
Original Paper

Older People as Engaged Leaders, Changemakers and Influencers

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Abstract

Leaders, changemakers, and influencers are contemporary labels often used interchangeably or in conjunction, and have implicit meaning for users. The literature as well as other studies exploring these characteristics are scant. We interviewed ten (N=10) older people (people aged 65+ years) who were nominated as leaders, changemakers and influencers, in their communities, about their experience in these roles. Through individual interviews, we discover three major themes when asked what makes them leaders, changemakers and influencers. They elaborated on their experience with: responsibility of others/self; they discussed their sense of powerlessness and finally their need for support. These all have implications for other older people who have similar characteristics. Impacts described by the participants were: they felt a responsibility to others; they had done such activities and acted as a leader, changemakers and influencer all their life; and finally, they expressed that they needed support to sustain their energy.

Keywords: older adults, leadership, changemaker, influencers, characteristics

Background

Characteristics of Older People Nominated as Leaders, Changemakers and Influencers

Leaders, changemakers, and influencers. These labels are contemporary, often used interchangeably or in conjunction, and have implicit meaning for users. The available scholarly literature exploring explicit meanings of these labels is scant but provides some insights on the characteristics and skills associated with each.

Definitions and Characteristics

Definitions of leadership as a term and concept vary and incorporate notions of influence.

Winston and Patterson (2006) in a review, developed an integrative definition of leader as:

one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization's mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives (p. 7).

The authors further elaborate on this definition to include a leader's use of critical thinking skills, insight, intuition, and the use of both persuasive rhetoric and interpersonal communication including both active listening and positive discourse.

Crittendon and DeAndrade (2015) list similar competencies required of effective leadership including: critical-thinking skills including the ability to assemble and integrate multiple concepts and the ability to

understand and recognize value positions and varying perspectives and their influence on perceptions of reality; communication skills such as active listening, negotiation, and conflict resolution; self-awareness, which refers to the ability to assess one's own positions, skills, and perspectives; Adaptability or responsiveness to changing contexts including the ability to view goals as aspirational and not fixed or definitive; and Understanding of various leadership styles.

The term changemaker was coined by the non-profit social entrepreneurship organization Ashoka (Ashoka, n.d.). In an Ashoka publication, Rahman, Herbst, and Mobley (2016) specify that a changemaker is intentional about solving a social problem, displaying empathy for others and is driven by the goal of making the world a better place; is motivated to act and make a difference; and is creative, inquisitive, open-minded, resourceful. They outline six types of changemakers: social architect, skills catalyzers, investors, inventors, connectors and influencers. Of relevance, the influencer type of changemaker guides how people learn and make decisions and include for example, educators, researchers, parents and journalists.

Few academic articles have been published on changemakers as a broad social concept with most academic articles exploring changemakers in specific disciplines. In the pedagogical domain, for example, authors explore ways in which the concept of changemaker (and more broadly, social innovation) can be defined and incorporated into higher education. In their review, Rivers, Armellini, and Nie (2015) explored the skills, behaviours, and attributes associated with university teachers' conceptions of 'changemaker'. Two relevant conceptualizations were changemaker as critical thinking, perspective shifting, and problem solving; and changemaker as social betterment.

When calling to mind individuals who "fit the bill" of being a leader, changemaker, and influencer, older adults will be amongst those individuals. This is because implicitly, life experience and passage of time are likely to be important for the characteristics of changemaking and leadership to be demonstrated. However, a review of the available literature on the topic found no scholarly articles on older adults as 'changemakers'. Rather, research on 'changemaker' as defined by Ashoka has tended to focus instead on the development of changemakers in youth and young adults through education (Drayton, 2006). Searching more broadly using terms related to changemaker revealed that the concept of social entrepreneurship could be applied more readily to older adults as 'changemakers'.

The term social entrepreneur was first used in the late 1970s (Stumbitz, 2013). Abu- Saifan (2012) characterizes social entrepreneurs as mission leaders, emotionally charged, change agents, opinion leaders, social value creators, socially alert, managers, visionaries, and highly accountable. A search of the grey literature produced a doctoral thesis (Stumbitz, 2013) that explored social entrepreneurship in older adults (50 years of age and older) using a life course perspective.

Stumbitz's research asked: Who are the 50+ social entrepreneurs and what is the role and nature of their social entrepreneurial activity? What motivates older social entrepreneurs and how do these motivations feed into the social entrepreneurship process? This research found considerable diversity in older adult social entrepreneurs and developed a typology of older social entrepreneurs as volunteer activists, rationalizing professionals and higher aspirers. In terms of the older social entrepreneurs' motivations, the data revealed multiple interrelated motivations, including a combination of social and personal achievement motives (Stumbitz, 2013). These motivations were categorized as addressing social needs, self-fulfilment, independence, and quality of life. Within quality-of-life motivations, several themes were identified that differed across types of social entrepreneurs, including tackling social exclusion and loneliness, having a role, having status, personal development, and retirement, downshifting/lifestyle (Stumbitz, 2013).

