You and Your Aging Parent: A Laboratory Approach

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Introduction

THIS program was offered under the auspices of the Jewish Community Center of Pittsburgh. The Center is the recreation and leisure time agency of the Jewish community, and, as such, it provides a variety of services and activities for persons from toddlers through senior adults. Although the Center's membership is open to any person regardless of race, religion, or sex, it is clearly stated that one of its primary goals is the maintenance and enhancement of Jewish identity for its members. The community center is clearly a "social work agency" in that it provides not only leisure time and recreational services intended to heighten members' awareness of their identity, but also, services that are intended to assist members in coping with social and personal problems affecting their lives.

The Need

It had become increasingly apparent to several staff members (including the Director of Adult and Senior Adult Services and the two senior adult workers) that many families were undergoing strained relationships between grown children and their parents. For the most part, these grown "children" were 35 to 50 years of age and their parents were approximately 20 to 25 years older. Staff interest in this problem resulted from several diverse experiences.

During a series of programs designed for broad adult interest, many senior adults attended. In general the senior adults came early to these programs (sometimes by as much as 45 minutes to an hour) and were seated before the bulk of the "younger" adult audience arrived. Present for the program were the Director of Adult and Senior Adult Services, who was in charge of the program, and both of the Center's senior adult workers, who were present just as participants.

Prior to the program, staff members were approached by several middle-aged adults who asked questions such as "Why are there so many old people here?" or "Aren't there a lot of old people here tonight?" or "How come they (referring to the senior adults) got all the front row seats?" The discomfort these questions implied indicated to staff the existence of a critical sensitivity bordering on hostility that many of the middle-aged persons present at the program seemed to manifest toward older adults. Similar experiences such as this one were repeated at a number of other adult programs.

The senior adult workers, in the course of their work in the Center's Senior Adult Program, were also being

approached by senior adults who wanted to talk about pressing personal problems concerning their relationship with grown children. A large number of these issues (such as living arrangements, family relations, finances) appeared to be areas of discord between the older persons and their grown children. Many senior adults seemed unwilling to discuss these matters or their feelings about the issues with their children, even when urged to do so by the worker.

Finally, staff was also becoming increasingly aware of tensions based on their own personal and social contacts. Several staff members knew personal friends who were experiencing some "difficulty" with their aging parents. Other staff members were coping with their own feelings about parents, and, in fact, when the idea about this program was discussed with the Assistant Executive Director she said, in a half joking manner, "we could fill it just with staff members!"

There was little doubt, based on data we were observing, that a need existed for some type of a program that would assist in alleviating some of the tension areas between grown child and aging parent. Staff felt that many programs and services were already being offered to the senior adult to help him cope with these issues. However, little was being done to help the grown children deal with their feelings and concerns about their parents. A decision was made to focus the program, at least in the beginning, on the grown child's needs.

The Approach

Once staff recognized the need for a program, they concentrated on the problem of how to develop a program that would meet this need, and, at the same time, be responded to by grown children. Staff believed people would not just show up for such a program because of the anxiety many have toward the very issue the program would be focused on. If staff was correct in its assessment of the degree of tension existing between grown children and their parents, then the design of a program to meet this need was a key factor in determining its success.

The program was designed to accomplish the following goals:

1. Sensitize middle-aged persons to the needs of older persons.
2. Bring to a more conscious level participants' own feelings towards their aging parents.
3. Assist participants in sharing their feelings towards their aging parents with other participants.
4. Help participants become aware that others, like themselves, have similar feelings toward their aging parents.
5. Provide an environment where participants could discuss alternative behaviors in dealing with aging parents.

Bearing in mind the staff's concern about whether people would respond to a program with such goals, it was decided that a group would be formed to plan a program entitled "You and Your Aging Parent." The group developed (there were 11 members) was composed of members of both sexes who were active on the Center's Board of Directors and committees. Each person was chosen because: 1) he had had a difficult experience with a parent, 2) he had what appeared to be a positive relationship with a parent or 3) he had shown a willingness to be active in and a concern for the senior adult program of the Center. Thus, the makeup of the planning group was rather heterogeneous in terms of the individual's personal relationship with his aging parents. However, there was one distinguishing characteristic in common. All had been approached by a staff member and asked to become a part of the planning group on the basis of 1) relevant experiences with own parents

and 2) willingness to talk about these experiences in the group.

The goal of this group was to plan a program entitled "You and Your Aging Parent." The structure of this group was designed by staff in order for participants to experiment with several activities that might help in their discussion about issues related to grown children and their parents and that might be relevant to any program they were to develop.

