

Actively develop human resources for the elderly -An investigation on the intention of students of Guangdong University for the Aged as "real" books under the background of aging

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Abstract

China has entered a moderately aging country, it is urgent to actively develop the elderly human resources and promote the transformation of demographic dividend to talent dividend. Taking Guangdong University for the Aged as an example, this paper investigates the intention of the elderly university students as "real" books, understands the wishes and needs of the elderly, and explores new ways to develop human resources for the elderly under the background of aging.

Keywords: Live books; Old human resources; Guangdong University for the Aged;

1. Introduction

By the end of 2023, China will have 297 million people aged 60 and above, accounting for 21.1% of the total population ([Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China,2024](#)). This marks China's entry into the stage of moderate aging. The State Council's report on strengthening and advancing aging-related work points out the need to actively promote the social participation of older adults, encourage them to play an active role, implement the "Silver Age Lecture Program," and introduce policies and measures to promote the development and utilization of human resources among older adults ([CPC Central Committee and State Council,2024](#)). In November 2021, the "Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Strengthening Aging Work in the New Era" comprehensively deployed elderly education work for the first time, proposing to incorporate elderly education into the lifelong education system and encouraging the elderly to continue to play an active role ([CPC Central Committee and State Council,2024](#)).

As the saying goes, "An elderly person in the family is like a treasure." The elderly population is rich in resources, including retired teachers, doctors, craftsmasters, travelers, psychologists, and more. They all have rich life experiences and harbor vast knowledge resources, especially tacit knowledge

resources. These high-quality resources and abundant experiences hold significant value for today's young people. Everyone's life experience is like a book. By participating in “human library” activities, the elderly can share their experiences, knowledge, and insights with readers, gaining a sense of fulfillment and achievement. This study, conducted at the Guangdong Elderly University, employs a questionnaire survey method to investigate the willingness of Guangdong Elderly University students to serve as “human” books, exploring new pathways for developing elderly human resources in the context of an aging society.

2. Feasibility Analysis of Elderly Individuals as “Human Books”

The Human Library was initially established to address violence and reduce conflict, highlighting the significant social and psychological importance of such initiatives. Utilizing the human resources of the elderly to conduct Human Library activities aligns perfectly with its original purpose.

2.1. Elderly individuals possess unique life experiences or skills

Elderly individuals have accumulated rich life experiences and may even possess unique knowledge and skills. Some were once industry elites, others are inheritors of intangible cultural heritage, and some master traditional folk skills; they have had legendary experiences such as backpacking, vagabonding, or budget travel, which hold significant educational and guiding value for young people's lives and careers. This is a crucial social resource. The imprint left by one generation on the next is irreplaceable; much oral literature, performing arts, and traditional crafts are preserved among the older generation in rural areas. If these are not passed down as the elderly age, it would be a tremendous loss for cultural heritage ([Wu Caihuan,2022](#)).

The purpose of human library reading is to gain access to the unique, little-known life experiences and specialized skills of others. These experiences and skills are accumulated over time and formed through long-term practice. The elderly are not orators or authors; they do not possess elaborate vocabulary but use the most straightforward language. The themes and content of human library activities need not be “highbrow” or ‘grand’; they must be grounded in reality and drawn from life, allowing readers to fully grasp the “essence” through sharing.

2.2. Willingness to share and possess a certain level of communication ability

Elderly individuals are very willing to communicate with young people and share their life experiences. During the recruitment process for human libraries, priority is given to elderly individuals with strong communication skills and fluent Mandarin.

The purpose of human libraries is to eliminate barriers and prejudices, using conversation as the primary method. Conversation is one of the oldest, most traditional, and most common forms of interpersonal communication. Two people

can meet, or a group of three or five can gather, and conversation begins. Through interaction and exchange, the elderly quickly disseminate the rich knowledge and information they have accumulated over the years. This also fosters a sense of contribution to society and a sense of responsibility, as well as psychological fulfillment from the experience ([Ruan Xiaolan,2015](#)).

2.3. Possess typicality and representativeness.

The elderly come from various industries, including medicine, education, management, finance, and more. They are the best representatives of their respective industries or fields. Readers can gain a deep understanding of a specific topic by engaging with a single “human book,” eliminating the need to read multiple human books with similar experiences or skills. As a detailed, comprehensive, and substantial “human book,” the elderly can serve as essential reading material for understanding a particular field.

2.4. They have relatively flexible and ample time, which provides excellent conditions for borrowing human books

Elderly individuals have ample free time and are not bound by the constraints of a 9-to-5 work schedule, offering readers a wide range of borrowing time options. Elderly individuals can utilize human library activities to expand their social circles and enrich their elderly lives. As a resource advantage, elderly individuals excel in areas such as intelligence, technology, management, and experience. Leveraging the strengths and roles of elderly talent not only acknowledges their potential value but also fulfills their self-driven need to enhance their quality of life and realize their life value in old age.