Considering social entrepreneurship through the lens of the life course perspective suggests that older adults' motivations and involvement in social entrepreneurship are not static. An individual's motivations, while influenced by personal background, are activated through trigger moments and experiences, but then are kept active or dormant depending on the individual's life stage (Stumbitz, 2013).

We found one relevant study on older people as leaders. Kunreuther (2002) examined differences between younger (Generation X) and older adult (Baby Boomers) directors and staff working in

non-profit social change organizations. In the findings, the author reported similarities in terms of younger and older adults' qualities: commitment, concern, energy, interest, and belief in justice. However, several differences were found in terms of younger and older adults' backgrounds, work/personal life divide, enjoyment, challenges, decision-making, leadership, training, race and gender, and the future. For example, older adult participants referred to their "involvement in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which provided them with an exposure to ideas and situations that unveiled the 'causes' of the problems facing society" (Kunreuther, 2002, p. i). For younger participants, they were drawn to the non-profit social change organizations due to "personal experiences and a desire to help those in their communities or in situations similar to their own" (Kunreuther, 2002, p. i). In terms of leadership, both younger and older adults agreed that vision, communication skills, collaborative style, and concern about staff were qualities of good leadership in social change organizations.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore why older people might be moved to be leaders, changemakers and influencers. The theoretical foundation for the methodology of this study is grounded theory. Grounded theory declares that the creation of theory is grounded in the analysis. According to Morse et.al.(2021) grounded theory is an approach to the construction of theory; it provides description; facilitates interpretation; offers an opportunity for individual experiences to be explained and analyzed; it assists in the development of the analysis conceptually and theoretically; and it builds and extends knowledge.

Semi-structured, individual interviews were completed with a total of ten (N=10) older people aged 65+; five were women and five were men. Each were asked the same questions with relevant probing questions. Ages ranged from 67-82 years with the average age being 76 years while the standard deviation was 4.84. Eight interviews were completed in an in-person manner and two were completed via a zoom call. All were recorded for transcription purposes. Participants lived in Edmonton at the time of the interviews and one resided in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. All interviews were digitally recorded verbatim with the written consent by all and the person in Manitoba who verbally consented to participate in the study.

Interview questions asked were: Can you tell me a bit about yourself- in terms of how you see yourself as a leader or changemaker or influencer? What challenges, if any, do you come across as you work as a leader and changemaker and influencer? How do people respond to you when you are in a changemaking and influencing role? Can you talk about your commitment to social change? As a leader, changemaker and influencer - do you find there are burdens to this role? Do you want to say anything more that you maybe have not said already?

Each colleague was asked to identify someone who they thought to be a leader, change maker or influencer; someone that they knew or were aware of. This question was used consistently.

When the name of someone came up twice or three times or when most of us agreed with someone conveying a name, that older person was contacted to request an interview.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis purposes. Each interview was coded inline with the main research question. Each code started falling into major categories; the more coding that occurred the more categories arose. The categories then evolved into major themes where there were commonalities and some differences; we focused on the commonalities amongst the themes.

Results

The findings begin with a brief point form story of each of the interviewees (in Appendix 1, Table 1). Pseudonyms are used for each participant. As well, we present their current activities and then their past activities. We demonstrate the type of characteristics by way of the activities. Overall, the findings describe three major themes that evolved from the data. The study received ethics approval under (Pro000099108). As well, prior to each interview, each participant signed a consent form agreeing to be interviewed.

Responsibility of others/self

Participants were asked what encouraged them to be a leader, changemaker or influencer. Thus, why they did what they did.

Responsibility of others

For most, they felt an obligation and responsibility to help others. They wanted to enable others to do their best. As Edward says: *"I do have the responsibility to do it."* Victor puts it this way: *"to help do their best and to dig deeply into ideas and issues to be frank about their lives....its people telling their stories around their own fears, their own celebrations"* and for Helen, *"I was trying to create communities that others could thrive in."*

Inherent calling

For several, they were an influencer all their life and had learned this from their parents who were very active in the community. *"Our parents taught us...I have always been interested in older people"*, says Eileen. Dorothy says it's like this: *"It's my philosophy that we as individuals have a responsibility to be the best we can be...I want other people to have the opportunity to be the best that they can be."* Bob says he's *"...been doing that kind of work all my life."* Finally, Jeffery says it this way: *"it started a long time ago...it was all my life...it's a way of life that started somewhere and bubbles along."*

Desire to do good

And for others, they have been change makers and influencers for the aim of fostering social change. Evelyn *"was always involved with anything that had to do with social justice...I love people [she says]...[and] I'm saving the world."* Jeffery states emphatically, *"Yes, I do this to make the world a better place"* and, he continues *"I realized that there was a huge amount of work to be done to try and help us serve seniors in a more sensible and realistic way."*

From those interviewed, these older people who are leaders, change makers and influencers do so because they have a responsibility to others. They motivate others because they have been doing it all their life, some having learned it from their parents and finally, to help make a positive change in society.

