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Activity Participation and Older Adults' Well-being

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Introduction

As people are living longer lives, there has come to be an increased emphasis on defining productive and successful aging (Winstead, Yost, Cotton, Berkowsky, & Anderson, 2014). The mission of Chicagoland Methodist Senior Services (CMSS) is to support, improve, and enhance the quality of life of older adults. CMSS provides a range of care services for older adults' changing needs that can arise and develop through the process of aging. Individuals who stay at a CMSS facility range in age and in level of care needed. Some individuals stay temporarily at CMSS for rehabilitative purposes, while others with dementia and in need of assisted living services may stay as permanent residents. Over the course of a semester, I partook in a service learning internship at CMSS. I participated in several projects and activities with a variety of residents, many of whom had dementia and were in need of memory supportive care. In this paper I will present my experience at CMSS working on various activities with older adult residents, in combination with research on R. J. Havighurst's activity theory.

Havighurst's Activity Theory

Old age is the start of the longest developmental phase of life (Nilsson, Bülow, & Kazemi, 2015). During this phase, an adult discovers and finds a renewed and ultimate meaning of life (Nilsson et al., 2015). Later life can be filled with challenges and inconvenient happenings, yet it can be a time characterized as highly productive, rewarding, and meaningful, depending on an individual's approach to aging (Nilsson et al., 2015). Activity theory (Havighurst, 1961) is one approach to developing a meaningful and successful life in aging. The activity theory provides an outline of the importance and overall impact of participating in activities in older age (Havighurst, 1961; Winstead et al., 2014). There is an association between continual participation in informal activities and overall greater life satisfaction (Winstead et al., 2014). Older adults need ongoing stimulation, socialization, connectivity, sense of purpose, and sense of belonging (Gitlin, Szanton, & Hodgson, 2013). Activity theory claims that the participation in activities is

essential for health, overall well-being, and quality of life of an older adult (Winstead et al., 2014). The intention of the theory is to find the best solution for handling challenges of aging and bringing an ease and enrichment to the lives of older adults (Nilsson et al., 2015).

Two central concepts of the activity theory are activities and roles (Winstead et al., 2014). Activity theory suggests that people use activities and roles as mechanisms to aid in the development of a sense of “self” (Winstead et al., 2014). The key factors of activities and roles each play a prominent part in the life of an older adult (Winstead et al., 2014). Activity theory proposes the best way to adapt to changing circumstances which come along with older age is by participating in voluntary and leisurely activities that encourage different types of social interaction (Nilsson et al., 2015). Successful aging can be defined by the continuation of common social roles of an individual, which can include worker, spouse, homemaker, citizen, friend, or church member (Havighurst, 1961). A significant concept of the activity theory is that it is not just the number of activities undertaken that is important (Reitzes, Mutran, & Verrill, 1995). Activities that aid in confirming a role identity, such as being a friend or parent, have a greater impact on self-esteem than simply the number of activities in which the older adult participates (Reitzes et al., 1995). When activities have to be given up, the activity theory proposes finding replacement or substitute activities (Havighurst, 1961). Research derived from the activity theory has found that older adults who remain active, energetic, productive, and a part of society overall age more successfully, are happier, and live longer lives (Wurtele, 2009).

Service Learning Experience

The activity theory is fundamentally based on older adults participating in activities; therefore my service learning experience was spent working on different activity projects for residents at CMSS. I participated in three main activities at CMSS. I partook in the Around the World Cruise Program, I led a horticulture project, and I created multisensory boxes/reminiscence kits. Each activity was chosen by staff and agreed upon by me, with the focus being on what would provide valuable and meaningful experiences for CMSS’ older adult residents.

The first activity I participated in was the Around the World Cruise Program, which was ongoing at three of CMSS’s residential communities. Each month, a country from various places around the world was picked and became the focus of activities and related outings for that month. I helped prepare materials needed for an art activity, created a presentation that was given to residents, and assisted with one of the program’s activities which was an outing to an art museum. For the Around the World Cruise Program, I acted in a supportive role which provided me with the opportunity to understand how programming is efficiently run at CMSS, and it allotted me opportunities to spend time getting to know various residents.

My second activity was a horticulture project. This was a three-day activity which involved dementia care residents coloring plastic pots and planting flower seeds. The first activity day consisted of me interacting with and explaining the project to residents as

well as helping them choose how they wanted to color their plastic planting pot. The second day was a continuation and completion of coloring the planting pots. For the third activity day, I assisted residents with planting flower seeds of their choice. The final planted pots were then placed in each resident's room with a plant care instruction guide that I created. Once a week after the activity was completed, I visited with residents and checked in on the growing flower plants.