3. Survey on the Intentions of Guangdong Senior University Students to Participate in the “Human Library” Program

3.1. Questionnaire Design and Distribution

The questionnaire was designed based on four dimensions, including student basic information, understanding of the human library, willingness to participate in the human library and preferred format, and unique experiences and skills.

A total of 204 paper questionnaires were distributed offline, with 194 returned and 193 valid responses.

3.2. Results of the Questionnaire Survey

3.2.1. Basic Information

Questions 1 and 2 of the questionnaire were designed to gather basic information about the study participants, primarily regarding gender and age. Among the survey participants, 95% were female (184 individuals), and 5% were male (9 individuals). There were 4 individuals aged 41–49, 102 aged 50–59, 61 aged 60–

69, 26 aged 70–79, and 0 aged 80–89. This indicates that the study subjects were primarily early-stage elderly individuals. See Figure 1 for details.

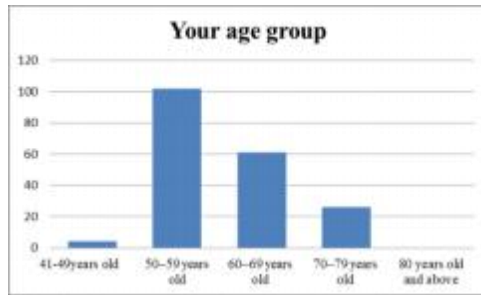


Figure 1.

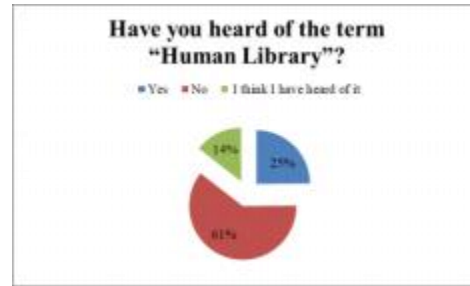


Figure 2.

3.2.2. Understanding of the Human Library

Question 3 of the questionnaire surveyed participants' understanding of the Human Library. 61% of participants said they had never heard of the term “Human Library”; 25% said they had heard of it; and 14% said they thought they had heard of it. See Figure 2 for details.

3.2.3. Willingness to participate in human library activities and forms of implementation

Questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 of the questionnaire surveyed the participants' willingness to participate in human library activities and forms of implementation. Among them, 192 participants indicated that the rich experiences of the elderly could be shared. Only one participant indicated that the rich experiences of the elderly could not be shared. See Figure 3 for details.

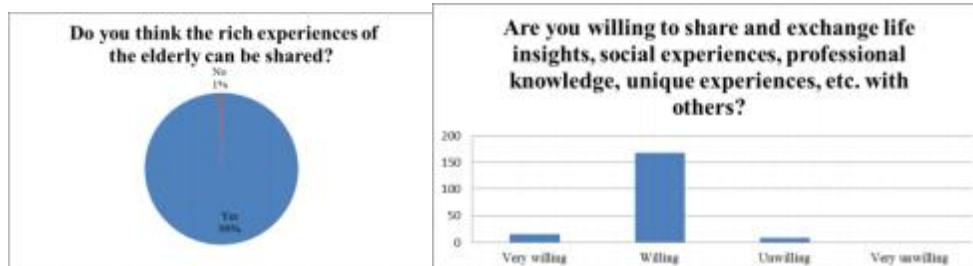


Figure 3.

Figure 4.

When asked, “Would you be willing to share your life insights, social experiences, professional knowledge, unique experiences, and other content with others?”, 168 students said they would be willing, 16 students said they would be very willing, and 9 students said they would not be willing. See Figure 4 for details.

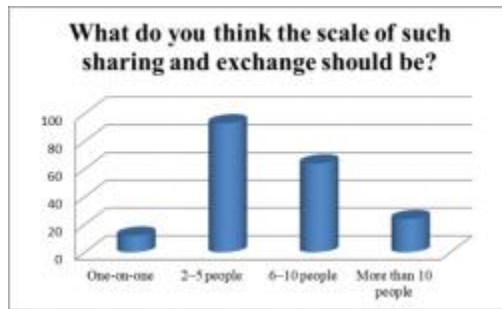


Figure 5.

