Older Adults in Action: Using Action Research to Address Neighborhood Change

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Abstract

Older adults face distinct challenges amidst changing neighborhood conditions, yet also bring distinct resources to aid their communities. After considering the literature related to well-being in older adulthood, the effects of neighborhood change on older adults, and older adults and social action, this paper explores the experiences of older adults in the Neighborhood Story Project. This action research project engages a group of neighbors to identify a set of research questions about their community, conduct place-based inquiry, and take action based on their learning. This study considers the degree to which the Neighborhood Story Project constitutes a macro therapeutic intervention. Drawing on observational and interview data with participants in seven Neighborhood Story Projects, this study explores the resources older adults brought to the project, what they personally gained from participating, and how their work benefited the broader community. The paper concludes with implications for macro-therapeutic interventions with older adults living through neighborhood change.

Keywords: older adults, action research, neighborhood change, macro-therapeutic intervention

Introduction

Neighborhood change—such as gentrification, in- and out- migration, and population decline—creates particular tensions for older adults who wish to age in a chosen and familiar place (Burns, Lavoie & Rose, 2012). Many of the fundamental aspects of well-being for older adults, such as opportunities for meaningful involvement, supportive social networks, and autonomy and control (Black, Dobbs & Young, 2015), can be threatened by physical, economic and demographic changes in neighborhoods. Older adults who experience the intersections of

racism, ablism, and/or classism (among other asymmetrical power relations), face particular risks of marginalization and exclusion while aging in changing neighborhoods. Interventions designed to address both individual and community level needs, also known as *macro therapeutic interventions* (Ferguson, Teixeira, Wernick & Burghardt, 2018), may be particularly appropriate to addressing the needs of older adults within changing neighborhoods. This paper examines the experiences of older adults in the Neighborhood Story Project—a place-based social action intervention. Through a qualitative study of seven Neighborhood Story Projects across Tennessee (USA), this paper evaluates the degree to which the Neighborhood Story Project constitutes a macro therapeutic intervention, as well as the resources older adults contribute to neighborhood-based social action, the benefits of participation to older adults, and older adults’ contributions to their communities.

**Well-being among older adults**

Scholars of aging increasingly attend to the generative potential in older adults, particularly those between 55 and 75 years of age. This period has been referred to as the ‘encore years’ (Moen & Lam, 2015), during which many people dedicate increased time to volunteering and other forms of civic engagement. While older adults may experience losses of physical capability during this phase of life, they demonstrate resilience and even increases in other domains. In a summary of recent scholarship on older adults and social and emotional well-being, Charles and Cartensen (2010) note that older adults generally demonstrate superior emotional regulation, social skills, and ability to adapt to low-level distress than younger adults. However, these age-related advantages can diminish with experiences of acute distress and disruptions to social networks (Charles and Cartenson, 2010). Protective factors for older adults include the ability to age in a chosen and familiar place, meaningful involvement in one’s
community, positive social networks, and the retention of control and influence over one’s environment (Black et al., 2015).

**Older adults and neighborhood change**

Neighborhood gentrification and decline can both harm older adult’s well-being. Gentrification is characterized by increased land values, loss of affordable housing, displacement of low-income residents and an influx of high-income residents. In contrast, neighborhood decline is marked by decreased land values, public and private disinvestment, population decline and a greater portion of residents living in poverty. During both kinds of change, older adults can experience disruptions to protective factors, including social ties and place attachment, even if they remain in a chosen and familiar neighborhood.