For my third activity, I made multisensory boxes/reminiscence kits. The purpose of this project was to provide an activity that incorporated aspects of both multisensory stimulation and reminiscence experiences. The incorporation of multisensory stimulation into the activity was a method used to activate the senses with the hope that the touch, taste, sound, smell, or sight of an object would trigger a past memory in a resident with dementia. The use of reminiscence in the activity was pertinent in picking kit themes that would hopefully connect to a memory of a prior experience of a resident with dementia. The themes of the kits were chosen carefully and aimed to recreate a pleasant and familiar experience for activity participants. I created four different kits with the themes of cooking (see Appendix A), sewing (see Appendix B), gardening/nature walk (see Appendix C), and a trip to the beach/vacation (see Appendix D). Each kit had related theme items in it that connected to each of the senses. Each of the four kits also had their own folder, which contained all the necessary information pertaining to the activity so the kits could be easily used by first-time activity participants, staff, or family members. I created a guideline and set of instructions for the activity on how to use each kit from start to finish. Included in the guideline were suggestions for the activity, prompts to aid conversation, and related sayings and idioms for each of the themes to read aloud. Also in the folders was information about the benefits of reminiscence and multisensory stimulation for older adults with dementia. I created a post-activity questionnaire for kit users to fill out after the activity session ended. The questionnaire was provided so feedback could be collected and, if need be, the kits could be modified to make the activity a more meaningful and beneficial experience for residents. I provided the list of resources I used to create the kits, for further guidance and future reference for the potential of the activity to continue and grow.

Reflection

In accordance with the activity theory and my site activities at CMSS, there were several points of learning that I identified throughout my work. Themes of learning included organizational learning, communication, group dynamics, critical thinking, adaptability, and active listening. Each theme played an important role during my service learning experience.

Organizational learning occurred throughout my service learning experience. I learned about how CMSS operates, and I learned from the residents of CMSS. As each person is different and has different needs, there is a flexibility that is necessary in an organization to make activities meaningful and relevant to individual residents. It is essential to provide older adults with a range of activity experiences, recreational or competitive (Kelley, Little, Jong Seon, Birendra, & Henderson, 2014). To meet the needs

of older adults, activities may need to be suitable for individuals with different vision, hearing, and neuro-motor and cognitive capacities and capabilities (Kraft, Steel, Macmillan, Olson, & Merom, 2015). For organizations with the goal of improving the health status of older adults, it is necessary to take into consideration social network factors, physical health, emotional health, and education level of older adults (Pino et al., 2014). There is significance in figuring out what activities are defined as productive and engaging for older adults in order to deem such activities evident of success and well-being (Johnson & Mutchler, 2013). The feature of an organization providing stimulating activities for the entire range of older adults present in its care is imperative so all residents are inclined to participate in activities.

Communication was a continual learning theme for me throughout my experience. Communication was essential between staff at CMSS, and it was also crucial relating to understanding residents. A resident's health and how a resident felt on a particular day had an effect on his or her participation in activities. Some residents communicated one day that they did not want to participate in an activity that they had previously seemed interested in. A few residents arrived at an activity and then no longer wished to participate. Providing activities for residents to participate in as active members can aid in older adult learning (Winstead et al., 2014). Part of communication, as well, is being able to diffuse tension in a situation and help calm upset residents. Adverse health outcomes may result if activities are stressful or consume too much time (Johnson & Mutchler, 2013). In speaking with residents, I learned what they liked to do and tried to assist them in being able to participate in activities of their interest. Continued communication with residents was significant, as it can impact a resident's willingness to participate in activities.

Group dynamics and cohesiveness was a relevant learning theme during my time at CMSS. This pertained to getting residents together and having them participate in an activity at the same time. In experiencing group dynamics and cohesiveness, there is a need to try to keep the residents happy and content in being with each other. There is value in the social aspects of the participation of older adults in activities (Kelley et al., 2014). Realizing the differences between residents and meeting the residents' needs accordingly helped group activities to be more cohesive. After participating in group activities, older adults may feel more connected with others (Winstead et al., 2014). Honoring differences in group members can lead to a better group dynamic and greater group cohesiveness during an activity.