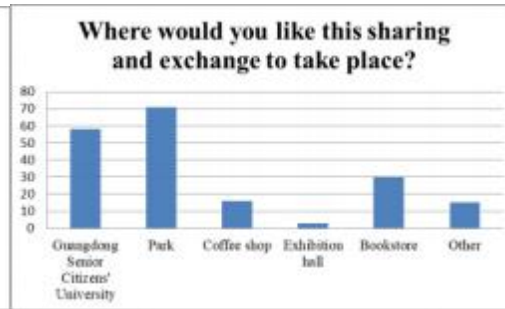


Figure 6.

Regarding the appropriate scale for live book sharing and exchange activities, 93 participants believed that the size should be limited to 2-5 people; 64 participants felt that 6-10 people was most suitable; 24 participants thought that more than 10 people was appropriate; and only 12 participants believed that one-on-one exchanges should be conducted. See Figure 5.

71 participants preferred to hold the human library activity in a park; 58 participants expressed a preference for holding it at the Guangdong Senior Citizens' University; 30 participants preferred a bookstore; 16 participants preferred a café; 3 participants preferred an exhibition hall; and 15 participants indicated that none of the above locations were suitable and preferred to choose another location, but did not specify a specific location. See Figure 6.



Figure 7.

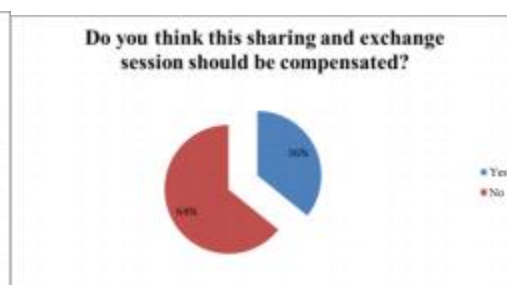


Figure 8.

Regarding the duration of the sharing and exchange session, 100 participants believed that 30-60 minutes was most appropriate; 38 participants believed that less than 30 minutes was appropriate; 37 participants believed that 1.5-2 hours was appropriate; and 18 participants believed that 1-1.5 hours was appropriate. See Figure 7.

64% of participants believed that no compensation should be paid for the human library sharing and exchange activity, while 36% believed that compensation should be paid. See Figure

3.2.4. Unique experiences and skills

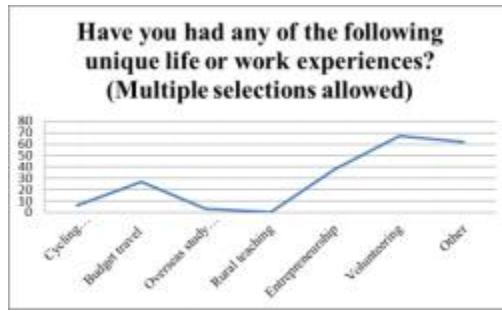


Figure 9.

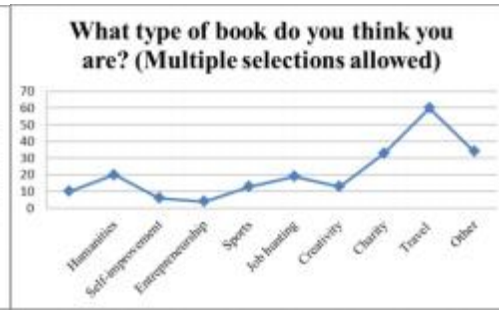


Figure 10.

All 67 trainees have experience in volunteer work; 38 trainees have experience in starting their own businesses; 27 trainees have experience in budget travel; 6 trainees have experience in cycling; 3 trainees have experience in overseas study tours; and 62 trainees selected other experiences, such as handicrafts, etc. See Figure 9.

60 participants identified themselves as travel-related books; 33 as public welfare-related books; 20 as humanities-related books; 19 as job-seeking-related books; 13 as sports-related books;

13 as creative-related books; and 10 as professional-related books, including finance, nursing, pharmacy, health care, engineering management, early childhood education, and piano. 6 participants identified themselves as belonging to the self-help category; 4 participants identified themselves as belonging to the entrepreneurship category; and finally, 34 participants identified themselves as belonging to other categories. See Figure 10.

This questionnaire survey has certain limitations. First, the sample population consists entirely of students from the Guangdong Senior Citizens' University, all of whom are from Guangzhou and are primarily retired individuals with open-minded and progressive ideas, failing to adequately consider the preferences of rural seniors. Second, the sample population's age range is primarily concentrated among the younger elderly population aged 50—70, failing to sufficiently include middle-aged and elderly seniors. Therefore, future research should supplement this study with surveys targeting middle-aged and elderly seniors as well as rural seniors.