A recent scoping review related to place attachment and aging found that place attachment is multidimensional, inclusive of physical, social, economic, psychological, and autobiographical dimensions that contribute to wellbeing (Aliakbarzadeh Arani, Zanjari, Delbari, Foroughan, & Ghaedamini Harouni, 2022). When neighborhood demographics change, older adults may experience increased social isolation and exclusion (Burns et al., 2012; Dahlberg, 2020; Versey, 2018), and are more likely to experience increased anxiety and depression (Smith, Lehning, & Kim, 2018). As Torres found, gentrification “constrains older residents’ options to find places where they feel a sense of belonging and comfortable economically, physically, and emotionally” (2020, p. 17). Given the persistence of racism, older adults in Black, Latinx, and other communities of color face particular losses when neighborhoods that have previously functioned as sources of support transform (García & Rúa, 2018; Versey, 2018). Given that neighborhood change can threaten the well-being of older adults, it is critical to increase older adults’ agency in their neighborhoods.
Older adults and social action

Social action can be broadly understood as individual or collective efforts to affect a desired social outcome. There is limited scholarship that explores older adults and social action in the context of neighborhood change, but relevant studies explore older adult’s involvement in volunteering (Cao et al., 2021), political advocacy (Bui, Coyle & Freeman, 2021), community development (Rawsthorne, Ellis & de Pree, 2017), and community-engaged research (Buffel, 2019). In general, active social engagement has been shown to contribute to older adult’s social, emotional, and civic well-being. For example, a study of the volunteer experiences of older, low income immigrant volunteers, Cao et al. (2021) found that volunteering facilitates stress relief, learning, and peer support. Other scholars conclude that older adults are more likely to increase their social and civic involvement following volunteering (Morrow-Howell, Lee, McCrary, & McBride, 2014).

Further, numerous scholars note how civically-engaged older adults benefit the broader community. The plurality of literature in this area focusses on older adults engaging with, or on behalf of, other older adults. For example, older adults have been found to be a key source of social support to others in their age group (Black et al., 2015; Cao et al., 2021), and to offer meaningful contributions to research (Buffel, 2019), advocacy, and social action (Bui et al., 2021; Rawsthorne et al., 2017) related to the needs of older adults.

Social action as a macro therapeutic intervention for older adults. Given the dual benefits to both socially-engaged older adults and their communities, some social action initiatives can be considered a macro therapeutic intervention (MTI), which as described by Ferguson, Teixeira, Wernick and Burghardt are “interventions that target community, organizational systems, and/or policy-level change and which also have direct clinical benefits”
The “intervention” in MTIs vary; in their flagship article on the subject, Ferguson et al. (2018) give case examples of social enterprise creation, community based participatory research, transformative organizing, and community-based partnerships, each of which targeted change in a particular community, system, or organization while concurrently producing individual-level benefits to participants.

MTIs are characterized by four principles, each of which has particular salience when applied to older adult populations. First, MTIs engage indigenous leadership, seeking out those who are directly affected by the conditions the intervention seeks to address (Ferguson et al., 2018). This emphasis mirrors calls to increase older adult involvement in the development and implementation of programs to serve their demographic (Cattan, White, Bond & Learmouth, 2005; Dahlberg, 2020). Second, MTIs build capacity among participants (Ferguson et al., 2018). This is particularly appropriate for older adults, who may have limited access to continuing education and yet value opportunities for continued learning (Cao et al. 2021; Rawsthorne et al., 2017). Third, MTIs adopt a team-based approach, which is also a key characteristic of interventions that decrease social isolation and loneliness in older adults (Cattan et al., 2005). Fourth, MTIs facilitate linkages between the personal and the political, which has been shown to help older adults contextualize their individual experience (Rawsthorne et al., 2017).

**Study Context and Methods**

This study explores the experiences of older adults participating in The Neighborhood Story Project, an approach to participatory action research that engages residents directly affected by neighborhood change to both learn and take action in their neighborhoods. The Neighborhood Story Project can be considered an MTI; while neighborhood change is the target of each project, a previous study found that a plurality of participants experienced an increase in

place attachment and social ties over the course of the project, and that half of participants credited their participation with fueling their continued community engagement (Thurber, 2019).