Critical thinking was an ongoing learning theme for me. Critical thinking was vital for the activities I was a part of, which catered to assisting residents in active and meaningful aging. Critical thinking occurred at CMSS as it involved creating plans to meet residents' needs. In promoting activity participation, it may be necessary to understand why residents may not want to participate in activities. A lack of participation can be the result of worsening health, worsening cognitive functioning, or a loss of ability to connect with family and friends (Fernández-Mayoralas et al., 2015). Other reasons that can affect participation include perceived health status, lack of ability to perform daily tasks, and education level (Fernández-Mayoralas et al., 2015). An older adult's health status and related factors warrant attention and critical thinking, with the goal of getting them to participate in activities.

Adaptability was an important concept during my service learning experience and was necessary in getting residents to participate in activities. Some residents were resistant to participation, requiring an adjustment of ideas and activities offered for

participation opportunities. Providing activities that allow for productive behavior to occur is important in benefitting older adults (Johnson & Mutchler, 2013). Even later in life, innovation can be liberating and growth producing for older adults (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007). Older adults may find ways to reinvent themselves, while others may come up with ways to preserve their current sense of self (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007). Being adaptive in providing options for activities can give older adults new chances for participation.

A learning theme for me that occurred during my time at CMSS was active listening. According to Kelley et al. (2014), “Understanding the meanings that influence activity behavior in older adults may be useful in promoting the values of activity across the lifespan” (p. 64). Active listening involved understanding a resident’s likes, dislikes, interests, or concerns and doing one’s best in providing opportunities for that person to be able to participate in activities important to them. Some older adults may also want to participate in different levels of activities (Kraft et al., 2015). Actively listening to an older adult allows for the opportunity to provide personally meaningful options for activity participation.

Each theme—organizational learning, communication, group dynamics, critical thinking, adaptability, and active listening—was discovered throughout my work on the various activities I was a part of at CMSS. Partaking in each activity project provided me with newfound knowledge and understanding of older adults, resulting in my personal and professional growth.

Conclusion

For older adults, being active can provide an outlet to transform and distinguish their aging identity (Kelley et al., 2014). Activity participation can provide: (a) opportunities for self-identification, (b) an outlet to build social networks, (c) an occasion for social interaction, and (d) an opportunity for role support, which are all important factors of successful aging (Winstead et al., 2014). Participation in activities allows for interactions with others, which can impact a person’s self-evaluation and self-esteem (Reitzes et al., 1995). There is a need for adults to be active, connected, and engaged in life in order to prevent decline (Gitlin et al., 2013).

The activity theory proposes continued participation in activities (Havighurst, 1961). The theory aimed to identify what it takes for an older adult to live a high-quality life through aging without falling into despair, depression, or complete inactivity (Nilsson et al., 2015). The activity theory promotes continuous action as indicative of successful aging (Johnson & Mutchler, 2013). However, other theories stress the importance of alone time and self-reflection (Nilsson et al., 2015). From the perspective of the activity theory, disengagement due to aging does take place, but it is due to society withdrawing from an individual, not the individual withdrawing from society (Havighurst, 1961). Some research suggests that having an active physical and social life as well as being contemplative and withdrawn are both important in coping with aging (Nilsson et al., 2015). In deciding successful aging markers, it may be more relevant to take into consideration the lifestyle of an individual (Havighurst, 1961). The activity theory suggests that individuals who are happy in life being active and productive, will be happy and satisfied in life if they continue to be active and productive (Havighurst, 1961). For an individual who is characterized as having a passive or home-centered lifestyle, they will more likely be satisfied with disengagement (Havighurst, 1961).

Due to the growing life expectancy and reduction of adult mortality, the current aging population is unprecedented (Pino et al., 2014). If an individual is fortunate enough to live into older adulthood, that person is likely to experience a decline in physical, cognitive, social, or emotional areas of life (Kelley et al., 2014). Future implications of aging research can assist recreation providers in offering opportunities and services for older adults to be able to be active (Kelley et al., 2014). Science and public health disciplines can work together in coming up with learning platforms that fit the needs of older adults at any developmental level (Kraft et al., 2015). Successful aging findings can contribute to policy, advocacy, and theory development in the field of gerontology (Johnson & Mutchler, 2013). A goal of gerontology is to offer individuals and society advice in helping people to enjoy and achieve satisfaction in life (Havighurst, 1961). Creating ways to make productive and engaging activity opportunities accessible and available to all older adults who want to participate is essential (Johnson & Mutchler, 2013).

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