

THE ADULT IN OLDER ADULT PROGRAMMING *

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THESE past ten years have brought deeper understanding of the needs of older people and enrichment of program. While the diversified social and recreational activities have helped to counteract the loneliness and frustration of the later years, it is important that we move into a new phase of older adult programming, if we are to tackle some of the deeper challenges inherent in the problems of older people. For example: (1) The problem of individual adjustment is complicated by the fact that there are no meaningful roles or functions for the older person in our present culture. (2) We need to have more knowledge about the developmental factors associated with the aging period, so that the techniques of group work can be more effective in achieving the goals of individual adjustment. (3) Greater consideration needs to be given to the implications of full-time leisure for programmatic goals, as well as to frequency of services offered.

With the trend toward an ever-increasing older population, hopefully the time will come when the societal climate and attitudes will be more accepting and positive toward the aging person. However, in this transitional period, group work

has the unique opportunity of helping the older person find useful and meaningful functions which can provide personal satisfactions. Of the helping professions, group work alone has at its disposal the technique of program, with its manifold uses.

The purpose of this paper is to stress the need for broadening the scope of older adult programming to provide greater opportunities for individuals to find useful and productive activities in terms of adult values and related to adult patterns of behavior. Hence this paper's title. It is true that the limitations of aging, as well as the strengths of the adult, have to be taken into consideration. It is equally true that different activities have different meanings and impact on the individual in different phases of life. The focus in selection of exemplary material in this paper has been to single out only a few aspects of program which have proved to be satisfying and meaningful to increasing numbers of older adults.

In limiting the material to this main purpose, major areas of program have been omitted. These include many activities which are important and valuable in meeting the needs of older people. Thus, it should be stated at this point that the companionship and social activities which the clubs provide are vital

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to older people, who are confronted with increasing social isolation and changes in the family situation. Older adult clubs have been particularly meaningful and helpful in this area.

Basically, the problem presented by older people who make use of group work services is the need to adjust to situational changes resulting from the aging process, which deprive them of accustomed avenues of satisfying basic personality needs. Essentially, they are normal in terms of personality functioning. Because of changes in the life situation, the older person no longer has access to basic groupings in daily living, such as the family, work, and organizational life in the larger community. Consequently, he is faced with the need to find satisfying and appropriate relationships and activities to replace these losses. There is also the major adjustment to stresses associated with physical decline, failing health, and the imminence of death.

It is both an individual as well as a rapidly growing societal problem. Although the social scientists speak of flexibility in role adaptation as a necessary ingredient to adjustment during this phase of life, there are no meaningful roles or functions for the aging person in our present culture. Neither are there clearly defined and accepted norms of behavior as a source of support and reassurance for the aging individual. There is also a cultural lag between the recent stereotype of the older person as a passive, declining individual, living out his later days in peace and quiet, and the more recent findings as to the improved physical condition and the potentials for development and fulfillment during this phase of life.

Another major aspect which merits a great deal of study is the quantitative change in leisure in the older person's life. When leisure becomes full-time, rather than a small portion of our busy

lives, the needs which a recreational program are called upon to fulfill are very different. This calls for new definitions, new emphases and broader concepts. This added dimension has implications, not only in terms of programmatic goals but also in the amount of time for which recreational programs are needed.

In addition to full-time leisure, the older person is faced with basic changes in family relationships, frequently involving reversal of roles between parents and children. After a lifetime of meeting the need to be useful and wanted in varying degrees, the older person finds most avenues of gratifying this need denied him. In a recent study conducted in New York City, it was found that the need to be useful and wanted was paramount in adjustment after retirement.¹

It should be noted that not all older people necessarily need organized programs of social and recreational activities, nor is this the only answer to the problems of adjustment during this phase of life. However, large numbers of older adults do need help in reorganizing their lives because of the complexity of the problems indicated above. The extent to which the individual can find constructive outlets for basic drives in group work programs is related to the individual personality structure, patterns of behavior in meeting needs, and other factors in his life situation bearing on intensity of need and opportunities for gratification. It is also dependent on standards of service, involving not only the competence and skill of staff, but also size of groups and ratio of staff to size of group. The burden of implementing goals does not rest on the worker alone, but is shared with the agency.

