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Research utilization for social transformation

Since the first democratic elections in South Africa in April 1994, remarkable social and political changes are taking place. With the transformation of the human rights culture in the country, policy is being rewritten, or written anew in several arenas of social life. The new Government of National Unity has recognized the important role which non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) have to play in realising the aims of its Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). Broadly, the programme's aims are to redress past inequalities in the distribution of resources and to create a more enabling environment for all citizens. New policy on ageing in South Africa is being structured in terms of a shift of service provision, as far as possible, to community agencies (Department of Welfare, 1995).

Along with a recognition of the contributions which NGOs and CBOs must make to the transformation process, is a need for research information on ageing to inform new policy and for applied research to benefit communities. The gerontological research enterprise should therefore ideally be a partnership between the research community and a variety of community agencies, and have intersectoral linkages and the involvement of stakeholders. However, research results on their own are neither translated nor disseminated, and nor does dissemination guarantee their utilization. Researchers have the skills to foster research implementation and decision makers need to be supported through accessible information.

Research utilization

South Africa has an historically poor culture of knowledge utilization in the area of policy making and planning for the older population. A reason for this has been poor understanding on the part of decision makers of research, its role and function, as well as poor capacity to employ or apply research findings. On the other hand it might be argued that much gerontological research has been esoteric, in terms of what decision makers' and users' needs are, and that in the new South Africa there is a need for more appropriately packaged and targeted research information, as well as strategies to facilitate the translation and implementation of research-based recommendations to benefit the communities to which they apply.

However, first there is a need to move beyond mere dissemination of research results and to develop research methodologies which are participatory and people centred (Schenck & Louw, 1995). These methodologies should be carried out by researchers in partnership with community agencies, with the involvement of decision makers and other

stakeholders, to interactively search for solutions and to effect development.

While applied studies may be used to change programmes within communities in the short and medium term, the corpus of gerontology knowledge in the country must still be utilized to inform policy and to direct planning in the long term. If relevant research information is ignored or rejected, policy is uninformed and programmes are not improved.

This issue

This issue comprises a transdisciplinary mix of interesting and relevant papers ranging from a community-development intervention, to gerontolinguistics, to guidelines for new legislation, to community services in China. The issue begins with an article on infrastructure and equity for the elderly, in which authors **Ross, Lerer** and **Phillips** investigate the attitudes of older residents of Elim, a village situated in South Africa's Western Cape province, towards electrification of their village and homes. The creation of basic infrastructure in historically-disadvantaged areas throughout South Africa is a priority under the government's RDP. However, in this case study of Elim, the utility company which provides electricity to the village failed to consult the elderly residents on the developmental intervention and the benefits which electrification might have for them. The majority of the older residents who were interviewed were consequently negative about this new energy source. The advantages which electricity has over other fuels have distinct health and other developmental benefits, and in rural households older members are important decision makers on energy use. The study's findings indicate that developmental interventions in rural-based communities should include a social-marketing component targeting older members of the community.

The article by **Makoni** on discourse practices in first-time encounters between old and young Xhosa-speaking women represents an exciting development in gerontological research in the Southern African region. As far as we know, this is a first report on a linguistics study in an older population in the region. In his analysis of the conversations, Makoni notes the sociohistorical background against which the old women try to retain status and respect. He points out that while the elderly are a marginalized group, the youth in South African society have become empowered through their contributions to the political changes, which along with other social changes are seen by some to destabilize traditional seniority respect norms.

In his article **Van Dokkum** makes out a case for the development of legislation to protect older South Africans against abuse. He uses examples of new South African legis-

lation to deter child abuse and vast legislation in the United States to protect older Americans, in outlining a proposal for local activists to campaign for adequate protection of elderly citizens.

Zhu gives us an update on a massive community social-services programme for older people being implemented in the People's Republic of China. The programme partly aims to assist an increasing number of older people who find that they are no longer able to live with kin and must live independently. The programme already serves a staggering proportion of China's 104 million persons aged 60 years and above, although it is estimated that it currently only meets 30 % of the demand.

A letter to the editor, which raises points in an article on pensions and household structure in Namibia by **Adamchak** published in *SAJG* Volume 4, No 2 (October 1995), and Adamchak's response are welcome additions to this number. The journal encourages debate on papers that it publishes, and the letters also reflect the development and growth of gerontology and research on ageing in the Southern African region.

Finally, gerontolinguist **Makoni** reviews Hamilton's (1994) book in which the author analyses her conversations with Elsie, an Alzheimer's disease patient in a "total institution" (Goffman, 1961). The book contributes to understanding of losses and changes in language use in sufferers of this disease as the dementia progresses. Makoni proposes topics for studies on this subject which might be carried out in Southern African countries, where the majority of dement-

ing older Africans are cared for within the community and not in a long-term care institution.

Special issue

The October 1996 number of *SAJG* is a special issue on "Gender, ageing and empowerment in Africa." The guest editor of the special issue is **Maria Cattell** of Millersville University, Pennsylvania, USA, who has conducted substantial research on older Kenyans and more recently on Zulu grandmothers. Dr Cattell is the President of the global Association of Anthropology and Gerontology (AAGE). The issue will comprise research papers from authors in several African countries, and will provide valuable data and experience of ageing in Africa for transnational comparison.

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