To begin a Neighborhood Story Project, trained facilitators recruit a leadership team of 8-12 residents of a particular area. This group meets weekly over 12 weeks. Facilitators utilize a facilitation guide with suggested activities to scaffold three phases of work. In phase one, the team explores their own knowledge of, concerns about, and hopes for their neighborhood. In the second phase, the team develops a set of research questions, learns systematic inquiry skills, and gathers and analyzes data. In the final phase, each team considers how to leverage their findings into community action. Past culminating projects have included a documentary film, an oral history archive, an interactive community exhibition, and a set on anti-displacement community organizing tools. Given that each Neighborhood Story Project is ultimately shaped by the interests of its members, this reflects an emergence-based approach (Shemer & Agmon-Snir, 2019) to community practice.

**Neighborhood Story Project Implementation**

To date, there have been seven Neighborhood Story Projects across Tennessee (see Figure 1). I developed the model in 2016, and facilitated the first three pilot projects in gentrifying, historically Black neighborhoods within the city of Nashville. Humanities Tennessee then adopted the Neighborhood Story Project, and contracted with me to develop a comprehensive facilitation guide and two-day facilitator training. In 2018, Humanities Tennessee funded four more Neighborhood Story Projects across the state. Three projects focused on historically Black neighborhoods that are experiencing population loss, and the fourth took place in a predominantly white, economically distressed neighborhood. Participating community organizations provided local facilitators to implement the projects, Humanities Tennessee
coordinated facilitator training and administered grant funds to support the work, and I provided monthly technical assistance calls to each facilitation team throughout the project.

Figure 1. Description of Neighborhood Story Project locations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CITY</th>
<th>POPULATION*</th>
<th>GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS</th>
<th>TYPE OF NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nashville</td>
<td>689,447</td>
<td>Cleveland Park neighborhood</td>
<td>Gentrifying, historically Black neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nashville</td>
<td>689,447</td>
<td>Edgehill neighborhood</td>
<td>Gentrifying, historically Black neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nashville</td>
<td>689,447</td>
<td>Stratford High School</td>
<td>Gentrifying, historically Black high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewisburg City</td>
<td>12,288</td>
<td>Downtown neighborhood</td>
<td>Historically white neighborhood experiencing disinvestment and population growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson City</td>
<td>8,419</td>
<td>Jay Bird Hill neighborhood</td>
<td>Historically Black neighborhood experiencing declining Black population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin City</td>
<td>10,825</td>
<td>Weakley County Training School</td>
<td>Historically Black high school in area experiencing declining Black population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulaski City</td>
<td>8,397</td>
<td>North End neighborhood</td>
<td>Historically Black neighborhood experiencing disinvestment and declining Black population</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data from 2020 Decennial Census **As identified by Neighborhood Story Project teams

Given that a central goal of the Neighborhood Story Project is to increase power among those most affected by neighborhood change, facilitators of each Neighborhood Story Project intentionally recruited participants whose perspectives may be marginalized in the broader community. Participants were recruited through existing organizations (such as neighborhood groups, community centers, and alumni associations), as well as facilitator’s networks. Across the seven completed projects, 78% of team members identified as Black or African American, and 68% of team members identified as women (see Figure 2). Though not intentionally designed for older adults, each of the seven projects was intergenerational, and 58% of overall

participants (and as much as 91% of one group), were over age 55. For descriptions of all completed Neighborhood Story Projects, see [https://www.humanitiestennessee.org](https://www.humanitiestennessee.org).

Figure 2. Neighborhood Story Project participant demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial/Ethnic Identity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>55+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Approach to inquiry

Broadly, the goals of the present study are to understand the degree to which the Neighborhood Story Project constitutes an MTI for older adults in changing neighborhoods. More specifically, this study explores the resources older adults brought to the project, what they personally gained from participating, and how their work benefited the broader community.

