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Relational Theory and Intergenerational Connectedness: A Qualitative Study

Tarrell Awe Agathe Portman, Jan R. Bartlett, and Laurie A. Carlson

Relational theory encourages women to be connected in relationships. The authors used qualitative methodology to explore the interactions of a nonfamilial intergenerational group of 7 female adolescents (13–15 years) and 5 older women (62–80 years) in a structured retreat. Findings indicated that the participants experienced increased connectivity and feminine identity.

Feminist scholars have promoted relational theory as a more inclusive approach to therapeutic change (Gilligan, 1982; Goldner, 2002; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Miller, 1976). These same theorists have advocated the concept that the female sense of self is relational, and this relational connection is a crucial aspect of a woman’s identity. Jean Baker Miller (1976) articulated a theory of women’s psychology based on relation and connection. Her life experiences led her to embrace the need for women to have affiliations and opportunities for intellectual and creative self-expression. This, in turn, resulted in her development of relational theory, which promotes feminine developmental tasks through relational contexts.

We developed this qualitative study to examine how a group of adolescent and older adult females might develop relationships through the sharing of life stories and future plans. We used an intergenerational group to establish connections between five older women and seven female adolescents through their discussion of female developmental issues. Participants were not related and had no acquaintance with each other outside of same-age peer groups. A weekend retreat brought the participants together for 48 hours. The older women shared with the adolescents personal experiences from their lives, spent time building

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relationships, and established connections during the retreat. The adolescents discussed, described, and reflected their own experiences by sharing their own journeys. This article discusses literature relevant to women's developmental issues, the design for the intergenerational storytelling group retreat, and the information learned through the analysis of qualitative data that was gathered.

CONCEIVING THE IDEA FOR THIS STUDY

During a clinical internship on an inpatient geriatric psychiatric unit in a large hospital, the second author provided counseling to older women. Groups were conducted twice a week at this facility. Bits and pieces of the older women's personal stories began to emerge and were shared within the group. For these women, personal exchanges in the group setting appeared to be a healing encounter, as suggested by Banks-Wallace (1998). As the groups progressed, these women were asked if they shared their stories with the young people in their respective families. The most frequent answer was no. The women expressed that young people today were too busy. In addition, the women reported they were reluctant to think that anyone would be interested in hearing about their life. The writer Alex Haley said, "The death of an old person is like the burning of a library" (Pipher, 1999, p. 11). In a similar vein, the Omaha Tribe believes that "when you lose an older person, we lose our history. They teach us our songs, keep our language" (Pipher, 1999, p. 288). These sentiments ring true. A wealth of rich information and experiences represented by the women in these groups was being lost because of intergenerational disconnection. It was sad to think that no one else would hear about the experiences of these women.

Reflection on these sentiments of the older adult women combined with professional experience in counseling female adolescents with heightened anxiety and stress issues inspired the concept for a research project. What would happen if an environment were created providing both groups of females with the opportunity to share their individual stories? Would they develop a connection? Would the adolescents gain insight concerning their impending developmental issues through hearing the stories of the older women? The value of linking adolescents with older women through the art of storytelling, especially focused on the confusing and complex issue of female development, was intriguing and deserved consideration. This experience with these magnificent older women from the hospital led to the conceptualization of an intergenerational storytelling group experience.

PREPARING FOR REALIZATION OF THE STUDY

After the conception of the idea for the study, our thoughts turned to exploring relevant literature to gain knowledge concerning the current scholarly

dialogue on both women and female adolescents. A review of this literature is provided to allow understanding of the conceptual and philosophical markers that guide this study.

Female Adolescents and Women

Female adolescents in U.S. society are confronted daily with challenges that erode their self-esteem and create a variety of alarming problems, such as the increase in teen pregnancy, underachievement, drug and alcohol use, suicide ideation and attempts, self-mutilation, and eating disorders (Sanrock, 1997). Current research indicates the influence of American culture as a source of many of the problems confronting girls and young women during puberty and adolescence (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Girls and young women are often discontent with themselves, trying to emulate the images portrayed in the media and experiencing increased self-dissatisfaction (Portman & Herring, 2001; Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996). These factors are often compounded by the increasing segmentation and isolation of generations and families through the breakdown of communities (Pipher, 1999).

