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EDITORIAL COMMENT

Reciprocity and Exchange in Kin and Nonkin Intergenerational Relationships

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The global phenomenon of population aging (Bengtson & Lowenstein, 2003; Lowenstein & Katz, 2010) raises a challenge to intergenerational relationships and addresses the social issues of intergenerational exchange and reciprocity. The exchange theory perspective contains an important implication for understanding intergenerational relationships as related to the psychological well-being of different generations and older people (e.g., Silverstein, Conroy, Wang, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 2002).

Consistent with Lowenstein (2007), intergenerational relations with kin and nonkin reflect a diversity of forms related to individual, familial, and social structural characteristics. These serve as markers for differences in socialization, roles, culture, values, and access to resources. Reciprocity should be perceived as an age-dependent variable, and the needs of the participating parties in the exchange process should be taken into consideration.

The set of papers in this issue of the *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* (JIR) seeks to address these core issues of exchange between nonkin and kin, grandparents and grandchildren, from research and practice perspectives. The timing of this issue is related both to the declaration of the European Union of the year 2012 as a year of “Active Aging and Intergenerational Solidarity” as well as to the Madrid International Plan on Aging (2002), which noted “the need to strengthen solidarity between generations and intergenerational partnerships, keeping in mind the particular needs of both older and younger ones, and encourage mutually responsive relationships between generations” (United Nations Organization, 2002, p. 4).

The five scholarly papers in this issue and the “From the Field” reports foster a dialogue between different countries and cultures: U.S., Scotland (UK), Cambodia, and Japan. The papers are based on different theoretical

frameworks: exchange and reciprocity, intergenerational family systems theory, theory of personhood and different research methods, quantitative and qualitative, and intergenerational relationships.

The first Scholarly Research article, an invited manuscript by Lokon, Kinney, and Kunkel from Miami University, uses Kitwood's theory of personhood (1997) to study and analyze the exchange of nonkin relationships from the points of view of younger students. Data were collected from reflective journals written by students who participated in Opening Minds through Art program (OMA) that works with older people with dementia. The findings reveal that facilitating the creative expressions of demented elders resulted in many positive gains for college students: enhancing personhood and academic learning, willingness to consider pursuing careers in aging, feeling rewarded in contributing to the lives of the elders, impacting positively attitudes toward older people, and especially seeing elders with dementia as friends and as artists.

The second Scholarly Research article by Lewis and Seponski from University of Georgia and University of Houston–Clear Lake presents and analyzes the plight of older, Cambodian grandparents in different domains who are raising and caring for orphaned grandchildren and in the process sacrificing their own spiritual growth in symbolic exchanges. The authors use family exchange theory and ethnographic research methods to understand the “types, meanings, and ambivalences” associated with the difficulties of these grandparents in a country where they are surrounded by poverty, deprivation, lack of basic resources including food and shelter, the epidemic of HIV/AIDS, and continued trauma. The study offers an initial glimpse into the needs of these extremely poor, elder-headed households.

Rempusheski and Haigh from the University of Delaware and Davidson from the District Health Department of Newbury, Michigan, explore the perceptions of college students about their relationships and communication with their grandparents. Increased longevity today enables more years for young adults to share with their older grandparents their life experiences. This factor, among others, relates to their competencies in using advanced technology. The benefits and shortcomings of the various technological devices are discussed. The theoretical perspective was intergenerational family systems theory, looking at the bidirectional, mutual influence of both generations: grandparents and young adult grandchildren. Most participants had positive relationships with their grandparents and used a variety of communication strategies to maintain contact.

The fourth Scholarly Research article by Mannion from the University of Stirling, Scotland, presents a review of the theoretical and empirical literature on intergenerational practice, where the focus was more on one-way exchanges between generations. However, understanding intergenerational practice as being all-age, reciprocal, and multigenerational leads to the conclusion that there are many places where different generations interact and

learn. Thus, the field today has to adopt a wider conceptual framework to support the many spaces and ages of those engaged in intergenerational practice.

Shedletsky from the University of Southern Maine, in his practice-based paper, as do the authors in the first paper in this issue, looks at perceptions of undergraduate students involved in a course on intergenerational communication who mentored older adults in basic Internet skills. The elders were students in a community outreach course in a lifelong learning institute. The paper uses a naturalistic inquiry method to analyze highlights from the journals the students kept. The findings show the benefits students felt they acquired from this experience in teaching and helping the older adults and witnessing their happiness in learning as well as getting along with them. The older adults on the other hand were satisfied with their abilities to use the Internet.

The Program Profile and New Programs in the Field article in this issue present evidence-based practice of two programs in which older volunteers are helping young students by sharing and using their knowledge and skills. These programs are impressive examples of exchange and reciprocity from the old to the young with positive outcomes. One is in the United States (Teufel and colleagues), about intergenerational volunteers tutoring elementary school students, and the second (Mendelson and colleagues), a program of Email Mentor Communication in which adult volunteers in Hawai'i assist Japanese students in Japan to improve their English.

This issue also includes two adult book reviews: one by Cabin on a text by Kresl and Ietri about the aging population and its benefits to the urban economy, which examines 40 U.S. and European cities. The book is helpful for readers not familiar with global, demographic trends related to healthy, urban aging. The second by Liou reviews a text by Göransson about Chinese, intergenerational relations in modern Singapore. In this book, the author is able to explore how Singapore's complex modernity affects Chinese cultural continuity and interaction between generations. There are also two children's book reviews on the bonds between grandparents and grandchildren: one with images from seven continents and the other about bonds that come from a mutual love of nature. There are two media reviews in this issue of JIR, each covering three films with intergenerational implications.

In the Forum Response, Hanton and Hatton-Yeo deal with the debate about elders "taking the places" of younger people in the labor market. Evidence from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries shows that younger and older workers occupy different sectors in the labor market and that it may be a false premise to assume that retiring people earlier will create more work for other ages. Therefore, it is not about social injustice between the generations but about social injustice across the generations.

This issue of JIR is a rich and cross-culturally diverse one. It looks at intergenerational exchange and reciprocity within family–kin relations, especially between grandparents and grandchildren, as well as nonkin relations between older and younger generations in various educational frameworks. One can conclude that the meanings attached to giving, even more than the actual giving, are important elements that affect satisfaction in intergenerational kin and nonkin relationships. In addition, the ability to be an active provider in exchange relations enhances satisfaction from the relations. The issue is geared to a variety of audiences: the scientific and research community, professionals in the field, students, and multigenerational family members.

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