Elevating the Elder Interview

Project Partnership
Family Lifeline & VCU Gerontology

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This Elevating the Elder Interview service-learning partnership is a collaboration between the Gerontology Department at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) College of Health Professions and Family Lifeline. It has been made possible by a VCU Community Engagement Grant. The project has been an opportunity to conduct interviews with the older adults in the Family Lifeline long-term support services program. We contend that the data gleaned from our guided interviews and conversations will provide invaluable information to assist students in the Gerontology program, and other programs, with interviewing older adults. We do not assume that students do not know how to communicate with older adults, nor do we dismiss the abilities of those who have conducted interviews in the past. However, we do present responses and suggestions from older adults themselves. Their responses represent the older adults students will be interviewing for their various projects.

As you read through our findings you will most likely notice information that is repeated in multiple sections. The use of repetition is a natural representation of data saturation and significance (Weller, et al., 2018). The "Elevating the Elder Project" aims to provide students with guidelines for conducting person-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally aware interviews with older adults, as well as to foster intergenerational connections and shared learning experiences. We recognize that not every suggestion will apply to every student interviewer, or every older adult being interviewed. There is, however, something here that every student will find useful and will be able to use when the time comes.

You will also likely notice that we frequently refer to the older adults we interviewed as participants. We conducted twenty-two participant interviews. Our participants ranged in age from 58 to 90 years old. There were fifteen females and seven males in the group. We had fifteen

participants who identified as African-American and seven participants who identified as Caucasian. The interviews were conducted over a seven-week period.

Our approach is to provide guidelines and participant feedback to help students prepare for the interview. Then, using the social determinants of health as a foundation, we provide the interview responses and discussions to assist students in interviewing older adults. The social determinants of health are defined as "the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. They include factors like socioeconomic status, education, neighborhood and physical environment, employment, and social support networks, as well as access to health care" (Artiga & Hinton, 2018, p 2). Finally, we include sections with conversation starters and additional advice to provide help during the interview process. Despite the fact that each participant has unique stories, opinions, and experiences, they share many commonalities, such as age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status.

Preparing Yourself for the Interview

An interview can be viewed as a way to gather information or as a social interaction (Dordah & Horsbøl, 2021). The kinds of questions asked will determine the type of data received and McLeod (2014) explains the differences. Closed questions or structured interviews will generate a fixed set of responses. The questions are usually rigid, to the point, and allow little deviation. This method collects quantitative data. On the other hand, open questions or unstructured interviews, will provide opportunities for people to share information. There may be a set of questions but modifying the questions is acceptable and determined by the responses received. This method collects qualitative data. A third type of interview is the focus group, which collects qualitative data using a select group of participants. This method is beyond the scope of our project.

Our interview project consisted of a structured question followed by an unstructured question. Our first question was, *"How do you prefer to be addressed, formally or informally?"* It was followed up by, *"How do you suggest a student or interviewer approach you to find out how you want to be addressed?"* Eleven participants responded, *informally*; six responded *formally*, and the remaining five shared just ask, first and last name and either, respectively one, one and three. Suggestions for how students can find out how participants would like to be addressed include asking: *Would you like me to call you by your first name or use your surname? Would you like to be called XYZ or Mrs. XYZ?* Another set of participants suggest students start out saying: *Mrs. XYZ, how are you doing?* Participants said that this approach allows the participant to say: *Just call me X.* For many, these approaches set the tone of the interview while demonstrating respect and giving the elder the opportunity to correct you if necessary.

Preparing to be Person-Centered

A person-centered approach places the person at the center of a service and makes them the focus of service. It includes not only offering support but being able to determine how to appropriately provide the multidisciplinary support needed (Coulter & Oldham, 2016). To assist a student in preparing to be person-centered participants addressed how the media, community and younger people in their families and in the community view older adults.