Many children experience the stress of constant rushing from one place to another, parents “feel isolated and overwhelmed,” and older people in U.S. society “go days without talking to anyone” (Pipher, 1999, p. 306). Frequent personal connections and relationships within a community of neighbors and family members often no longer exist, or at a minimum, have deteriorated. Some researchers and theorists stress the central role that relationships play in the growth and development of girls and women (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, Rogers, & Tolman, 1991; Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1976; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995). These authors have stated that being in connection with others is vital for healthy development.

Research has suggested that girls have difficulty expressing opinions, emotions, or thoughts confidently and without fear of being judged (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan (1982, p. 23) referred to this as *voice*, defined as the full expression of one’s self as it relates to thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. To access their voice, women and girls should be empowered to speak openly and without apprehension about their opinions, feelings, and thoughts (Belenky et al., 1997; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan et al., 1991; Taylor et al., 1995).

Women and female adolescents often “silence themselves in relationships rather than risk open conflict or disagreement that might lead to isolation or to violence” (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 3). This situation might lead many female adolescents, and eventually women, to experience the lifelong effects of disconnection (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Portman & Garrett, 2005). This disconnection may be manifested in depression, anxiety, or isolation (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Some authors have suggested that the voice returns when a woman reaches age 50, a point at which women often feel more empowered

(Belenky et al., 1997; Estes, 1995; Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997; Thomas, 1997). What would be the outcome if younger women were exposed to older women who have regained their voice?

When Surrey (as cited in Jordan et al., 1991, p. 38) addressed the elements of a relational theory of development, she stated five key components.

1. Critical relationships would be seen as evolving throughout the life cycle in a real, rather than intrapsychic form.
2. To account for the capacity to maintain relationships with tolerance, consideration, and mutual adaptation to the growth and development of each person.
3. To account for the ability to move closer to and further away from other people at different moments, depending on the needs of the particular individual.
4. To explore the capacity for developing additional relationships based on broader, more diversified new identifications and corresponding patterns of expanding relational networks.
5. Examine the potential problems and vicissitudes inherent in the development of these relational capacities.

Our research examined the concepts of self-in-relation in the context of intergenerational storytelling and personal narratives as it relates to Surrey's fourth concept, which is the capacity to develop meaningful relationships and connections through a diverse network that exists outside the family. The aim of our study was to discover the reported meaning of this type of connection for female adolescents as it related to issues of female development. The telling of stories to relate personal experiences (Estes, 1995; Knudson-Martin, 1995), assisted both the younger and the older women in retrieving those aspects of self that had been forgotten or had not been nurtured, as stated by Brown and Gilligan (1992). In addition, the experience of reclaiming their stories and sharing them with others heightened the older women's sense of responsibility and empowerment, in recognition of their having had a sense of their life as meaningful in the world (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997).

Intergenerational Disengagement

In her book published in 1970, Margaret Mead reflected on a White House conference on children that had occurred in the 1950s. Mead's main concern in the 1950s was the tremendous change brought to American culture by the impact of television, the tragedy of World War II, and the huge question mark of the future. However, by 1970, Mead's concern changed to the lack of commitment of youth to the past, present, and future. Mead suggested that there was a necessity for youth to come to terms with the past and the present

and that only then would there be a future for the oldest and the youngest of human beings who share this world. Mead was the first to write about the disengagement between the generations as she described three societal trends (Mead, 1970) described as follows.

In the *post-figurative culture*, prior to the industrial revolution, older adults had the highest status, children learned from them, and the future was a repetition of the past (Mead, 1970). In the *co-figurative culture*, prevalent after the industrial revolution, adults and children learned primarily from their peers. The co-figurative society is one in which no grandparents are present: “The past, once represented by living people, becomes shadowy, easier to abandon, and to falsify in retrospect” (Mead, 1970, p. 44). In the *pre-figurative culture*, older adults learn from the children because the children inhabit a world that the older adults have never experienced (Mead, 1970). One can clearly see the trends of the last two cultures in society today (i.e., co-figurative and pre-figurative) Mead (1970) stated, “It is only with the participation of the young, who have the knowledge, that we can build a viable future” (p. 88).

