality improvement and development of intergenerational programs for service providers and policymakers.

This study has identified three motivation components driving people's participation in intergenerational programs. The first is the intention to increase intergenerational contact. This finding indicates that both younger and older participants express a desire to enhance intergenerational contact through intergenerational programs, which is a mutually beneficial activity to satisfy their parallel development needs at different life stages (Gross, 2020). The second motivation identified in this study is to strengthen social cohesion, a social responsibility perceived by older participants. It might be explained that older adults typically have a longer history of community involvement and social connections, which *instill* them a sense of responsibility and generativity for promoting intergenerational solidarity and social cohesion (Kruse & Schmitt, 2012). Third, previous working and volunteering experiences motivated people's engagement in intergenerational programs. These findings align with previous research on the determinants of volunteer participation (Niebuur et al., 2018), showing that people with social maturity and willingness to be engaged with others appear to be ideal candidates for further involvement in promoting their interests in intergenerational contacts.

Generally, the benefits of participating in intergenerational programs aligns with previous empirical work and conceptual bases. For example, this study found that intergenerational activities remarkably reinforced mutual understanding between generations. During the interaction, participants may be

influenced by the views and mind-sets of other generations, and this understanding may be embedded in their attitudes and behaviors in broader social norms (Together, 2021). According to the contact theory, mutual understanding between disparate groups can enhance positive perceptions and reduce stereotypes (Kuehne & Melville, 2014). In addition, our study revealed that engaging in intergenerational activities ameliorates older people's sense of loneliness and isolation, resulting in improved mental well-being (Gamliel & Gabay, 2014). This finding can be further elucidated through the lens of socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen & Meeks, 2021), which suggests that older adults prioritize present-oriented goals in their social interactions, such as seeking emotional satisfaction and comfort. Consequently, participating in intergenerational programs may offer older adults a source of mental and emotional well-being.

For university students, participating in intergenerational activities encouraged them to share knowledge and skills and helped them obtain the life experience and wisdom of older adults. University students have considerable potential to transform such intellectual or emotional functioning into positive personal growth and professional development in later life (Wood et al., 2017). Therefore, these life experiences received from intergenerational programs may have long-term effects on the choices and explorations of young people's developmental trajectories.

Challenges related to engaging in intergenerational programs were identified in this study. The most prevalent is intergenerational conflicts, which were triggered by differences in personalities, communication patterns, and lifestyles between generations. Participants also experienced the challenge of role conflict and ambiguity as they struggled to navigate the expectations of fulfilling the roles of friends or playfellows in intergenerational activities. These role expectations may go against their prior life experiences and traditional Chinese cultural norms regarding role ethics. Moreover, the inactive engagement or passive responses from some young participants impeded the effective participation of other older people. In addition, building trust and establishing profound intergenerational connections within limited duration presented a significant challenge for participants from different age cohorts. Overall, our study contributes to the extant literature by revealing the challenges associated with intergenerational programs from the perspectives of both older and young participants, instead of the views of organizers or staff members (Jarrott et al., 2022).

Practice implications

This study provides practical and policy suggestions to better develop intergenerational programs. First, it is crucial for program organizers and policymakers to acknowledge the inherent value and synergistic potential that

intergenerational programs hold. This study affirms the parallel developmental and communication needs shared across generations, emphasizing the significance of collaboration with various institutions, such as universities, elderly centers, and nursing homes. For instance, intergenerational programs could involve partnering with universities and communities to create mentorship initiatives where older adults collaborate with university students to offer guidance and support. Second, to mitigate intergenerational conflicts, it is advised to provide appropriate training sessions that focused on tailored communication skills for different age groups. These sessions should precede formal activities and serve as guidance for effective interpersonal communication, thereby reducing potential tensions. In order to address role conflict and ambiguity, participants should be fully informed and have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities prior to engaging in these programs. During the activities, it is crucial to minimize role ambiguity by timely monitoring and implementing interventions based on observations. Third, it is imperative to develop intergenerational programs that effectively foster the interest and proactivity of young people. For example, intergenerational programs may involve the integration of sporting activities or arts and cultural exchange initiatives, which incorporates meaningful, relaxing, and purposeful components, thereby aligning with the preferences and aspirations commonly observed among young adults (Giraudeau & Bailly, 2019). Last but not least, it is advisable to allocate sufficient time for participants to interact and regularly convene, as this will enhance the overall quality of intergenerational programs.

Limitations

This study encompasses three limitations. First, despite attempts were made in this study to address trustworthiness issues, it should be realized that the sample size may not be adequate to generalize the results to a larger population. Second, this study is based on older people and university students within a university-affiliated setting, which may not fully represent a typical reality of intergenerational interactions in community. Therefore, it is suggested that future programs expand their scopes to involve diverse research settings (e.g., community, nursing home). Third, our study did not incorporate an analysis to evaluate the potential differences in findings based on methods of data collection, whether through focus groups or individual interviews. Future endeavors could strive to explore whether distinct data collection methods yield varying information and insights.

Conclusion

This study investigates the motivations, benefits, and challenges in the participation of intergenerational programs within a Chinese context, from the

perspectives of both older and younger adults. The findings indicate that both younger and older adults are motivated to engage in intergenerational contact as a result of developmental needs in different life stages. Participants are also driven by the desire to strengthen social cohesion and intergenerational solidarity, as well as their previous voluntary and working experiences. Moreover, engaging in intergenerational programs has been found to remarkably improved intergenerational mutual understanding and mental well-being of older participants, while also expanding knowledge and social circles of all participants. Challenges related to the participation of intergenerational programs encompassed intergenerational conflicts, role conflict and ambiguity, inactive engagement, and frustration in establishing profound connections between generations. To address these challenges, it is suggested that designers and organizers of intergenerational programs should enhance the whole process of preparation, program design, and high-quality interactions of intergenerational activities.

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ORCID

Daniel W.L. Lai PhD 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6365-3189
Jia-Jia Zhou PhD 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5677-9015
Xue Bai PhD 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0502-7291
Yong-Zhen Li PhD 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4448-5180

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