<div align="center">Respect</div>

Respect was a theme, especially in responses to unstructured interview questions with some form of the word being mentioned multiple times. Preparing yourself to be person-centered towards participants being interviewed starts with respecting yourself. One participant simply said, "Two things you need: discipline and respect. If you don't respect yourself, you don't respect anybody else." Preparing yourself to be person-centered for one participant means, being

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"mindful about how that person is going to take it when they tell you their age -- do not be disrespectful or joke about age." For another participant it means knowing when to stop. Respect for another participant is shown by providing the information in advance or in written form. This method allows opportunities to review and prepare while also giving the impression of being a part of the process.

Although many of our participants preferred a direct approach when asking questions, they indicated the importance of respect accompanying the directness. One participant suggests being frank, coming right out and asking the question and offering this scenario as an example: **Student:** *Mrs. XYZ, I would like to have a discussion with you.* **Elder:** *What would you like to talk about?* **Student:** *How do you feel about aging?* **At this point the elder will provide an answer.**

Participants also warn that there are other issues to consider when asking questions aside from the one at hand. This could require asking transitional questions. The transitional questions will allow for more conversation and an opportunity to get to know each other, resulting in mutual respect, trust, and comfort.

<div align="center">Attitude</div>

Preparing yourself to be person-centered also means checking your attitude, which includes body language, voice tone and internal biases. This was brought to light by a participant, who stated, "don't have a superior attitude. People have this attitude like 'you're old and you can't do nothing'. . . talking down to me is an immediate turn-off . . ."

Our participants are quite intuitive about reading body language. "So many times, the body language can tell where a person/where they're coming from," shares one participant. Body

language is described by another participant as "being standoffish." Another explains that crossing your arms comes off as aggressive or not interested. Others mention that body language is revealed by voice and "talking down" which is an immediate turnoff. Finally, another participant maintains that gestures and other actions should not be used to replace words because they can be misinterpreted. Participants consistently encourage students to be themselves, try to relax, talk in a clear voice and when conducting in-person interviews to make eye contact.

Attitude also includes recognizing and evaluating personal internal biases about older adults. Participants share these suggestions: A self-evaluation means *you want to be comfortable as you can; be honest as you can*; it entails being able to approach an older adult *with a calm and peaceful voice; a smile to let them know they can feel safe with you*; and coming to the interview with a *peaceful heart and tone* ready to *listen and learn*.

Preparing to be Trauma-Informed

Before the interview, do a self-check to ensure you understand and consider the pervasive nature of trauma, including historical, inter-generational and/or a cultural trauma experience. Check-in to recognize and acknowledge the role trauma may play in an individual's life, including your own. Reframe thinking from, "What is wrong with this person?" to "What has happened to this person?"

To begin the interview:

- Build some rapport: Ask simple questions about their background. Ask participant's how they feel about being interviewed, acknowledge and validate if it feels new or strange.

- Tell them from the start that it is okay to take a break or stop anytime.

- Ensure you are both in a safe and private place good for conversation and sharing stories.

- Provide information about yourself, role, project; describe what you are doing and why.

During the interview:

- Don't interrupt: Allow participants to share their responses without interruptions. You can ask follow-up questions after they have shared their response.

- When possible, affirm and validate an individual's lived experience and the stories they share.

Students are reminded to be alert and aware of changes in the older adult by noticing their comfort level. For in-person interviews, notice if they are wringing their hands where before they had them on their lap**.** For telephone interviews, be aware of voice changes like trembling or longer periods of silence. Longer periods of silence, however, could mean they are thinking back or trying to formulate an answer. This brings patience into the mix. It also requires the student being able to determine the difference between recalling a traumatic event to preparing the mental answer for the question. Simply asking, "Are you comfortable with continuing?" or "Do we need to take a break?" is a good way to determine what is going on.