The material for this paper has been drawn from some of the experiences in

¹ Bernard Kutner, David Fanshel, Alice Togo and Thomas S. Langner, "Five Hundred Over Sixty: A Community Survey of Aging."

older adult programming in the Jewish Community Center of Essex County over the past ten years. The older adult program in Essex County reflects the general pattern of services in that it includes both a day center in Newark, as well as six weekly clubs in the suburban communities. The clubs range in size from 20 to 125, with the day center having a membership of over 200, and daily attendance of 75 to 150. The age range covers a span of 30 years, roughly from 60 to 90. The Center provides full-time professional staff for the day center, and part-time leaders for the weekly clubs. Again, in line with the national picture, five of the groups are conducted in cooperation with women's service organizations, four of these being local sections of the National Council of Jewish Women. A large corps of volunteers provide three categories of service: preparation and serving of refreshments, transportation on a selective basis, and assistance with program, primarily in the form of leadership of special interest groups, under the supervision of professional staff.

The specific program experiences to be cited might be prefaced with a comment made by an older adult when asked why he didn't join a Golden Age Club. His reply was, "Who wants to learn to paint?" In these few words are highlighted not only the older person's resistance to finding a hobby as a solution to adjustment and the common misconceptions about "golden age" programs, but also the need for greater consideration of adult values and their implications for program.

Within the past few years an increasing number of service projects have been developed in our programs which provide opportunities for many individuals to perform useful and needed functions and thus contribute to the welfare of other members in the group, as well as to the larger community. The projects are

sufficiently diversified so as to permit the widest participation of both men and women, at their level of interest and ability. These range from service positions within the group, such as checking coats, serving refreshments, visiting sick members, to numerous community service projects, including cancer dressings, sewing for Israel, making plastic aprons for amputees at the local veteran's hospital, dressing gowns and footstools for the cerebral palsy treatment center, and some others.

While some of the tasks may seem menial and insignificant, many members seek these service jobs. Their great satisfaction from these jobs is indicated by their reluctance to have others share in the work, or even to give it up when their health begins to fail. Recently a woman told us that in the last few days before her father's death, when his mind was wandering, he talked chiefly about his work as chairman of the check room at the club. This is cited only to show that it is almost impossible for us to gauge the older person's tremendous need for usefulness and the deep gratification which services in the club provide.

It is significant that although the club's Cheer Committee first viewed its function as one visit to sick members, one of the committee voluntarily began to make periodic visits to members with long-term illnesses, either in their homes or in institutions. Many of these were long trips, involving two and three bus changes. This led to the suggestion by the worker that the function and the size of the committee might be further expanded to include regular periodic visits to the residents of the Home for the Aged and one or two convalescent and nursing homes. When this was discussed with the membership, there was an immediate and wholehearted response, accompanied by spontaneous contributions of money from several members to cover the committee's expenses. After the

committee's first visit to the Home for the Aged, one of the men on the committee with deep feeling told the worker of the gratitude expressed by the residents, particularly those who were bedridden and had not had visitors for a long time. He felt that the visit was a real *mitzvah*, and then added, "You know, this is a job that we, the older people, have to do; not the younger people."

The values of service projects, in terms of meeting basic needs for a sense of achievement, usefulness and recognition, are further demonstrated by the sustained motivation, interest and participation in the cancer dressings project, in contrast to many craft activities. It might be noted that the former is an unusually good medium for older people, since the steps involved are so simple that almost any member, regardless of physical limitations, such as poor vision or shaking hands, can participate, and further, there are several processes involved which can be done by different people. Within a few weeks after this project was started, attendance grew rapidly, with both men and women participating. Men were cutting gauze, folding and cutting newspapers; the women were tearing sheets into proper size, clipping the various parts together, and still others were doing the sewing. Moreover, work on the project was not confined to the day on which it was scheduled, but on other days of the week members would go to the cabinet, take out materials, and work by themselves. When the first shipment was completed, members of the group who had worked on the dressings accompanied the volunteer to the American Cancer Society, where they became more fully aware of the scope of the service in which they were participating, and learned more about the distribution of the dressings to patients. Later in the season the club was awarded a service certificate by the

American Cancer Society. Shortly before the volunteer working with the group was about to leave for the summer, she broached the subject of ending for the season. An excerpt from her record might be of interest:

"As June approached I mentioned the need to 'finish' our work. They finally agreed that next Wednesday would be the last meeting. I was delighted with the fact that I had put my point across with no arguments. If you have worked with our people for any length of time, you will know that when you decide something is 'final,' it is not at all final, because there are at least ten opinions on why it should or should not be final. But today no arguments, thank God.