Currently, the trend of disengagement between the generations has escalated. Families may face disengagement because they live across geographic distances or they lack day-to-day contact with one another (Hargrave & Anderson, 1992). Kotre (1996) maintained, “We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future” (p. 1). Sharing the power of personal stories between generations may have reached an all-time historical low within the American dominant culture. When generations are separated into age-specific or life-stage-specific communities, the needs of each generation, and arguably the overall society, may not be met. Reconnecting youth with older adults has many positive benefits (Larson, 2006). “Segregated societies are intellectually stagnant and emotionally poisoned. Only when all the ages are welcome into the great hoop of life can a culture be a healthy one” (Pipher, 1999, p. 306).

METHOD

Social phenomena are complex, thereby requiring that related theory be conceptually dense and account for variations within research projects (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). This study used heuristic inquiry within a grounded theory (emergent) design. We used heuristic inquiry, which means “to discover,” as the process for systematic observation of and dialogues with self and others (Patton, 1990). Because of the complex nature of emerging themes related to self-knowledge, self-expression, and interconnection, heuristic inquiry was the most suitable method of sense-making for this study. Heuristics can lead to depictions of essential meanings and may involve reintegration of derived knowledge that is a synthesis of intuition and tacit understanding, but it also

involves the passionate quest for meaning by the researcher who is involved with and in connection with the study participants (Moustakas, 1990). These essential meanings and this derived knowledge characterized the meaning of the storytelling experience for the adolescents and older women through our use of emergent design. Emergent design also allowed for a certain degree of maneuverability during interviewing of the study participants as important concepts developed. The concepts that emerged from the study included relationship building, developing connection, empathy, and the capacity for additional relational networks outside the family.

The Retreat Experience

Imagine a group of older women and female adolescents gathered in a large room with wooden floors and a stone fireplace on a cold February afternoon. None of the individuals are related to one another, and most are meeting for the first time. The lodge, built during the 1930s, is nestled in the woods on a mountaintop, creating a sense of isolation from the outer world. The furnishings are sparse but adequate. In the beginning, the women and the adolescents sit with those of their age group, but that division begins to blur as time passes.

The preceding description provides a glimpse into the retreat central to this study. The retreat began on a Friday afternoon at 4:00 p.m., and parents came for the adolescents on Sunday between 3:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m.. The structure of the retreat provided opportunities for interactions between the adolescents and the older women in a variety of contexts. Storytelling involved the sharing of personal stories by the older women about their youth, and through the course of the weekend they shared much about their life experience. Several authors have written of the strength that emerges from shared stories (Crimmens, 1998; Divinyi, 1995; Gersie, 1997; Monk, 1998; Parry, 1997; Peake, 1998; Rybarczyk & Bell, 1997). Throughout the schedule of the retreat, certain times were designated as *story time*. During these allocated times, topics were introduced for discussion. Both the older women and the adolescents spoke freely on the topics. The topics were chosen with the direct intent of providing opportunities for the discussion of issues related to female development. Chairs and couches were rearranged into a circle during story time so the group members could see and hear each other easily. The time for these discussion groups was 60 to 90 minutes.

The initial story time occurred during the first gathering of the group. For this occasion only, as an icebreaker, each participant was asked to speak up in turn and share a favorite childhood fictional story. After this first exchange of sharing, participants were then asked to share a personal story from their childhood. From this point on, participants were free to speak when they wished and were under no pressure to participate in the group sessions. The other topics for story time were menarche and puberty, fun, work, dating, fashions, and sports. During the final gathering, the older women and adolescents worked together in small groups to process the retreat experience, and then the large group met for further discussion.