**Design.** This paper draws on data from two waves of qualitative, constructivist inquiry. Constructivist inquiry explores the multiple ways in which social processes, interactions and meanings are constructed and experienced (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and is well suited to studying group work (Rubel & Okech, 2017). In the pilot phase, I conducted a multi-case study examining the facilitation process and outcomes for Neighborhood Story Project team members (also described as participants) in the first three Nashville projects. I played multiple roles, serving as the project designer, facilitator, and principal investigator. To increase the study’s validity, collaborating researchers (one per project) assisted me in collecting and analyzing data. The second wave of inquiry studied the replication of the Neighborhood Story Project as facilitated by local facilitation teams in four additional communities. In this phase, I again played multiple roles, serving as trainer/technical assistance provider and investigator.
Sample. This paper draws from a sample of data from both waves of inquiry, with a focus on the experiences of team members who were 55 or over. Older adult participants ranged from 55 to 87, with an average age of 67. Thirty-four of 59 Neighborhood Story Projects were older adults; of these, 65% participated in this study (n:22). This sample included 16 women and five men. Twenty-one participants identify as Black or African American; the remaining participant identifies as white.

Data collection: To understand participants’ experiences in Phase one of the study, the research team collected observational data (including complete audio recordings of each of the 12 weekly sessions, and corresponding field notes) and conducted a concluding focus group data with participants. To explore outcomes over time and to member-check my initial interpretations, I interviewed participants several months after each project concluded. In Phase two of the study, I conducted monthly audio-recorded interviews with facilitators throughout the project implementation to understand their perceptions of participant experiences, as well as a concluding focus group with all facilitators. To learn directly from participants about their experiences, I recorded interviews with participants following their project’s completion.

Analysis. All observational field notes, interview and focus group transcripts were uploaded in the qualitative software, MaxQDA, for focused coding (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). The code book included four major code categories: what members brought (including the strengths, limitations, and concerns members brought into the project), project design and facilitation (including the design and facilitation strengths and challenges), member outcomes (including shifts within and among members over the course of, or following, the project), and
community outcomes (including shifts in the broader community over the course of, or following, the project). For this paper, I analysed what older adults contributed to their teams, what they gained from participation, and their perceived contributions to the broader community. These themes were then considered in relation to the core characteristics of MTIs: leveraging indigenous leadership, building participant capacity, adopting a team-based approach, and facilitating links between the personal and the political.

**Researcher as instrument.** Given the multiple roles I played in this project—having designed the intervention, facilitated the first three projects, trained facilitators of subsequent projects, all while studying the intervention—attention to my own assumptions, as well as possible effects of my involvement on participant responses or interpretations, was critical throughout. As such, this study incorporated a number of best practices for establishing trustworthiness and credibility in constructivist research. In the first phase of data collection, during which I served as both facilitator and investigator, I employed *prolonged engagement* and *persistent observation* in the research setting and *triangulated researchers* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In both phases, I *triangulated data* and methods through the combination of naturalistic observation, focus groups and interviews, along with the collection of field notes, audio-recordings and meeting artifacts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout, I sought a high degree of *reflexivity* by explicitly attending to assumptions I was making (about the project design, facilitation, participants, and outcomes) through reflective field notes, and sought alternative perspectives and explanations through dialogue with collaborating researchers (Morrow, 2005). Additionally, I used the follow-up focus groups and interviews as an opportunity for *member checking* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) my early observations and interpretations, and also gave all participants and facilitators the opportunity to review a draft of this manuscript in full, soliciting
their feedback on the text, and encouraging them to challenge interpretations they disagreed with or add additional insight to better reflect their experiences (Morrow, 2005). Though the driving purpose of constructivist inquiry is to provide a depth of understanding of complex phenomenon rather than generalizability, findings of constructivist research may be transferable to similar contexts. To that end, I have endeavoured to provide sufficient contextual information—related to the Neighborhood Story Project, the settings, and the participants "to make transferability judgements possible" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 316). The study was reviewed and approved by the Portland State University Institutional Review Board (#184747) to ensure adherence to ethical guidelines.

Results

The following findings explore older adult’s experiences in the Neighborhood Story Project in relation to the four defining characteristics of MTIs, considering the degree to which the project leveraged older adults as leaders in their community, developed older adult’s knowledge and skills, engaged older adults in collective teams, adopted a team-based approach, and helped older adults link personal experiences to public issues.