"That is why I say, when a small committee of members approached me the following Wednesday, with 'Sick people don't take a vacation. We will work all summer,' I am not ashamed to tell you that there was a tear in my eye and a lump in my throat."

The inclusion of service projects as an integral part of the club program contributes to group morale, as a result of recognition from the community, and also to a sense of purpose. This has value and meaning to the group and offers some answer to the older person's vague groping for a sense of purpose in his life. When new individuals inquire about joining the club, only a few have been articulate enough in defining their needs to ask for service projects, and are pleased to learn that this is available. For many others, however, the service aspect of the club program has provided a sound and acceptable reason for joining. There is a whole constellation of feelings and attitudes around affiliation with a Golden Age Club, including the obvious one of identifying oneself as an older person. There is no previous experience during adulthood of belonging to an organization for enjoyment, self-expression and development. While individuals on their own initiative may develop friendship groups for enjoyment, or join classes to learn skills, most

organizations with which they affiliate usually have a stated purpose, such as civic, fraternal or religious. In response to an inquiry from an elderly gentleman who was considering joining the club, the staff worker told him about the various activities of the group. After she had mentioned quite a number of specific program activities, he asked, "But what do they do?" The rather plaintive question, "But what do they do?" also voices the older person's lack of a sense of purpose in his own life and the desire to find something to which he can feel related that has some purpose.

In addition to giving conscious direction to the development of service projects as an integral part of the club program, great care needs to be used in the selection of media, both in the area of crafts, as well as in other phases of program. This paper is in no way intended as a brief against the use of crafts for older adults. There is full recognition of the importance and value of crafts in providing opportunities for creative expression, for satisfaction in learning new skills, and for acquiring a sense of achievement. However, the problem lies in finding the media which will meet these needs, as well as the older person's standards of taste and values. Although a variety of crafts activities had been tried, such as ceramics, copper enameling, leather work and several others, they had met with very limited response. In contrast, basketry has swept Essex County during the past year. After its initial success in the day center, we found the same experience repeated in each of the clubs. For the first time members asked to take supplies home with them to work on the baskets. Before entering the hospital for surgery, one of the women took sufficient materials to make a whole basket. A few of the members have shown great ingenuity and creativity in improving on the techniques taught them by the

leaders and in developing forms and shapes so that the baskets can be used for a variety of purposes, including summer handbags.

This points up the differences between members' scale of values and standards of beauty and those of the workers. While creativity is very high on the group worker's scale of values, creative expression in and of itself did not provide sufficient satisfaction for the members, especially when the finished product was frequently crude and childish. It is significant that when the emphasis in ceramics was changed from working with the raw clay to use of molds, there was an immediate upsurge of interest, with many more people participating in the glazing. The basketry not only provided scope for individual creative expression, but this medium evidently has deeper meaning for the older person as a form of handicraft in terms of his taste patterns. The usefulness of the finished product is also important in motivating interest. The reaction of other members of the group, who are not participating in the activity, also plays a role in reinforcing members' doubts or satisfactions. Thus the group as a whole was more favorably impressed with basketry than with previous crafts projects.