The Design

A warm-up exercise was chosen that would act as an "ice breaker." Although several persons in the group knew one another quite well, each person was asked to select a group member they did not know or at least did not know as well as most. After introducing themselves to their partners, they were then asked to choose another pair and each person was asked to introduce his partner to the other pair.[1] The entire group then came together and repeated the introductions.

From the very beginning several members shared facts about their personal lives relevant to the group, such as "my mother lives at home with me" or "my mother lives in Florida" or "my father has lived in the Jewish Home for five years." Several members joked about predicaments they were now facing. For instance, one woman had both a mother and a mother-in-law who were hospitalized in almost the farthest ends of the city and this member jokingly mentioned that she spent 37 miles a day in a car running from hospital to hospital.

After the warm-up exercise the group was asked to view a film entitled *Weekend.*[2] It is a warm and very moving story about a family (mother, father, son and grandfather) who go out on a picnic. Throughout the day's picnic the family is shown in close and loving scenes with one another and, as the day comes to an end, all depart for the city with the exception of the grandfather, who is left in a field sitting in his prized armchair. As the film closes, the camera pans back across the field and the viewer sees many older persons all sitting and waiting.

At the conclusion of the film the staff facilitator set a "theme" for the group — "Why Are We Here?" The group began to discuss their roles — were they supposed to immediately begin planning a program? Should they react to what they had just seen? What should they do first? The facilitator was non-committal and only responded that his role would be to see that everyone had a chance to talk, that two or three people did not talk at once, and that the group would conclude at 10 p.m. The facilitator also reminded the members that their own personal experiences with their parents might have direct relevance to the discussion.

Although a few members wanted to begin immediately to plan a program, it became obvious that most of the group wanted to talk about the movie they had just seen. Several used the movie as a beginning point for sharing with the group feelings they had toward their own parents. By 10 p.m. the group had begun to discuss several ways a program could be formulated, including: guest speaker, small groups such as this one, or various combinations. No definite decisions were made but the facilitator pointed out that the group had shared many personal experiences and had begun to explore various program possibilities. He suggested that everyone think about the specific type of program

[1] Group members were told they could talk about anything they wished with their partner. Several began to immediately talk about their relationship with a parent while others tended to confine themselves to providing information about themselves such as age, number of children, work, etc.

[2] Zagreb Films, Producer, Mass Media Assoc., 2116 N. Charles St., Baltimore, Md. 21218.

that could be developed and be ready to begin at this point next week.

At the second session members were asked to participate in an exercise, which, the facilitator explained was intended to make them more aware of the needs of the elderly.[3] In the discussions following the exercise, group members began to talk in great detail and sometimes with much feeling about relations with their parents. The group by this time had become a safe medium for people to share feelings while, at the same time, affording members the opportunity to look at these personal expressions in terms of the task at hand — planning the program. There was no indication that group members believed expressions of personal experiences with parents impeded the progress of the group in accomplishing the task. In fact, group members seemed to agree implicitly that such expressions were helpful in formulating a program.

Throughout the discussion a clear thread was beginning to emerge. The group felt the exercises had been most useful in stimulating discussion and heightening their own personal awareness. Several members, however, expressed a concern about the lack of cognitive input regarding particular issues, such as nursing homes and the social psychological aspects of aging. They suggested that one or two sessions be planned with an expert who would provide cognitive knowledge for the participants.

The program planned by this group included the following: 1) a second group to be formed that would participate in the same series of exercises as had the planning group, 2) one or two meetings with experts who would provide specific cognitive elements and who would meet with members of both groups. Although a few members of the planning group wanted the small group discussions to be continued, the majority believed two sessions were sufficient.

A second group was formed on the basis of names suggested by members of the planning group. The planning group members submitted possible names to the staff facilitator. The facilitator then formed the group, and, in our case, since there were only twelve names submitted, the group included everyone suggested by the original group members. The planning person was asked to contact the person they had suggested and the staff facilitator sent a note to each person one week prior to the first meeting.