Leveraging older adults as leaders

As noted above, Neighborhood Story Project facilitators intentionally recruit participants whose perspectives may be marginalized in the broader community. Thirty four of 59 (58%) participants across the seven projects were over 55. These older adult participants were diverse in terms of their educational, personal and professional backgrounds. Despite these differences, most older adults contributed to the Neighborhood Story Project in similar ways, offering deep place knowledge and attachment, existing social and institutional networks, robust curiosity and desire to learn, and a sense of responsibility to their communities.
**Place knowledge and attachment.** All but two of the older adult participants had long-standing connections to their neighborhoods. Most had lived the majority of their lives in the area, and given the history of racial segregation throughout Tennessee, many participants had multi-generational ties to their neighborhoods. Johnny (age 68), participated in a project related to a Black school in Martin City. As he explained: “of all the participants in this project, I have I guess a unique connection. The property on which this school was built belonged to my grandfather…So I felt like I had to be a part of this. I had to.” Members’ place knowledge and attachment motivated their participation, and were also important assets to their teams. In the early weeks of their projects, team members drew on their historic knowledge of their community to identify gaps in the historic record that they felt ought to be addressed. Ellen (age 87), noted that there had been “a lot of genealogical books written” about her area in Jefferson City, “but the African American community was not really brought into it. So, I wanted to correct that gap.” Ultimately, older adult’s place knowledge guided their inquiry in their communities.

**Social ties and organizational affiliations.** Older adult’s social networks were also an important resource. Nearly every member joined the project knowing at least one—and more often, several—other team members. Most also had strong existing social ties and organizational affiliations that benefited the project. For example, when the Jefferson City team decided to focus on the legacy of a historically-Black neighborhood, they quickly created a list of over 100 people within their networks that they hoped to interview. As Ron (age 63) recalled, “my first two interviews, both people would have never talked to a stranger…But they were willing to participate, because they knew me.” He continued: “they had a certain amount of trust in me that I would do the right thing with their information.” In all seven projects, older adult participants
leveraged their social ties to learn from others in the community—often people who were their elders—and drew on these neighbors’ experiences to explore their research questions.

**Desire to learn.** Members also brought a strong desire to learn. When asked why she chose to sign up, Ms. Pauline (age 65), offered, “Wanting to know and to learn and see different perspectives that helps me to grow.” For some, the desire to learn was tied to their concern about the neighborhood. Betty (age 68) was drawn to the project in her historically Black neighborhood, “because it was talking about the area that I lived in and it was talking about how people are being displaced.” As she explained, “I have some concerns about that because I don't think it's right.” A sense of curiosity was echoed by older adults throughout all seven projects, and was an asset to each team’s local research.

**Sense of responsibility.** As is evident by the quotes above, threaded alongside members place knowledge, social ties, and desire to learn was a strong sense of responsibility to their communities. Johnny’s connection to the school left him feeling that he ‘had to’ be part of the project; Ron felt entrusted by those in his social network ‘do the right thing with their stories’; Betty wanted to learn because she does not “think it’s right” that her neighbors are being displaced. A number of members recognized that their sense of responsibility was informed by their developmental stage in life. As Helen (age 87) explained, “the older you get, the more you are aware that history can be lost. If there's not some way to record this history, it could be all forever.” For many, their sense of duty was sharpened by the recognition that the perspectives of their neighbors—who were predominantly Black and/or poor—have long been marginalized, ignored, or omitted. As Johnny, whose team explored the legacy of the Black school founded on his grandfather’s land, put it: “I strongly felt that this story had to be told. And if the story was
going to be told, we were the ones that had to tell it.” Indeed, contesting racial injustice was a powerful motivator for many older adults.

In each of their projects, members leveraged their existing place knowledge, social ties, motivation to learn, and sense of responsibility to conduct place-based research in their communities. They gathered and analyzed data—a combination of stories, survey and interview data, artifacts, and administrative data—determined how to bring their findings to the larger community, and ultimately engaged their community in further learning and action.