Other discussions during the weekend occurred after watching one of two films on Friday and on Saturday evening: *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Avnet & Lear, 1991) and *How to Make an American Quilt* (Pillsbury & Sanford, 1995). Both of these films were chosen because they involved relationships and bonds that developed among women across generations. The two films modeled in a small way the connections and sharing that the retreat was attempting to create. A minilecture on women in history was presented and discussed following the films. Lectures focused on Hildegard von Bingen from the 11th century and Hypatia of Alexandria from the 4th century. Hildegard and Hypatia were chosen because of the status they held in their communities; their intellectual and scholarly accomplishments; and the fact that although their stories were not well known, their contributions were significant. The concept of “his story” was also discussed, referring to the construct and implications of the word *history*.

Unstructured time provided opportunities for private reflection, assimilation of new information, and journal writing. Participants spent much of the unstructured time playing music, dancing, singing, sharing old pictures, eating, and talking together. A piano was located in the great room, and one of the young women brought her violin. The lodge had no telephone, computer, or cable service, so the television was only used to show the films. Activities that promoted healthy and positive attitudes through physical and artistic expression were structured into the retreat. Activities included morning walks, yoga, dance, music, and a yarn spinning demonstration. Incorporated into the retreat were the personal skills and knowledge of those women who wished to share these with the group. One woman shared her skills in painting and quilting, and another woman demonstrated the technique and then led the group in making clay doll heads, which were then baked in the oven. During the activities, the adolescents and women learned and practiced new skills, which involved elements of risk taking. Initially, some were reluctant to participate, but as time went on they experienced some success and were more willing to try new things.

Participants

Eighteen adolescents and 20 women were interviewed for participation in the intergenerational storytelling group retreat. The final participants were seven female adolescents between the ages of 13 and 15 years and five women between the ages of 62 and 80 years. We used purposive sampling to recruit and select information-rich participants for this study. Patton (1990) stated that purposive sampling illuminates the questions under study. This type of sampling maximizes the “investigator’s ability to devise grounded theory that takes adequate account of local conditions, local mutual shapings, and local values (for possible transferability)” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40). Parental permission, individual consent, and individual releases were obtained for this study from participants. Insurance was purchased from the retreat center to cover the entire weekend of activities.

Female adolescents. The adolescents were selected for the study through contacts with three area churches, three school counselors in three different school districts, and the first author's personal contacts in the community. Their grade levels in school ranged from the seventh to the 10th grades. Criteria for recruitment and ultimate selection of the adolescent participants in the study were the following: willingness to participate in the retreat, willingness to share their thoughts and feelings in a journal, and few or no contacts with grandmothers or with extended generations in their family (i.e., women older than their mother). All of the adolescents who participated in the retreat had dealt with challenges in their life. Five of the seven adolescents had lived through divorce in their family. One young woman experienced the hardships of neglect from alcoholic parents and was placed in an adoptive home at the age of 5 years; another was adopted at birth, but her parents divorced and she subsequently lived with her mother. One participant came from a very simple and modest home and lived with strained family relations. Of the seven adolescents, four lived in a single-parent family, and only one lived with her biological mother and father. One adolescent had lived through divorce in her family and was the oldest of six children in a stepfamily, and another lived with her father, who was about to remarry. There was great diversity in the economic and educational status of the adolescent participants' families.

Older female adults. Regarding the selection of the older women, inquiries were made and flyers posted at two area churches and a temple, at an exclusive, affluent retirement community, and at a subsidized federal retirement housing neighborhood. Community contacts were also used. The criteria for selection of the women were a willingness to participate and to document their feelings and thoughts in a journal. The women also needed to be comfortable talking about their youth and experiences they had during their developing years. All of the women selected to participate were articulate and expressed an openness related to the topics to be addressed: menarche and puberty, fun, work, dating, fashions, and sports. They all stated that they were comfortable with the idea that the adolescents might ask them questions that were both related and unrelated to the discussion topics. The women brought pictures of themselves from their youth to share with the adolescents.