The second group, also with both sexes represented and in discussion con-

[3] The exercise is adapted from Barry Eisen , the article: "Exercise in Being Elderly, An Experiential Model for Staff Development" *Program Aids* (Spring 1975), The National Jewish Welfare Board, New York 1) Each member was seated in a room where the chairs had been scattered in a way to limit their contact with one another. The Beatles' song "When I'm 64" was then played and each person was asked to reflect on the lyrics in the song, 2) After the song was finished and approximately two minutes of silence had passed the facilitator read the following statements with a minute interval between each to the group and asked them to reflect on the thought being communicated and their feelings about it: a) "If old people show the same desires, the same feelings and the same needs as the young, the whole world looks upon them with disgust — in them love and jealousy seem absurd, sexuality repulsive and violence ludicrous"; b) "The older person must, sooner or later, absorb the loss of the person with whom they have shared their life, and who had virtually become part of them;" and c) "No one who lives long can escape old age, it is an unavoidable and irreversible phenomenon." 3) Each person was then asked to choose a partner and discuss with that person their reactions to the song and statements, 4) After five minutes each member was asked to choose a new partner and discuss a series of statements the facilitator handed out. The statements were open ended sentences: a) To be old is to be . . . . . b) Once a widow . . . . . c) Once a person turns 65 . . . . . and d) Retirement is difficult because . . . . . , and 5) After approximately seven minutes everyone was asked to form a circle and the facilitator asked for members to share any comments or feelings they had about the exercise.

tent and personal interactions, was strikingly similar to the first. Members were less quick to share personal feelings but by the conclusion of the second session, each person seemed comfortable expressing feelings about his aging parents. Since the second group was constituted not as a planning group but rather as a group where people would be talking about experiences with their parents, it is interesting to note the fact that this group was slower in moving toward "I" statements concerning aging parents. Several members shared rather moving experiences and the group, much like the first, provided a supportive environment for this type of behavior. By the end of the second session, this group had covered much of the same ground and was at the same stage of group development as the first one.

Both groups then came together and met with experts who were to provide cognitive input for the group's consideration. One expert spoke about institutional care of the elderly and another expert spoke about the aging process and its ramifications for family relations. Both were well known authorities in their respective fields of nursing care and casework counselling.

The sessions with the experts were characterized by an informality and a great amount of give and take between each of them and the group members. Several factors contributed to this?

1. A letter was sent to each member informing him about the meetings and emphasizing that " . . . These meetings will be quite informal with our guest . . . becoming part of our group."

2. Several members knew one or both of the experts personally and (I would think but do not know for certain) one or two may have used them in their professional capacities.

3. Both experts had discussed with the facilitator prior to their "appearance" the nature of the group and both began their discussions with personal stories concerning their own relations with parents and with grown children.

For the most part the two sessions with the experts were very similar to the previous group meetings. Although the experts were able to provide specific information (e.g. nursing home admission procedures, reality therapy, realistic expectations in a counselling situation, etc.) their presence only seemed to generate further group "interaction." During both evenings there were extensive periods of time when two or three group members carried on a discussion among themselves without any participation by the expert or the facilitator and it turned out to be quite appropriate for this to happen. The experts' presence seemed in great measure to only further stimulate the group's discussion.

Evaluation

After the conclusion of the meetings with the experts, each participant was sent a brief questionnaire and asked to return it by mail. Twelve responses were received and seven persons did not reply. (The questionnaire was not "scientific" and was intended only to provide feedback for staff.) The response was very positive. Typical of the replies about the program, the question "What were some of the things that you got out of these sessions?" brought the answer, "an awareness that my problem was not unique — an appreciation of the difficulties of others — a realization that I was never really aware how many people were affected and in so many different ways."

Three other points are noteworthy. First, two members mentioned the sessions had made them more aware of their interactions with their children. One participant replied that "the discussions moved me enough to perhaps

prepare myself for the aging process and hopefully . . . make it easier for my children when they will have to cope with me as a senior citizen." Second, although the original planning group had recommended that two group sessions were sufficient, eight participants indicated a willingness to continue with two to four more small group meetings. One person did not check "yes" or "no" and one person who said, "yes" added the provision "If the discussions had a definite purpose or goal." Third, little specific reference was made in the evaluation to the sessions with the experts. This may be due to the lack of a specific question about those sessions. However, during the planning group's discussion two persons were very strongly in favor of having experts included in the program and the other members seemed willing to go along with this request. Interestingly enough both of these people did not come to the sessions with the experts. One conclusion may well be that the sessions with the experts added to the group's consideration of particular issues but did not have a significant impact on the program.

Similar programs are planned for the future with consideration being given to extending the number of sessions from two to four. Staff is beginning to discuss the possibility of bringing grown children and their aging parents together in small groups to share their feelings with one another. Another option that is under discussion is the formation of aging parent groups who would begin, under the guidance of a staff facilitator, to explore their feelings towards grown children. Also being considered is the use of participants in the first two groups as leaders for new groups. The major thrust in all these activities, however, is the emphasis upon the laboratory method as a significant approach in the development and implementation of the program.