**Building older adults’ capacity**

Over the course of the 12-week action research project, older adults found particular value in their own continued learning, as well as an increased sense of efficacy and civic engagement.

*Learning.* Sixteen of 22 older adult participants reflected on the project’s educational value. When I asked one participant what was most challenging or difficult about the project, she answered, “Having to leave each Monday at 8:30, because you didn't want to go. You wanted to continue. I wanted to keep going, get a little bit more. Learn a little bit more.” In some cases, members appreciated learning about contemporary issues. After learning about how zoning changes can accelerate development and displacement, Betty (age 68) reflected, “I've been hearing a lot of this stuff and it's all new to me and being in here for me is a learning process so I'm getting to see how things work and I'm going to be a part of it when it all comes together.” For others, gaining new perspectives on history was particularly meaningful.

Early in each project, each team created a neighborhood timeline, drawing on their personal knowledge and additional resources. In this activity, members of the Cleveland Park
Story Project learned that the roots of their historically Black neighborhood stretched to the Civil War, when thousands of people fled conditions of slavery and came to Nashville. In exchange for their labor to fortify the city, the Union army provided rudimentary lodging in what were known as ‘contraband camps’ (Lovett, 1999). One of these camps was located near the Cleveland Park neighborhood, and after the war, the newly freed women and men built Black businesses, churches, and schools in the area. Larry (age 59), had lived his entire life in the neighborhood, yet had never learned this history. After ruminating over this for weeks, Larry offered,

I found out something…the first time I was here, that startled me. What was it-the-the slaves, the camps, came here. I, I did not know that. That blew me out of the water and, so everything has a, has a lineage, just like all of us, just like any plant. Put a seed, comes up, it has many roots and it just grows.

As shown by Larry’s reflection, the learning facilitated through the project impacted the participants relationship to their neighborhood, particularly in places where Black history has been omitted or obscured.

Increased efficacy. Over half of the older adult participants described feeling a greater sense of efficacy following the project. In assessing the impact that the Neighborhood Story Project had on her life, Mary (age 65) offered, “You know, everybody just came out of it a different person and somebody they really wanted to be. I feel a certain amount of growth. That I'm ready to go to the next level.” Georgia, a team member in her 70s with various health challenges, reflected that her participation “helps me to better focus on what needs to be done, how it should be done, and how to get people involved…It motivated you to do more, even if you don’t feel well.” Randall (age 55) noted, “I think what it changed for me is, I've kind of took
more pride in, and wanting to get more involved in, community events.” Betty (age 68) put it this way, “doing the Story Project is making me change how I think about the neighborhood… I'm not going to let nobody run over me and tell me that I can't do something to save my neighborhood.” Several months later, many had already translated this efficacy into action.

Betty described how “this Story Project has opened doors for me” and described having recently provided a guest sermon about gentrification at a church, and given testimony at city council about the need for more affordable housing. For others, the project led to political involvement: one member of the Pulaski team was elected to public office, and a member of the Jefferson City team was recruited to join the local Democratic Board Committee.

Engaging older adults in collective teams

The Neighborhood Story Project is, by design a team-based project. While many had existing relationships with others on their team, about a third of older adult participants had limited social ties prior to the project. Yet regardless of whether or not they had preexisting relationships, most—18 of 22 older adults—described deepening their social ties through the Neighborhood Story Project. T.K., in her 60s, described having been depressed at the start of the Edgehill Story Project, and deeply concerned about the changes happening in her neighborhood. Just four weeks in, she shared with her team, “You know, this group keeps me hoping for the best for Edgehill… each one of us is important and special. We have beautiful gifts and I like that. You know, I like how we validate each other, we have each other's backs.” Arlene (age 68) had worked with a number of other participants through her church in Jefferson City, yet reflected, “But I think as far as the team itself, it drew us into a closer relationship with each other.”
While the project design intentionally fostered relationships among team members, an unintended consequence was the strengthening of relationships in the broader community. Diana (age 61) was one of the few participants who was new to her neighborhood, with limited social ties when the project began. As part of her team’s data collection, she interviewed her neighbors about their perspectives on the community. Several months after the project ended, she noted how these relationships deepened over time: “they’re more friendlier, you know? It's almost like I know them all.” She went on to describe extended porch conversations which are now commonplace between her and her neighbors.