The Substance and the Setting

The substance and the setting for the intergenerational storytelling group retreat were unique. In the intimacy of the mountaintop retreat, the older women told their own stories about youth, dating, and the ways in which so many things were different when they were growing up, and yet some things seemed to remain the same. Full of vitality, intelligence, and occasional humor, the women recounted long-ago memories of menarche and growing to womanhood in a culture and a society very different from those of today. They talked about important things, about life itself. They shared the ways that families managed and survived dur-

ing the hardships and challenges of the Depression and World War II. They shared simple stories, for example, one story about a pretty piece of fabric bought for 25 cents to make a special dress long ago. But much more was learned from the actual sharing than from the price of fabric. After the sessions, the younger women had an expanded sense of what it meant to be female and a growing sense of self-pride and comfort with themselves and with others. They had the opportunity to listen, to speak, and to be heard; they each found their individual voice.

Data Collection

Contact with the participants covered a 3-month period, from mid-January through the end of March, and included the intense 2-day retreat. Data collection was based on three in-depth interviews, 18 hours of videotape, case notes, and other documentation from the retreat. In addition, the participants were given a journal to record their thoughts and feelings during the retreat. The participants kept their journals until the second interview, when these data were collected. Once they were collected and the data retrieved from them, journals were returned to the participants.

Data Analysis

Recorded interviews and videotapes were transcribed to allow for inductive coding using the constant comparative method. *Inductive analysis* (Patton, 1990) means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis “emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (p. 390). Data analysis for this study began by using open coding of initial interviews across cases. The open coding process produced several emerging themes that we then used to refine analysis and guide further data collection decisions, such as clarifications in second and third iterations of the interviews. After open coding, we used axial coding to draw connections between the initial emergent themes and to develop the resulting thematic framework. Finally, we used selective coding to revisit the data through within-case analysis to further refine and support the thematic framework. We used qualitative data analysis to further explore the frequency of the patterns that had emerged from the data and to aid in the selective coding process.

Trustworthiness of the Data

We achieved triangulation through the various types of data collected. We used member checks to ensure accuracy in capturing the meaning or phrases used by the participants; this is one way to rule out the possibility of misinterpretation of the meaning and the perspective (Maxwell, 1994). We used peer debriefing through consultation with other researchers or experts regarding the coding and concepts that emerged from data. Prolonged and persistent engagement was mixed. With an emergent design, some flexibility was required to allow the study to develop on a creative and natural course. This may be considered

a study limitation because the length of time for contact with participants was not prolonged, yet it was consistent. An audit trail of the data was maintained and secured to allow for reexamination and reevaluation of the data.

RESULTS

Four central themes emerged from this study: two related to the common experience of the adolescents and the older women and two uniquely related to the experience of the adolescents. The common central themes were the uniqueness of the single-gendered experience and the openness generated through lack of formal relationships between participants. Central themes related specifically to the adolescents' experience were growth through connection with older women and new awareness through connection with other female adolescents. Within these central themes, subthemes also emerged. The adolescents disclosed that the intergenerational storytelling group retreat was beneficial in increasing their self-confidence, comfort with self, openness with others, and risk taking. The adolescents also stated that the experience led them to be less judgmental of others who were different from them. The older women shared that they felt a sense of pride in the progress of women, a personal instillation of hope, an increase in personal risk taking, and a sense of rejuvenation.

Single-Gendered Experience

The retreat was markedly different from other group interactions that the participants had previously experienced, whether such gatherings had occurred at church camps or school events. The participants noticed a unique atmosphere at the retreat. Previous events had always included the presence of male adolescents and/or men. Participants stated that because of the type of environment that we created for the retreat, they felt free to express their distinct opinions and thoughts, to speak with their own voice. A special atmosphere was created through the single-gender experience that was related to the issue of voice and the expression of each participant's voice. One of the adolescents addressed this topic in her journal.