The Use of the Laboratory Approach in Programming

We considered problematic the dual tasks of generating a program by the use of a planning group, which at the same time it "planned," gave its participants some personal satisfaction and growth from their interactions. Therefore we chose a laboratory method as our approach. This method is characterized by a dual emphasis on experiential and experimental ways of learning.[4] In experiential groups the data focused upon are generated in the relationships and interactions among participants. Relevant and vital information that enter into such interactions is derived from each individual's personal experiences. The experimental element in the group refers to the environmental freedom to try out different ways of relating, different from day-to-day experiences.

In our lab the experiential elements included: a) The participant's experience with aging parents, b) awareness on the part of participants that such experiences were relevant and c) the use of structured exercises that were designed to stimulate group interactions. The experimental elements included: a) facilitator's attempt to provide a setting conducive to trust, openness and psychological safety, b) use of structured exercises that were designed to assist participants in becoming aware of their reactions to the exercise, and c) opportunity for members to test out their reactions by discussing personal reactions with a partner and/or the group.

The exercises were experienced as so relevant by the planning group they strongly recommended the same series of exercises for the next group. Furthermore, the experiential element that developed in the planning group made such an impact on the group members

[4] Terry Pickett, "The Laboratory Method," unpubl. University of Pittsburgh, 1975.

that they recommended that any further program should consist of small groups. Staff, of course, had assumed the exercises would be relevant to the planning group, but it was just happenstance that the sequence of activities proved to be so helpful. The second group formed also responded favorably to the exercises.

In the formation of the planning group, members were personally contacted by a staff person who clearly stipulated the importance of the member's personal experiences with his aging parent. It was essential that each person be made aware of the importance of personal experience because these experiences would be a significant aspect of the lab but even more importantly it conveyed an expectation to the would-be participant. By making such an expectation explicit the individual had the opportunity consciously to make a decision about whether he was prepared to come to such a group. The groups formed, therefore, came together voluntarily with each participant's knowledge beforehand of what would be expected of him. It is absolutely essential that persons be made aware of the nature and expectations of this laboratory prior to their joining.

Formation of the second group literally self-generated from the first. Members of the planning group approached people they thought would be interested in joining a group with this specific focus. They conveyed to prospective members what had happened in their group, and again the elements of experience and experimentation were stressed. We can also conclude that voluntary selection came into play since members of the second group were quite aware of what they were going to participate in because their friends had already done so.

Leadership style was also a factor in the lab. The Director of Adult and Senior Adult Services and one of the Senior Adult workers were co-facilitators. Although highly non-directive, they did set ground rules for the discussion. Besides maintaining these ground rules they were also clear as to their roles. Together they were responsible for monitoring the group's discussion in terms of a) maintaining a personal level of discussion ("I" statements rather than "You's" or "We's"), b) focusing the group about the theme under discussion, c) allowing all participants the opportunity to talk and d) facilitating group discussion by sharing personal experiences when appropriate. The senior adult worker had considerable personal experience with an aging mother who lives with her, and prior to the group's meeting, had indicated a willingness to talk about these experiences with the group if a point developed when discussion lagged. The worker's role was to be more involved in the group process while the Director of Adult and Senior Adult Services' role was to be more involved with the process.

Many facilitators bring to a group some type of authority. In other groups a leaderless approach is made. Group process very often is affected by the participant's perception of and relation to the authority or lack of such in the group. In our group the facilitators brought considerable authority in that both had extensive experience working with senior adults and group members were aware of this. Although the facilitators made great efforts not to interact with the group on the basis of their expertise it is impossible to account for the participants' perceptions of the facilitators' authority and the effect this had on group interaction and development. (A research design could certainly be developed that would measure the participant's perception of the leader's authority and the effect on group process and development).

The cognitive part of the program came directly from the recommendation

of the planning group. However, they suggested that a second and even a third group (we did not have time to generate a third group) be formed to go through the same small group lab experience before the entire group would meet with the experts. The planning group realized the need for the small group experiences as preparation for the cognitive input and they were willing to forego their own meeting until another group had, in a sense, caught up with them.

To conclude, the use of the laboratory method increased participants' awareness of their feelings toward their aging parents and made them more sensitive to the needs of senior adults. The method also allowed participants to bring personal experiences to bear on a task resulting in both meaningful personal growth and the completion of a task — the developement of a program that would help others with the same need. Finally, the laboratory was relevant to the second group that came not to plan but to participate.