It's necessary to convey that several participants had other ways that they saw themselves rather than being a change maker. Jeffery used the term *"leadership"*. He says it's about change making but *"It's also about courage, and conviction, and preparedness, and planning, and being organized and being clear about where you're headed."* Shirley refers to herself as a leader and activist and not a change maker or influencer. For example, *"I don't really think of myself as being an influencer or a change maker. I think of myself as being an activist who keeps at it...who keeps trying...I aspire to create influence and change but I don't feel like I've arrived..."* and *"...it's not about me, it's about the bigger picture."* Helen also never saw herself as being a changemaker or influencer, *"I was consciously trying to create a community that other people could thrive in as I thrived here."* Finally, Edward had a problem with the term influencer, *"I don't care for the term influencer."*

It can be concluded that changemaking can be described as a number of other terms. So these participants view themselves as such terms as: motivator, leader, activist, organizer etc.

Powerlessness

Participants were asked to speak to any challenges and burdens they experienced while being a leader, change maker and influencer. The majority of participants did not speak of being embraced or welcomed but of many other feelings of guilt and struggle. Edward noticed that once he retired he was cut off from networks of people putting himself into a state that was definitely not his comfort zone. Several participants talked about working hard but feeling like they were not doing anything really useful for the planet. Peter's struggle was that he noticed that men are afraid to step up and speak out: *"Men are struggling with the balance between themselves and women and understanding role relationships and so guys are afraid. They're afraid to do things. They're afraid to step up. They're afraid to speak. It's really quite amazing."* This can be heard in Victor's wish for him to have been more forward or aggressive in teaching others. In contrast, Evelyn struggles with stopping herself from speaking out if she sees injustice. Shirley expresses that there are challenges when working with older people-they often can't walk too far

or its too cold out or they have appointments so it's hard organizing older adults she admits.

Need for Support

In the end participants talked about what supports them the most in this work. Peter gets support from his family which he calls motivating the motivator. Dorothy echoes the same sentiment- she needs people to help her. For example she could use friends as a sounding board. Three participants all identified that they needed support. They needed somewhere to discuss their frustrations and successes and Bob wants someone who is willing to listen to him and Evelyn needs motivation and needs to discuss her frustrations with someone to stay positive.

For example, here is a table that identifies each individual and the types of activities they are involved in currently and those they were involved in in the past.

Table 1. Descriptions of participants leadership, changemaking and influencing characteristics

(Pseudonyms are used)

Name and Characteristics	Name and Characteristics
<u>Shirley</u> Current activities: - Involved in leading a rally against a health- based organization i.e. sing relevant songs at protests. - She is the Chair of her Community League. A Community League works at the neighbourhood level and has an aim to improve communities and it plans some social activities.	<u>Bob</u> Current activities: - He is a leader at the national level for Men's Sheds and was the founder of the Manitoba Men's Shed. - He conducts many public presentations about Men's Sheds. -Carves diamond willow walking sticks and gives them away to many people.
Past activities: -She recommended a safe injection site on her church grounds to the leaders of her church. She suggested the idea, rallied for support and now the site exists.	Past activities: -Travel agent. - Bob played a significant role in developing and building the Trans-Canada trail system in Manitoba.
<u>Edward</u> Current activities: - Edward supports high risk youth through participating in local programs. - He facilitates safe spaces for older 2SLGBTQIA+ residents. -He is highly involved in an initiative that continues to move Edmonton in a direction where older adults are equally integrated into society.	<u>Evelyn</u> Current activities: -Board member of a community health organization addressing women's wellbeing.
Past activities: - High level of involvement in the local church. - Sat in on trade association organizations. - Always involved in small community projects. - Board member and worked at the ground level of an association that empowers and improves the well-being	Past activities: - Teacher for 20 years. -Facilitated a support group for women with a particular illness. -Was a community minister (clergy). - Worked in a highly responsible role in pastoral care.