Another technique is the adaptation of program media, which meet adult needs and values and also take into account the limitations of aging. Dramatics can be a rich and ongoing source of meaningful programs when the emphasis is placed on creative expression of the older person's life experiences and feelings, rather than on the use of script and the memorizing of lines. When the worker first introduced the idea of interpreting in dramatic form the club's program and its meaning to the members, as part of an anniversary program, it met with resistance from the chairman of the club's entertainment committee on the grounds that it was contrary to

his concept of theater, based on the Jewish stage. A contributing factor is the reluctance of individuals who enjoy prestige and recognition in their particular spheres of competence, whether it be as a performer or chairman of a committee, to share this with others, lest it detract from their own. As this form of group presentation, in contrast to individual performances, provides opportunity for more members to participate, group pressure finally prevailed, the chairman acceded, and rehearsals started. "The method" involves developing a story idea in discussion with the group, related to some aspect of their life experiences, selecting participants (in reality, each individual plays himself) and working out the ideas which each one conveys in his own words. As rehearsals progressed, content of the "play" developed in depth and richness as members began to give expression to their own current and previous experiences and feelings. As one participant put it, they "were talking from the heart."

With this technique as a basis, it has been possible to develop broader themes, with the result that the group's dramatic presentations have become important aspects of program to mark such events as Roosevelt's birthday, Jewish Music Month, Israel's 10th anniversary, and others. With enrichment of content has come the addition of song and dance, and the inclusion of the group's choral group and folk dancers.

The development and encouragement of self-government is desirable, not only as a basic group goal, but also in providing opportunities for individuals to use their abilities in meaningful activities. Through participation as club officers and chairmen, many individuals gain recognition and status within the group. Others find the opportunity for such activity for the first time in their lives and realize some of their untapped potential. As a result of these positive

experiences within the group, some individuals find the means of becoming active in the larger community; in some instances, for the first time in their lives, in others, the means of returning to active participation in community affairs.

Before citing a case in point, acknowledgment might briefly be made of some of the problems in practice. In the initial stages, older adult groups are quite passive and dependent on the leader. While dependency needs of older people can be understood in terms of the fears and insecurities related to aging, a deeper level of dependency was revealed during the course of an executive committee meeting. The discussion in question involved criticism of the supervisor's absence from the club, necessitated by other job responsibilities. A part-time worker was to be added to the staff, so that there would be professional staff coverage at all times. When this was discussed with the executive committee, the chairman expressed his dissatisfaction by commenting that "a baby sitter cannot take the place of a mother." Another indigenous leader corrected the chairman by saying that the members should not be compared to young children, but rather to teen-agers, who needed their mother even more. The relationship with the staff worker is further complicated by the fact that many of the indigenous leaders, in their efforts to assume complete control of the group, feel threatened by the staff worker.

While the process of helping the group achieve greater independence in functioning may be slow and laborious, the governing bodies of the day center and several of the weekly clubs have shown marked development. Not only has leadership been broadened to include large numbers of individuals, but they have become increasingly effective in planning and in making decisions.

The satisfactions to the individual can

best be illustrated by the following case in point. With Mr. A's work background in an administrative and supervisory capacity in a large firm, his fluency in both English and Yiddish, his ability as a public speaker, and his leadership qualities, he attained leadership positions in the club rather quickly. He has held a series of chairmanships, including presidency of the club, over a period of years. (The constitutional provisions of this group limits the term of office for president, though not for other posts.) His pattern of gaining recognition and prestige has been through high-status leadership positions, for he has been quite selective in his choice of chairmanships, accepting only those which carry great prestige and which involve planning, supervisory or other functions with considerable responsibility. Positions of a "service" nature, involving any physical work, were not even offered him by the group. Although he has manual skills, he has consciously refrained from direct participation in such activities, but has frequently told others how to do it.

While aware and resentful of this, members respect his abilities and feel they need him as a spokesman for the group. On those occasions when the club participates in total agency programs, or when the general community is invited to a club affair, he is invariably chosen to speak for the group. He is also the elected representative of the older adult division to the Y Board of Directors. Further, through his activities as the club's fund-raising chairman for United Jewish Appeal and the local Building Fund Drive, both he and the group have received recognition from the organized Jewish community for the large sums raised. Mention might also be made of the fact that Mr. A, who is 78 years of age, organizes and conducts these fund-raising campaigns in as highly developed a fashion as any professional fund-raiser. Although he is the indi-

vidual who compared the group to teenagers in their need for a mother, his use of the professional worker with respect to the conduct of the fund-raising campaigns is confined to requests for needed supplies or general information, but not for help in planning or conducting the campaign.