Preparing to be Culturally Aware

Preparing to be culturally aware is much like preparing to be trauma-informed. Before the interview we encourage students to do an awareness self-check to be aware of your feelings and thoughts about people other than yourself. This is not to judge you, but to emphasize the value of self-awareness and how it relates to interacting with people who are not like you. It is likely that you may need to have some knowledge about the person's cultural identity, heritage, beliefs, values and attitudes. Preparation leads to meaningful and effective interviews. One participant shares, "If they know I'm Black/African American it may help them understand my answers a little better if they know beforehand."

Preparation also means putting aside the media portrayals of older adults whereas one

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participant says the media "makes old people seem so goofy and silly. It's like they're trivializing elders." It means letting go of historical assumptions, "pre-conceived notions that Black clients don't understand anything, they're uneducated and stupid . . .whereas, in reality, the opposite is true. . . just need to talk to their Black and brown clients like they would their white clients and treat them all the same."

Social Determinants of Health

Community and Social Context

From a community and social context, the interview questions presented to our participants were: *Are you comfortable talking about your friendships and relationships? Can you be lonely and still have friendships and relationships? How should a student approach a conversation with you about loneliness or social connections? Can a student prepare themselves for a conversation with you about loneliness?* The majority of participants who answered the first question shared that they are comfortable talking about their friendships and relationships.

Also, the majority of participants who answered question two share that a person can be surrounded by people, have friends and still be lonely. The stories explaining why were as different and unique as each participant. A response from one participant shared about recently relocating to be closer to family but the loneliness she was experiencing due to not knowing anyone in her new building. Another participant talked about the loneliness and void that happens after a spouse of over sixty years passes away. He explained that he was not interested in another relationship but loves all of the friendships he has. Still another participant shared the difficulties of living in a neighborhood but being alone after retirement. For her the changes in the neighborhood compounded with not working makes it difficult to relate to others and others to relate to her. Even though she has friends and family, one participant has started working a

part-time job to alleviate her loneliness.

Discrimination

Discrimination, according to HealthPeople.gov (2022), is an unfair or unjustified socially structured action capable of causing harm to an individual or group of people. There are multiple types of discrimination including racism based on race, sexism based on gender or sexual orientation, ableism based on disability. Older adults encounter multiply types of discrimination and often at the same time.

Many of the older adults who participated in this project reported that they had experienced ageism. One participant, who is 77 years old, describes how ageism and disability intersect in public areas. When asking for assistance in public places, for example, "people typically act as if they don't see you." Transportation is similar in that drivers will pass by her home and not pick her up if they see her walker on the front porch. Drivers who stop to pick her up will notice her walker but will not assist her down her steps or into their vehicle. She also brought to light a commonplace activity: grocery shopping. Going to the grocery store for older people and people with disabilities often means waiting for the mobile cart or arriving to find the cart is broken. It is like "we're in our own little world and some individuals support that." She also submits, however, there are people who will help. Another, 75-year-old male participant shares how he uses tact and directness. After correcting the offender about an ageist comment or remark, he leaves them with, "I'm already there, you'll be lucky if you get there yourself."

Remarks and attitudes directed toward older adults by family members and the media often include examples of ageism. The participants described actions of older children and grandchildren, knowingly or unknowingly, that explicitly imply *old people* do not know what they're talking about, are outdated, and viewed as weird. According to this 66-year-old

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participant, family members often choose not to carry on meaningful conversations and also "treat me like a child saying things like *nobody thinks that way*." Along the same lines, a 62-year-old male participant shares that the media creates commercials that "make old people seem so goofy and silly. It's like they're trivializing elders." On another note, he describes himself as "an elder, but not old," which might point to an element of internalized ageism as well.

Our participants perceived racism as a kind of discrimination from a variety of views. One 90-year-old shared that for over thirty years she was the only African-American on her street. For her it was a matter of "you as the person coming to somebody as a person. Age and race are just added on to the person you already are." This was much the same for a 64-year-old participant who shared that moving from Philadelphia, where she co-existed with many races and nationalities, to Richmond as a child was her initiation to racism and prejudice. Another participant described how the actions of some demonstrate racism, "some white students who have preconceived notions that they are superior when dealing with black and brown clients. They talk down to them regardless of what their educational status is or what they know. They have pre-conceived notions that black clients don't understand anything, they're uneducated and stupid and don't know a thing. Whereas, in reality, the opposite is true. They just need to talk to their black clients like they would their white clients and treat them all the same."