of youth.	- Several times, she has been a keynote speaker at conferences.
<u>Jeffery</u> Current activities: -He is the President of an Edmonton-based seniors centre. - He is a Board of Directors member for a coordinating group that helps organize and simplify the service system for older adults.	<u>Eileen</u> Current activities: -Eileen leads older adults in physical movement exercises on a regular basis. This has been occurring for 23 years.
Past activities: - A teacher. -Jeffery has been an high-level leader and influencer in many schools such as being a President, and many Superintendents.	Past activities: - She is a teacher-she has been a Professor at the University level.
<u>Victor</u> Current activities: - He brings together young people and older adults using drama to facilitate positive relationships.	<u>Peter</u> Current activities: -Is in a leadership role of a Men's Shed community. For example, is a Chairman. - Builds Men's Sheds in many locations in Alberta. -Library advocate.
Past activities: - Was a teacher. -Has written a book, written publications, and written grants to facilitate intergenerational activities.	Past activities: -As a Camp Director organized a large camp for youth.
<u>Dorothy</u> Current activities: -Dorothy is involved in a high-level position with a group that supports grandmothers caring for their grandchildren in Africa. -She plays a lead role in an Edmonton comprehensive learning organization for those 50+.	<u>Helen</u> Current activities: - Is a poet who publishes her work. -She is the Chair of an organization addressing the arts. -She is the lead of a national level league of poets.
Past experiences: - She was in a high level position with a local curling organization.	Past activities: - Was Edmonton's first Poet Laurette. - She is the founder of the Edmonton festival of poets which is an annual celebration of poetry and spoken word in Edmonton. This is its 16 th year. -A lot of Board involvement. - Started a publishing house. - Worked at a weekly newspaper.

Discussion and Conclusion

There are many learnings that have taken place throughout this study. The reasons that these ten older people were as involved in their communities was because they said they felt a responsibility to others; they said they have done these types of activities all their life and that many wanted to make a difference in their communities. In the process of making a difference, however, they said they also need care and support to sustain their own energy and time. Researchers want to work with them as a valuable resource how can that be done so we do not further burden leaders, changemakers and influencers?

After looking at the current and past experiences of these participants (Table 1), it could be said that experiences of teaching fosters people to continue to use many of those same skills throughout their life and into their aging years.

When we asked if there was evidence of social change from their actions we can say that it was not evident. The activities that the participants were involved in may be in and associated with social change related agencies but methodologically we did not follow them in this activity so don't know the effect or results of their activity. It's fair to say, however, that the results of their associations were likely positive. In the same vein, we cannot say they are definitely not "social change makers". We got a sense of the background and level of activity type but we don't know the long term effects of social level change making of changemakers.

There are many ways and characteristics to describe the variety of ways to express someone who may be a leader, changer maker or influencer. For example, empowerer, activist, motivator, informal leader, caregiver or organizer. Drawing out these many other qualities of older people will assist in fostering positive relationships and environments among older people.

As older people become more prominent in our global population, we will need older adults to address system level needs. For example, we will need more older adults to be leaders and change makers. This will affect other older adults who need leading as not all older people have

leadership or changemaking tendencies. In this study we have learned that changemakers help to enable others to thrive and be their best selves. Another system implication is in the realm of planning at the municipal level, we will need to hear their voices. We need to hear how development, for example, affects older people; it's essential that their views are shared here. Another implication is the need for individual level support. This study teaches us that people who are leaders and changemakers and influencers need support themselves; this has Provincial policy level implications. This also has implications for researchers who want to work with such groups but again, be aware of not burdening them.

Study Limits

One study limit was the assumption made by the Principle Investigator. From the beginning of the study process, she assumed that the term "changemaker" was the most accurate term to use to describe the older people nominated and then interviewed. The emphasis of the term "leader" and "influencer" evolved afterwards as several interviewees said they did not feel comfortable being labeled a "changemaker". A second limitation of this study is that it has a low number of participants. A fuller, more robust number of participants could offer a very different perspective of the findings.

Next Research Directions

There are several research questions that need to be asked. For example: Whose role is it to inquire into the support needs of such older individuals and to determine if they have needs to be met? As well, as our aging population continues along this trajectory, can we conclude that there will be more older people similar to those described in this study? If so, how should they be supported as changemakers, leaders and influencers did talk about their need for a variety of type of support? What would those supports look like? Finally, further research is required to understand where change makers come from as we want to create an environment or interventions to bring changemakers to the forefront?

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Declarations:

1. Ethics Approval: Pro0000HA67
2. Consent of participants: All applicants filled out consent forms.
3. Funding: KULE Institute (Kule Institute for Advanced Study)
4. Authors Contributions: A majority of the work (interviews, analysis)

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6. Availability of data materials: the data collected for this study (i.e. interviews) and generated during the current study are available in Dr. Kyle Whitfield's repository and deleted after 5 years. The data used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article[and its supplementary information files].

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available as all interviewees signed a form saying they did not want their interview content to be made public.

Data could be available from the author with their specific permission working through the corresponding.

“The authors declare that they have no competing interests”

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