When he was offered a part-time job a year ago, he declined. When he mentioned this to the worker, he did not go into his reasons, other than to state that he was not interested. It is entirely possible that the recognition and prestige, which Mr. A is deriving from his deep involvement in the organizational life of the older adult club and in the larger community, may be more meaningful to him than the satisfactions he might find in paid employment. In passing, it might be noted that increasing numbers of adults, who are successful in their vocations and have full family lives, become involved in the organizational life of the community, through which they are deriving meaningful gratifications.

One of the reasons for citing this illustration at such length is related to the difficulty in finding appropriate activities in which the male members of older adult clubs can participate. While women feel freer to take part in the social events and various other program activities, one of the challenging problems in working with older people has been to find activities which have some relationship to men's previous work experiences. Our experiences have indicated that if a man has been able to become involved either in the organizational structure of the group or in some other activity which lend "male" status, he feels freer to participate in some of the "recreational" phases of program.

Differences between men and women in their attitudes and the use they make of group work programs is further borne out in the sexual composition of the membership in the day center and the

weekly clubs. The pattern in Essex County is probably typical of the general picture. In the day center the majority of the members are men, whereas in the weekly clubs the overwhelming majority are women. Further, a large proportion of the men attend the day center five days a week, coming in at the same hour in the morning and leaving at about the same time each afternoon. This approximates the work pattern and points up the need to find a meaningful substitute, in view of the older person's full-time leisure. For many individuals the day center has become the hub of their lives. This is not only the place where they become involved in a variety of activities which become increasingly meaningful and important to them, but also where they can find a rather full social life. The depth of involvement varies among individuals; in some instances even leading to marriage.

Although the methods used in the introduction and development of program have been touched upon in the course of citing the various illustrations, a brief recapitulation might be helpful. A variety of methods were used, with varying emphases, but all generic to group work. These have included planning with the group, exposure, demonstration and use of relationship. In planning with the group, it has been necessary for the worker to be quite directive with specific program suggestions, particularly in the early stages. After the group has had some positive program experiences, members begin to take more responsibility in the planning as well as the execution of program. At the point where they become critical or reject the worker's suggestions, progress has really been made. The techniques of exposure and demonstration were brought into frequent play, possibly more so than may be the case with other age groups. As an example, when cancer bandages were suggested to the group's

planning committee a number of years ago, it was rejected. Several years later, when a volunteer suggested this project to the worker, it was not discussed with the members. The planning was confined to worker and volunteer, and was focused on scheduling of the activity, the names of some individuals who might be interested in participating, and methods of involving others. Following this, the volunteer brought in the materials, a completed dressing, and asked several people to assist her. The results have already been discussed.

Although it may seem quite elementary, the use of a committee, rather than the involvement of the whole group, to plan for several weeks in advance, has been far more effective and productive than involvement of the whole group. Further, the technique of distributing the month's program schedule to the members has met with a very positive response, for it gives them an added sense of security in knowing what the program will be.

Another factor, which is dependent on staffing, is the need to encourage the formation of smaller groupings around common interests and committee functions. While large groups and mass programs have a number of positive values for older adults, it is essential that these be balanced with smaller groupings in order to create opportunities for the involvement and participation of larger numbers of individuals.

A key factor in the development of programming is the need for the worker to know the individuals, their interests, their capacities and their limitations. Particularly with older adults, because of their limited experience range in "recreational activities," their fears and insecurities, and their tremendous need for encouragement and recognition, continuity of relationship with the worker is especially important. Though it is axiomatic that the development of effective

programming to meet the needs of individuals is dependent on adequate standards of staffing, adequate not only in professional competence and skill, in ratio of staff to size of group, by and large this has not been implemented in the area of work with older adults. Most older adult clubs are very large in size, ranging from 50 to 200, even to 400; frequently with only one worker. While some development has taken place in providing more staff, there is obviously a great need to formulate criteria with respect to standards of staffing. Perhaps the lag is due in part to the fact that goals in serving this age group have not been too clearly formulated and understood.