During our participant interviews, sexism was briefly mentioned. One woman in her sixties acknowledged the disparities in compensation between men and women for the same or similar employment. This same participant also highlighted how retirement has kept her out of conversations with younger women who are still working.

Economic Stability

We were clear in sharing with our participants that questions about financial health and wealth were not questions to delve into their personal finances. The first question was: *Are you comfortable sharing how their finances had impacted their life and life experiences?* All of the participants said that they are comfortable. One 61-year-old participant, in particular, spoke of growing up in New York and how he used the security and comfort of his middle-class upbringing to build a better life for himself and his family. Another 77-year-old woman opened up about how divorce and aging require lifestyle adjustments that affect income stability. Our youngest participant, a 58-year-old female, discussed how the death of a spouse affects the financial stability of the remaining partner. She said, "when a spouse passes on you are now going from two checks to one check, that becomes a problem and you do have to adjust." Another life event that affects financial stability is retirement.

An unstructured question was: *Can a student prepare themselves for a conversation about your experiences with financial wealth and health?* One participant said that students should do a "little research about race and ethnicity based on financial health and wealth inequalities." Another participant said that the subject should not be discussed at all. Finally, one participant mentioned wage disparities between men and women. The acknowledgement recognizes the impact pay disparities have on women's incomes.

When asked, *Do you agree or disagree with this statement: When discussing financial health, it's important to acknowledge and talk about historic inequalities based on race and ethnicity, the past?* a majority of participants answered yes – many emphatically. One woman replied, "Oh gosh, Yeah … Because historically the assistance has gone mostly to white people instead of to the Black people. If there was anything left, Black people would get the remnants

and on their own. Any assistance from the black community usually came from Black churches and people in the Black community would be helping their own." Another participant, a man, said "Yes, I agree. Everybody knows a little bit about the history of inequalities based on race and ethnicity. Sometimes when in school, the white children may not pay attention to the part of history that talks about slavery and oppression. You pay enough attention to be able to pass the test. If it doesn't affect you, you may not know that much about it. This can be the same for some Black people. They may only know what they've been told and have not researched it to know a lot."

Another male participant put it this way: "Absolutely, I agree. … Because not everybody launches from the same platform so you must understand where they are."

Housing

The question that garnered the majority of feedback concerning housing was: *How should a student approach a conversation with you about your experiences with housing and the homes you have lived in?* The majority of participants suggest being direct but easing into the conversation. One participant suggests the student preface their questions with, *I'd like to ask you a question about the homes you've lived in? Would that be okay?* The participant feels sure that people will either say no or yes and answer the questions accordingly. Then he suggests asking questions like, *I'm curious about your experiences from when you were a kid to now? How do you feel about the housing you are in now? What is the happiest home you remember being in?* He also points out using the word *home* and not *house*, explaining that *home* is the heart, *house* is the structure.

Another participant suggests a good starting point as: *Are you comfortable with where you're living; are you having any issues?* Additionally, our youngest participant suggests asking:

Are you living in a home or an apartment? And based on the answer asking additional questions about responsibilities, maintenance and so forth. Still another participant suggests asking: *How do you like where you are living? Is it okay?*

Conclusion

As a few closing reminders, it is important that students prepare themselves for the interviews. This means realizing and being able to set aside their personal biases about age, race, gender, and any other issues that may cause them to miss the wisdom and information they will receive. It also means checking their body language and tone of voice. Moreover, it means recognizing traumatic event triggers that may show up through changes in their participants voice, long spaces between responses, hand wringing or facial expressions. Finally, it means creating a safe and comfortable space that starts with getting to know each other before delving into the interview.

Additional Responses: Conversation Starters

Participants share how to get conversations started.

