

## Editorial

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# A place and time for a gerontology journal

The first number of the *Southern African Journal of Gerontology* (SAJG), which appeared in October 1992, did not include an editorial. In our excitement to launch the journal we omitted to introduce SAJG to readers. This omission is put right in the second number. Future issues of the journal will include an editorial – sometimes written by a guest editor.

The timing of the launch of the journal is important. The decision to produce a journal of our own in the southern African region was made on several grounds.

First, it was felt that a journal could provide a forum for the exchange of knowledge on ageing in the region. Trends in ageing and problems of the aged have commonalities in all southern African countries. By pooling and sharing knowledge through such a forum, common solutions to problems can be found.

Second, researchers and gerontologists in South Africa have until recently been isolated as a result of academic sanctions imposed on them because of the country's apartheid policy. Over a decade or longer authors have experienced difficulty in having research published in international journals. A lack of two-way exposure during this period stunted the development of gerontology in the country. We thus felt that a journal of our own would provide a much-needed medium for publishing local research. At the same time it would serve to expand gerontology in the region generally.

Third, we felt that there was sufficient interest in gerontological research in southern Africa to warrant a fully-fledged journal. The efforts of the Co-operative Research Programme on Ageing to a large extent promoted this interest in South Africa – and are continuing to do so.

Fourth, we noted that articles on gerontological topics were being published in a wide variety of social science, medical, health care, social work and other journals. The time had come, we felt also, to gather scientific articles on ageing-related matters – the corpus of southern African gerontologists – under a single cover.

Finally, the field of ageing and the concerns of the elderly are of interest not only to academics and practitioners but are also relevant to policy makers. The political transformation period in South Africa is a critical time to review ageing issues and matters affecting the elderly. Hence we felt that a scientific gerontology journal could provide a valuable medium for publicizing the issues, as well as reporting new thinking on how the matters should be dealt with.

### The shape of SAJG

It is difficult to anticipate at the outset what shape SAJG will eventually take. This shape will be determined by the response from readers and contributors as time goes by. We welcome feedback from readers, as we are keen to learn how

we can improve the format of the journal and make it more appealing and useful to them.

Although the journal's focus is on gerontology in southern Africa, it is hoped that authors in other parts of Africa and overseas will contribute to the journal. Important practical and policy lessons can be learnt from colleagues working in other parts of the world. In the past policy formulation in South Africa has suffered because of a lack of an international perspective. Alternative options and solutions pioneered in other countries may find new applications in South Africa during the transformation period. It is important that new knowledge, both indigenous and from abroad, be brought to gerontologists and researchers in the region. To this end the journal has an important role to play.

### This issue

The second number of SAJG again presents knowledge on ageing and the aged which can be useful in the development of better practices and the formulation of better policies in southern African countries. A focus of the articles in this number is on housing and living arrangements.

**Nyanguru** and **Peil** writing on Zimbabwe give a finely detailed description of the housing situation of the elderly population using survey material. They draw on comparisons with other developing contexts to place the Zimbabwean housing situation in perspective. At the outset, the authors note that the impact of disability on the elderly is directly related to the nature and quality of housing. In conclusion to their overview of urban and rural housing circumstances, they recommend a more appropriate housing policy for the elderly which makes provision for home maintenance and home-help services to assist the elderly to stay in their homes.

**Møller** re-analyses data collected for South Africa's baseline study of the elderly to explore the possible benefits for South Africa's elderly when they live with adult children. Her comparative case studies are based on the assumption that black elders might prefer to live with sons as traditional custom dictates and whites would usually choose to live independently according to Western custom.

**Chen** systematically explores the question of which children co-reside with elderly parents in Taiwan using a large national database and sophisticated multivariate analyses. He also raises the question whether filial piety is on the decline when children no longer co-reside with their parents.

The articles by Chen and Møller are revised versions of twin papers presented at a Sino-South African symposium held in Cape Town during October 1992. Chen's data constraints forced him to review Taiwanese living arrangements for the elderly from the adult-child perspective, while Møller's data constraints dictated the elderly parent perspec-

tive. Both authors point to the need to include both parent and child perspectives in future research (cf. Speare & Avery, 1993).

Readers will be struck by the many similarities but also the differences in the housing situations and living arrangements described in the three articles referred to above. The southern African and Taiwanese study contexts have in common a background of turbulent historical developments, rapid urbanization, and belief in the notion of filial piety. In describing the different research contexts the authors remark on the strong influence of the recent historical past in shaping housing choice and changing patterns of living arrangements. In Zimbabwe and South Africa, rapid urbanization, held in check for many years by restrictive influx control policy, has changed the pattern of housing and living arrangements. Chen notes that geographic mobility of children has dramatically altered living arrangements for the elderly in Taiwan. The southern African researchers comment on the generally high level of satisfaction with housing despite objective shortcomings.

Both in southern Africa and Taiwan it is feared that filial piety may become a victim of rapid social change. Chen worries that the lax visiting behaviour of younger Taiwanese might be a sign of waning filial piety. Møller finds subtle signs in her data that rapid urbanization has damaged the caring image of the co-resident black household.

The onus may be on the researcher to look for new concepts and approaches to better assess the consequences of rapid change for intergenerational relations. Chen's review of the situation in Taiwan provides many instructive pointers for African researchers. His research demonstrates that filial piety can undergo transformation in time and may be more resilient than hitherto recognized. Many African readers of *SAJG* may be unfamiliar with a caring principle which was formerly a common living arrangement in Taiwan. "Meal rotation" allows siblings to share in the care of their ageing parents. This flexible caring situation probably occurs in Africa but has not been formally registered by local researchers.

Regarding redefinitions of conventional concepts, Chen sees in new visiting practices the continuation of the traditional norm of filial piety. His research found that parents who lived alone were visited more frequently by their children.

Thus visiting practices are employed as a revised indicator of filial piety.

The last article in this issue picks up a subject relating to quality of life—a topic introduced in an article in the first issue of *SAJG*. Authors Gillespie and Louw wish to re-open the debate on activity and quality of life. They pose the provocative question: Does a decline in activity in the elderly really dampen morale?

Preliminary results from the pilot study undertaken by the authors reported in the article yielded inconclusive results. However the pilot study involved only a small sample and is presented to make the point and whet our appetite for further research and debate.

In support of Gillespie and Louw's call to re-open the debate on the activity question we contribute further South African evidence which allows for various interpretations.

- In a study of 253 social pensioners in KwaZulu conducted in 1983-84, an activity index correlated positively with various measures of life satisfaction (Møller, 1988). The original intention was to offer these results as counterevidence. On a second inspection of the data it had to be admitted that the measure of activity used in the study tapped social participation activities as well as purely physical ones.
- Unpublished results from a more recent study of 300 three-generation households in Soweto and Durban's Umlazi and KwaMashu are similarly inconclusive. Although 74 % of the grandparents in the households agreed that "It is dignified for grandparents to sit and rest most of the time", 95 % also endorsed the statement that "Active older people are happier than those who just sit around". The grandparents' viewpoints were echoed by their teenage grandchildren and adult children.

Other *SAJG* readers and researchers may want to take up the challenge offered by Gillespie and Louw to join the debate on the activity issue in a rejoinder or a letter to the editor.

## References

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