As services for the aging are a relatively recent development, not only in group work but in the general field of social welfare, there is much that is experimental and much to be learned. The goals of group work are generally defined in terms of contributing to personality growth and social adjustment through application of the group work methods. As our experiences have been primarily with younger age groups, the terms "growth" and "development" connote preparation for the future. It is necessary for us to revise our thinking in terms of its application to older adults and their life situation. Again, perhaps a few specific illustrations may bring out the point.

For Mrs. C, who raised 10 children and had never had the time, money or opportunity for much social life, the club programs are providing many new and enjoyable experiences. Although not a "doer" or leader, she belongs to four clubs in the county, enjoys the companionship at the meetings, attends all the social events, trips, outings, and the annual camp vacation week. Not only is she deriving a great deal of pleasure and happiness from her participation in the club programs, but her children are

so deeply gratified by what the Y has done for their mother that several of them have taken active roles in Y leadership.

Mr. G, a former garment worker, joined the day center about six years ago, shortly after the death of his wife. The method of involving him in activity was through the club's sewing group. Since this is an all-female group, he did not sew with them at the club, but lent a hand by doing various chores for the group, bringing in materials, and finally, taking work home to do. When the worker expressed the fear that perhaps he was doing too much work at home, he replied that he can't sleep after six in the morning, and suffers with very severe headaches. When he sews the overalls early in the morning, he forgets about his headaches, as he thinks of the pleasure that his work will bring to some unknown children in Israel. Through the confidence and recognition he gained as a result of this, he became active in other aspects of the club program, serving as treasurer, chairman of the visiting committee, and most recently, chairman of the club's annual bazaar. His pattern has consistently been to seek out service projects, but those which also carry with them a good deal of prestige and status. He has also found another wife through his participation in the group, and now both attend the day center five days a week, where they are actively involved in a variety of projects. They both seem to be very happy in their new-found relationship.

For many individuals who are living with their children, their participation and accomplishments in the club programs enhance their position in the family and also contribute to better relationships. A brief excerpt from a leader's record points this up:

"Mrs. B, a very fragile looking woman in her late 80's, joined the club three months ago and took part in the painting group. She had

never painted and immediately 'took to it.' Her daughter was so delighted that she enrolled her mother in an adult education painting class. Mrs. B is reticent and sort of pooh-poohs her 'success' in painting. At first she came on 'painting days' only (twice a month), but now every week. Last week she was involved in a very long and spirited discussion on painting with Mr. R, age 90, who has been painting 2½ years. They then went on to talk about how happy and responsive their families are to their painting."

That the group work program has contributed to the social adjustment and mental health of these individuals is evident. However, one other point might be made in discussing goals. Mr. A, cited previously, who found such deep gratifications from his leadership roles in the club organization, has a tendency to be quite autocratic and controlling. Mr. G, cited above, articulates such insatiable needs for recognition that it is impossible to gratify them. Their personality problems impinge on other members in the group. Although group pressure has at times exerted a restraining influence, and the professional worker has tried to deal with these situations, both on an individual basis and through conscious use of her role in group situations, it is doubtful whether their personality patterns have been affected. These individuals, as is true of the members generally, gratify basic ego needs through lifelong patterns of behavior. With the present tendency to attach great significance to the goal of affecting personality

problems, the mental health, or preventative, values of positive group experiences almost seem to take a secondary place. Is the goal of personality change necessarily more important and more desirable than the goal of enriching the lives of people whose total life situation is characterized by serious deprivations? It would seem to me that both are sound and desirable goals.

To summarize. In the main, the emphasis in the first decade of older adult programming has been on meeting the social and recreational needs of older people. In view of the unique and complex societal and developmental factors affecting this age group, namely, lack of meaningful roles and function in our society, and changes in basic living patterns involving family relationships, work, and participation in community life, it is essential to broaden the scope of program to include opportunities for useful and productive activities, related to adult behavior patterns and values. This means the development of greater opportunities for service to the group and to the larger community, strengthening the self-government structure within the group, as well as greater skill and creativity in the selection and adaptation of traditional program media. Undoubtedly, there are many other techniques and media than those dealt with in this paper which continuing experience will help define.