- Be mindful and ask questions, "Have you had breakfast, lunch, dinner?" "What is your preference for eating?" "How often do you like to eat and what do you eat?" These questions make the visit feel personal.

- Multiple participants suggest students talk to their participants just as they would their grandparents. One suggests, "Make it as conversational as possible—grandparent and grandchild. If they didn't have grandparents maybe there's someone else who can record and provide an idea." Another says, "Ask: 'What was this like?' 'What happened to you?' 'How did you go to school?' 'What was it like when you went to school?'"

- Start with what will not be discussed and share what will be asked and then ask, "How do you feel about that?"

- **Can a student prepare themselves for a conversation about loneliness/growing old?**

    o Just ask, "How do you keep in touch with your family and friends?" Then let them tell you. Yes. A lot of us/some elders don't do/are not computer literate. But don't take the assumption that they are not computer literate, they may just surprise you. At least mention the phone or ask if they use the computer to ZOOM with their family or friends or something like that.

- **Do you like talking about your social life and your community connections?**

    o You might talk to them about your friends, or something first and then say, "Do you mind telling me about your friends?" "What are your interests?" "Do you have friends and contacts?"

- **How should a student approach a conversation with you about your experiences with housing and homes you've lived in?**

    o They could say, "What is your experience with housing?"

    o They may start with, "Are you comfortable with where you're living, are you having any issues?" Just don't be too nosey. Know when to stop.

    o Straight on by saying, "I'm curious about your experiences in housing from when you were a kid to now?" "How do you feel about the housing you're in now?" "What's the happiest home you remember being in?" [not the happiest house because home is the heart, the house is the structure] They should preface each question with, "I'd like to ask you a question about….? Would that be okay?'

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o I would just ask the question, "Are you living in a home or an apartment?" And

   based upon the answer you can take it further, "What are the responsibilities that

   you have in your home/in your apartment; does the manager take care of

   maintenance and whatnot?"

o Approach by easing into the conversation, "How do you like where you are

   living?" "Is it okay?" "Can we do anything?"

o For older adults who have experienced trauma with housing consider asking, "Did

   you live in a house? Did you go from an apartment to assisted living?" One

   question will lead to another. Before starting the questions, you might say, "We

   just want to find in-depth information about your housing habits."

Additional Responses: Other Advice

Participants share information to assist with successful interviews.

- Creating a relationship is a good starting point. This participant shares an old sales

  method used when talking to someone you don't know. He modifies it to **FROC** - **F**

  where the person is *from*, **R** what *recreational* activities they enjoy doing, **O** what was or

  is their *occupation*, **C** what *community* or where do they live.

- Interviews should not happen right away. They should have a first-time visit. This

  provides a chance to get to know them and their disposition. Everybody cannot be

  approached the same way. Share with the older adult that they would like to interview

  them and ask for permission, "Would you be amenable to me interviewing you?" This

  would provide a chance for the elder to ask questions – *What are you interviewing me*

for? How will the information be used? And it provides a chance for the student to answer the elder's questions and concerns.

- Be friendly and nice. A lot of elder people are very humble and may not understand some of the things they're going through. Learn how to break the ice.

- Social connections are not based on race, religion, or age; they're just based on somebody you get to know and talk to, "people just people." Social connectedness, friendships and relationships can move beyond one person to another person to another person, just because we accept people for who they are—regardless of their age, race, or ethnicity—and that's what it is all about.

- Talk to me just like you're getting to know somebody.

- Having a predetermined safe signal or safe word to provide a level of comfort when something unexpectedly comes up that makes them uncomfortable, "If you feel uncomfortable, though you said you were okay, just hold up your hand to let me know you're no longer comfortable." Asking, "Would you like to take a break? I want to be sure you're comfortable with me asking these questions."

- When memories of a traumatic event surfaces, a participant suggests that the student gently and respectfully remind the participant to "not keep their minds on what they have been through but to look forward to better things."

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