Changes among college students’ attitudes, knowledge, and intention to work with older adults

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Curricular intervention studies have examined if instruction in aging and gerontology affects undergraduates’ attitudes, knowledge, and perceptions toward older adults. However, less is known about the curricular impact on undergraduates’ intentions to work with older adults and attitudes and knowledge about sexuality and aging. The current longitudinal study examined the impact of an upper-level adult development psychology course on student attitudes, knowledge, and intentions toward working with older adults. Participants were 8 undergraduate students enrolled in upper-level undergraduate psychology courses. Participants completed validated, self-report questionnaires at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester related to their attitudes towards working with older adults, ageism attitudes, aging sexual knowledge and attitudes, and attitudes and knowledge about aging. Paired samples t-tests were used to examine changes in main outcome variables. Students endorsed significantly greater attitudes toward working with older adults at the end of the semester (t = -2.57, p = .037). Additionally, knowledge about sexual aging significantly increased (t = 2.62, p = .034). These findings suggest curricular interventions may positively impact attitudes toward working with older adults and sexual aging knowledge. Future work will evaluate predictors of change in attitudes, knowledge, and intentions. By identifying factors that increase undergraduates’ intentions to work with older adults and improve attitudes and knowledge regarding sexual aging, we may elucidate meaningful points of intervention to enhance the pursuit of careers in the geriatric workforce.
The productive aging literature suggests that volunteering plays a crucial role in enhancing psychosocial well-being among older adults. A growing body of research based in stereotype embodiment theory also demonstrates significant negative health impacts of internalized age stereotypes. Yet, limited research explores which social engagement activities result in an enhanced sense of purpose in later life.

In this study, we investigated whether internalized age stereotypes mediate the relationship between volunteering and a sense of purpose in life. A cross-sectional study was conducted with 154+ years of age living in the U.S. Mountain West community. Participants completed a 15-minute, online survey. The independent variable was number of volunteer hours per week (mean = 6.39, SD = 5.47). The dependent variable was purpose in life measured through the in life subscale of the Ryff psychological well-being scale (α = .75; mean = 3.93, SD = 0.61). Drawing from the self-reflective appraisal model, a negative, age stereotypes partially mediated the relationship between volunteer hours and purpose in life while holding constant age, gender, race, functional limitation, education, employment, self-rated health, and previous volunteer experience. Results indicate that increased internalized positive, not negative, age stereotypes partially mediated the relationship between volunteering and purpose in life.