**Helping older adults link personal experiences to public issues**

Though most older adults entered the Neighborhood Story Project with a personal sense of connection to and concern for their community, participating in the project deepened members place attachment, and helped members to leverage that attachment in ways that benefited the broader community.

**Deepened place attachments.** Seventeen of 22 older adults described their place attachment as strengthened through the project. When asked how the project informed how he felt about his community, Johnny (age 68), reflected, “Well, it just endeared it to me even more because there was so many things that some of these participants that we interviewed said that I was not aware of.” Similarly, Ann (age 70), described learning more about the place she has lived, and concluded, “I’ve always loved [my neighborhood]; my love grew stronger with this project.” For many, filling in gaps in their personal knowledge of their community helped them develop a more complex understanding of where they lived, and depended their feeling of connection to their community.
Contributions to the broader community. Although older adults appreciated what they personally gained from the Neighborhood Story Project, they ultimately judged their effectiveness by the degree to which the project served others. Although each project’s goals varied, three areas of contribution emerged across the seven projects. First, participants believed that their work affirmed perspectives that have been marginalized in their community. Members found that the practice of collecting and sharing interviews was a powerful demonstration to neighbors, friends and family members that their stories mattered. As Beverly (age 70) reflected:

… some of the interviewees, some of the things that they said, it was like, it was opening up a door that had been shut, and that they were able to share things not just with family but with somebody else, and they knew that their interviews would be read or could be looked at, at the exhibit…It just seemed important to them that they'd be able to express that memory, that moment.

Attendees at Neighborhood Story Project events shared with team members their appreciation of ‘seeing themselves,’ literally and figuratively, in the culminating projects. In some cases, community members saw pictures of themselves from childhood in archival materials uncovered by the team; in other cases, their experiences of increased economic precarity and threats of displacement were affirmed. Given that each Neighborhood Story Project centered on a disregarded, marginalized, and otherwise ignored community, these affirmations mattered.

Second, participants also believed their work educated the broader community. Randall (age 55) hoped the Jefferson City project would educate community members about the history of African Americans in his county. Having contributed 36 oral histories and dozens of artifacts to be permanently archived in the public library, he concluded, “I think we did an excellent job on that project. I was amazed at the amount of material that was there and disseminated and
made available to the public at large.” His team was particularly pleased that their culminating event drew broad participation of both white and Black attendees.

While several projects focused on preserving the past, others sought to educate the public about the present. The Edgehill team explored the rapid development and residential displacement occurring in their historically Black Nashville neighborhood. They released a data-rich report and evocative video featuring interviews with long-time neighbors to a 100-person crowd. Several major news sources covered the event, expanding the project’s educational reach.

Third, older adult participants believed that their project inspired greater civic involvement. Several team members were approached by other community members asking if they too could share their stories. According to Mary (age 62), a member of the Jefferson City team that collected oral histories from African American elders, “it’s worked well here to the point that I’m getting phone calls, I’m getting conversations with people who want to get information…They want to be able to tell their stories.” Others observed that event participants had become more involved in neighborhood civic life. An Edgehill member in her 60’s, T.K., explained that after her team’s work to mobilize her predominantly Black neighbors against predatory development, “Everybody is alert to what they want. It's making people come out and do more of the RA meetings, resident association meeting. A lot of people's participating.”