4. Several Perspectives on the Role of the Elderly as “Living Books”

4.1. The elderly have a strong desire to share

According to the results of the questionnaire survey, it is evident that the elderly have a strong willingness to serve as “living books,” eagerly desiring to share their life experiences and wisdom with others. This is closely tied to the arrival of an aging society, where home-based elderly care, solitary living, and empty-nest elderly are prevalent, leading to an increasingly strong desire to share. Many elderly individuals, after retiring, find themselves with little to do and unable to alleviate their emotions. Their children, often not living nearby or busy with work,

may not provide sufficient care and attention. Through sharing and communication, elderly individuals can feel cared for and respected.

4.2. The selection of elderly individuals as “human books” requires face-to-face communication and a comprehensive understanding

Elderly individuals vary in terms of educational background, language expression abilities, and skills. Only those who meet the selection criteria for “human books” can become true “human books.” The primary focus is on their fluency in Mandarin Chinese and language expression

abilities, while also deeply exploring their rich, unique, and distinctive life experiences and skills.

4.3. The borrowing time for elderly “human books” should be limited to one hour or less

This survey found that the vast majority of elderly individuals prefer the exchange activity to last no longer than one hour, which is closely related to their physical condition. Due to their physical conditions, the elderly cannot endure prolonged high-intensity activities. Therefore, organizers should closely monitor the physical needs of the elderly at the activity site and dynamically adjust the activity schedule and process as needed.

4.4. Establish a dedicated “Human Book” resource database for the elderly

As a special group with numerous variable factors, the elderly should have a dedicated “Human Book” resource database, categorized by age into young, middle-aged, and elderly groups. Borrowing rules and the recruitment of “human books” should be tailored to the characteristics of the elderly.

4.5. Elderly “human books” can be borrowed by a maximum of five people at the same time

Research has found that the elderly prefer the number of participants in human book exchange activities to be controlled between two and five. The elderly have slower reactions and find it difficult to maintain high levels of concentration for extended periods. A larger number of participants can lead to a poorer reading experience and delayed communication.

5. Summary

In the context of an aging population, actively developing elderly human resources and promoting the transformation of demographic dividends into talent dividends is of utmost urgency. As “human books,” the elderly can share their hidden knowledge resources and unique skills with the younger generation, which not only has significant reference value for their work and life but also helps preserve cultural resources and pass down Chinese culture.

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Attachment:

Survey Form on the Intentions of Guangdong Senior University Students to Participate in the

Human Library Activity

Dear Sir/Madam:

“Everyone’s life experience is a book.” The Human Library activity uses real people as the subject of borrowing, allowing readers to “read” through interaction with the human books. At a predetermined time and location, readers engage in direct dialogue and exchange with the human books, sharing life experiences, social insights, profound thoughts, unique experiences, and reflections on reading, fostering immediate communication and two-way interaction.

This is a survey form on the intention of Guangdong Senior University students to participate in the Human Library Activity. The purpose is to understand the true thoughts of senior students, to redevelop and utilize senior human resources, and to assist retired individuals in achieving successful aging.

Thank you for taking a few minutes to complete this survey. Your opinions are crucial to this research. Please answer honestly according to your true thoughts. There are no right or wrong answers. This survey is anonymous, and the results will be used solely for academic research. We guarantee confidentiality.

1. Your gender

☐Male

☐Female

2. Your age group

- ☐41–49 years old ☐50–59 years old ☐60–69 years old
☐70–79 years old ☐80 years old and above

3. Have you heard of the term “Human Library”?

- ☐Yes ☐No ☐I think I have heard of it

4. Do you think the rich experiences of the elderly can be shared?

- ☐Yes ☐No

5. Are you willing to share and exchange life insights, social experiences, professional knowledge, unique experiences, etc. with others?

- ☐Very willing ☐Willing ☐Unwilling ☐Very unwilling

6. What do you think the scale of such sharing and exchange should be?

- ☐One-on-one ☐2–5 people ☐6–10 people ☐More than 10 people

7. Where would you like this sharing and exchange to take place?

- ☐Guangdong Senior Citizens' University ☐Park ☐Coffee shop
☐Exhibition hall ☐Bookstore ☐Other

8. How long would you like this sharing and exchange session to last?

- ☐30 minutes or less ☐30–60 minutes
☐1–1.5 hours ☐1.5–2 hours

9. Do you think this sharing and exchange session should be compensated?

- ☐Yes ☐No

10. Have you had any of the following unique life or work experiences? (Multiple selections allowed)

- ☐Cycling experience ☐Budget travel ☐Overseas study abroad
☐Rural teaching ☐Entrepreneurship ☐Volunteering ☐Other

11. What type of book do you think you are? (Multiple selections allowed)

- ☐Professional (specific field:)
☐Humanities ☐Self-improvement ☐Entrepreneurship
☐Sports ☐Job hunting ☐Creativity
☐Charity ☐Travel ☐Other

The survey has ended. Thank you for your participation. Wishing you good health!