Now that I am back at school, I am paying closer attention to my friends and their stories. I think it's really cool how much I learned about other girls my age, in general, from the talks we had over the weekend. I guess I didn't realize how many of the same problems we all face, or have faced in the past. If all women and girls talked as openly about things as this group did, we/they would find many problems much more easily dealt with. It really helps me to see how other women and girls overcome their difficulties, so that I can better handle mine in the future.

Advantages of Gathering Group Members Not Related as Family

The women and adolescents also commented that the open environment was further enhanced by the fact that group members were not family members.

This allowed the participants to speak for themselves without reservation. They stated that if family members had been present at the retreat, they might have moderated comments because of family expectations or boundaries. The group came to view the common denominator as being female, not daughters, or granddaughters, or mothers, or grandmothers. One of the adolescents said,

I thought it was really fun and I enjoyed talking to the older ladies. It's not like they are your parents or anything, so you could say whatever you wanted to and you didn't feel embarrassed or anything. So you could say whatever you wanted to, and it was OK.

One of the older women said,

But here I was with a group of new girls to me . . . and they would talk, but I felt no real responsibility towards them, like I do my grandchildren, I was happy to share with them, but I didn't feel that responsibility to them. But as I said in my thing [journal], if anybody had wanted an adopted grandmother, I would've been glad.

Younger Women Connecting With Older Women

The adolescents (the names used are pseudonyms) grew to respect and listen to what the older women said. One example of this was regarding the role of hope. Joan (one of the older women) had talked about how important it was to have hope, and in a journal entry, Rosalie (one of the adolescents) remembered that and applied it to her classmate who had given up on trying to do her math homework.

She doesn't benefit at all [talking about the homework]. I told her that I wasn't going to help her unless she helped herself first. Basically told her if she couldn't do it I would help her, but that I wasn't going to give her the answers and I wasn't going to give her my paper. . . . Before I had always given her the answer. I kind of related it to what Joan said, that there is always hope. I knew she was intelligent and, um, but she never applies herself.

Many of the adolescents referred to the older women as being as close as family. The adolescents discussed many issues and topics with the older women that they had not talked about with their own family. I (first author) knew that soon after the retreat, all the adolescent participants received e-mailed Valentine's Day cards from Mary and Claire. The young women were thrilled. One of the things that surprised the young women was how technologically advanced these older women were on the computer. Even Claire, at the age of 80, had e-mail. Mary was surprised at everyone's response and said, "Well we are not dead you know!" The adolescents were very comfortable with and accepting of

the older women. It appeared that many of the adolescents' stereotypes about older people were shattered during the weekend.

One particular exchange that occurred during one of the last story times was a reflection on the different challenges in different generations. Mary (one of the older women) said, "Every generation had their problems, whether it was the Depression, or the war, and yours is going to be drugs and crime, everybody has their problems." Nadine (another older woman) went on to add that

We endure because we had to endure things like the Depression, and we can't even talk about it or paint a picture of it because it was so hard. We had to live with it. Then you looked forward to better times, and meeting the right guy, and getting married. But then Pearl Harbor happened, and I was married in 1943, and our little girl was born in 1944, and [my husband] came home in 1946. And every morning [we heard] someone else was dead. Then the Eisenhower years, and it was peaceful. We had to be tough, so maybe you girls are just going to be tougher than we are. There is hope if [you girls] endure.

The young participants felt special after Nadine said this to the group; you could see them sit a bit straighter and perhaps they felt they were up to the challenge. If the older women had survived so much, so could they. Maybe the younger women would be stronger than the older women, because the challenges that they faced—drugs and the pressures to be sexually active and to look a certain way—were different. It would require great strength from the adolescents to "endure" and have hope that things would get better.

Toward the end of the retreat, Mary asked the young women if they would have liked to have grown up during her time. The case she made was that there was no need to lock doors and that young women were safe to roam around freely, but that it was not the case today; young women were not safe. Mary mentioned several of the issues that had emerged in the retreat talks, such as drug busts, metal detectors in the junior high schools, and the pressure to engage in sexual activity. Natalie, the youngest participant in the room, was the first to respond. She said that she would not have liked living during the period when the older women were growing up, partly because you could not wear pants to school. Natalie said that she knew more about her body than the older women did growing up, and she perceived that she just had more freedom. Mary said that they did not know about freedom back then, to which Natalie responded that she did know about it, so she wanted it!