Taken together, older adult participants in the Neighborhood Story Project believed that the degree to which their efforts affirmed, educated, and engaged others were modest yet provided meaningful contributions to their community. Knowing that they had made a difference was particularly rewarding to older adult members. As Arlene (age 68) reflected, “I am excited that the interest in the history has been discovered, and now we can just go forward from this
thing on and look forward to our legacy being left behind.” For most members, this legacy was both personal and political. Mr. Johnny (age 68), concluded:

I guess selfishly I just wanted [my grandchildren] to know our own personal family history. But it's more than that, it's the history of a town. It's the history of a community. It's the history of West Tennessee. And it is a story that's not recorded in any history book.

Importantly, the work of six of the seven teams was inextricably tied to racial justice: just as contesting racial injustice was a powerful motivator to participate in the Neighborhood Story Project, believing that their work had helped advance racial justice was particularly significant to older adult participants.

**Discussion**

Neighborhood change can exacerbate existing social inequalities and undermine well-being for older adults (Burns, Lavoie & Rose, 2012). As noted previously, while various studies have explored the benefits of social action to older adults, there has been limited study of social action in the context of changing neighborhoods. As such, this study has several implications, particularly for those working with older adults in areas undergoing economic and demographic change.

First, this study suggest that the Neighborhood Story Project can be an effective macro therapeutic intervention that engages older adults as change agents within communities experiencing both neighborhood decline and gentrification. The four elements of MTIs described by Ferguson et al. (2018) —developing local leadership, capacity building, team-based approach, and linking the personal to the political—are strongly reflected in the Neighborhood Story
Project design. While the results of this study are not intended to be generalizable, it in nonetheless noteworthy that the seven different Neighborhood Story Projects completed in urban and rural settings across Tennessee disproportionately attracted participants over 55, many of whom were concerned about racial injustice in their communities, and that, though diverse from one another, older adult participants both contributed to and benefited from the project in similar ways. The benefits to older adult participants were mirrored in what they perceived as their contributions to their communities. The project leveraged older adult’s place knowledge, who in turn affirmed the expertise of other older adults by recording and archiving their stories. The project facilitated older adult’s learning, who in turn created learning opportunities for the broader community. As older adults built relationships through the project, their culminating events strengthened a broader sense of community. Finally, as older adults were mobilized into action, their projects engaged and mobilized others. Social work practitioners might consider the Neighborhood Story Project as one approach to engaging older adult residents of rapidly changing neighborhood conditions in social action. For those interested in implementing the Neighborhood Story Project, a facilitation guide is available from the author by request.

Although this study explored older adults experience in the Neighborhood Story Project, a second, broader implication is that place-based social action may be an important avenue for older adults to counteract the negative effects of neighborhood change. As noted previously, a preponderance of social action initiatives that target older adults focus on serving/engaging with other older adults (Bui et al., 2021; Rawsthorne et al., 2017). However, findings from this study suggests the value of inviting older adults to participate in intergenerational projects related to their interests and concerns, such as neighborhood change and racial injustice. Further, these findings underscore the degree to which older adults can be critical sources of stability, support,
and activism in community change efforts. As such, community practitioners working in the arena of neighborhood change, particularly in historic communities of color, should consider ways to strengthen outreach and involvement of older adults. Engaging older adults in local social-action projects can simultaneously contribute to older adults’ wellbeing, and enhance the benefits of these projects to the broader community.

A final implication concerns the need for ongoing research related to macro therapeutic interventions with older adults. The Neighborhood Story Project targets neighborhoods undergoing rapid demographic change. Additional inquiry is needed to understand the appeal and benefit of this approach to older adults in demographically stable neighborhoods. Further, although the Neighborhood Story Project follows an emergent design that does not require rigid implementation-fidelity, additional study is needed to more fully understand the facilitation practices and design elements that best support older adults’ participation in this, and other, MTIs. Ultimately, this project is a demonstration of how community practitioners can support the individual and collective needs of older adults in changing neighborhoods. Working together and across generations, older adults can fill gaps in the historical record, amplify stories that have been marginalized, and contribute to shaping their community’s future.

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