Female Adolescents in Connection

In their journals and in their interviews, the adolescents continually mentioned how wonderful it was to spend time with other young women in an open and safe environment. They referred to the judgmental attitudes and the rigid structure

of groups in school and said that you could not be yourself or be different and be accepted. All of the adolescents commented several times on the diversity of the young women present at the retreat. At first I was puzzled, so I asked them to explain. The seven adolescents represented variety in their heritage, in religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds and in rural versus urban backgrounds, but this was not their point of reference. When they glanced around the room at that first encounter, they saw young women whom they would not have normally included in their groups at school—young women who dressed, talked, or looked different from their usual friends. The bonds that the young women created, once they began to listen to each other, provided a powerful lesson regarding judging and exclusion.

What seemed to be important to the adolescents was their common experience. One of the journal entries stated, “I visited with some of the girls there and they talked about the freedom they felt there. Felt so good there. Talked about the stress you see girls under these days.” Lynn said about adolescents at her school,

I can't help thinking that a lot of the girls at school here could use a weekend or two like the one we spent . . . spending the weekend with these women and girls really helped to relate to my friends back home. . . . I really don't know what they think about things. I mean, they have to have opinions, but they rarely talked about them.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The intergenerational storytelling group retreat provided an excellent vehicle for connecting female adolescents and older women in a meaningful way. Both the adolescents and the older women were able to make connections from the group experience to their own lives. Four central themes emerged: two common to both older women and adolescents and two unique to the adolescent experience. Both adolescents and older women identified themes related to the uniqueness of a single-gendered experience and the value of the gathering participants who were not related as family members. The central themes emerging from the adolescent experience included connection with older women and connection with other female adolescents. Furthermore, the adolescents found the experience beneficial in increasing their self-confidence, comfort with self, openness with others, and risk taking. The adolescents also stated that the experience led them to be less judgmental of others who were different from them. The women reported feeling a sense of pride in the progress of women, a personal instillation of hope, an increase in personal risk taking, and a sense of rejuvenation.

Researchers have stated that girls and adolescents often lose their voice or ability to state strong emotions or thoughts or to challenge others when

they disagree (e.g., Gilligan, 1982). Rather, during this developmental time, they become confused about how they should look and what they should say (Belenky et al., 1997; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan et al., 1991; Taylor et al., 1995). The intergenerational storytelling group retreat experience assisted the adolescent participants in retrieving their voice and putting it to use. As indicated in their journals and interviews, every adolescent had a story to share regarding personal inner strength that they felt was gained from the retreat. Each story involved a choice they had made that they would not have made before the retreat. These choices included speaking up about something they felt strongly about or simply reaching out to another person in conversation. The adolescents stated that these choices were possible because they had the opportunity to talk openly and freely in an atmosphere in which they felt safe and free from others' judgment.

This research demonstrates that the intergenerational storytelling group retreat and the narratives shared provided an opportunity for both older women and female adolescents to share and listen to other females. This experience had a positive and beneficial influence on both the adolescents and older women. Six weeks after the experience, at the third interview, participants indicated that impressions from the weekend were still influencing their sense of self. A follow-up study would determine the residual impressions of the retreat and determine if any of the relationships established between the participants had endured. Findings that emerged from the data indicate that further research might be beneficial to explore social groups within the adolescent participants' junior high and high school settings. From the adolescents' comments, it appeared that these groups have become more rigid during the last few decades. A further examination of this phenomenon may provide insight into the workings of relationships and self-esteem in this age group.

The intergenerational storytelling group retreat concept may be useful in a variety of settings. Perhaps within a wide spectrum of diverse communities, which might include cultural, ethnic, religious, urban and rural, the intergenerational storytelling group retreat may be of benefit to any persons seeking to provide a meaningful connection and who seek to build community and enrich the life experience.

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