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Postscript

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Postscript

Kees Knipscheer
Vrije Universiteit
Amsterdam, the Netherlands

This issue reflects ongoing discussions by a diverse group of social scientists who worked together during their residency at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies. A number of disciplines were represented: sociology, psychology, economics, and cultural anthropology. It goes without saying that the varied disciplinary backgrounds of the group resulted in a broad array of topics and points of view. However, all members shared an interest in the social integration of older adults: their embeddedness in micro and macro social contexts, from marriage to family and personal social networks, work, community, and social institutions.

In this postscript, I will not summarize all the contributions in this special issue. Rather, I would like to draw the attention of readers to some specific, interesting findings and issues they raise. As a member of the group and starting from the central concept, social integration, I ask, What did we learn about the social integration of older adults, as reflected in the articles that were conceived through our collaboration?

Social Integration and the Macro Social Context

Juxtaposing integration and segregation, Hagestad and Uhlenberg discuss institutional age segregation. This phenomenon occurs when the principles and norms that define a social institution include chronological age as an eligibility criterion for participation. The authors express concern that age segregation reduces cross-age contact and network creation, which in turn deprives older adults of important support and socialization. Their discussion raises the issue of possible social policies that might reduce segregation and enhance integration.

Author's Note: I would like to thank the issue editors for their support in composing this postscript. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kees Knipscheer, Vrije Universiteit, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social-Cultural Sciences, De Boelelaan 1081, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands; e-mail: cpm.knipscheer@fsw.vu.nl.

Differences in policy contexts are a key theme in Ginn and Fast's contribution. They investigate the possibilities for and constraints on midlife adults (aged 50 to 69 years) to achieve social integration via employment or other activities, such as involvement with family and friends and providing care and support to other generations. Their analysis of attitudinal data on preferences from 20 countries shows the tension experienced by employed midlife adults between the time demands of their jobs and their wish to spend more time with family and friends and on leisure activities. Furthermore, they illustrate how social policy significantly affects the options open to individuals. Welfare policies influence the actual employment status of older men and women as well as the timing of retirement. Social-democratic northern European countries allow maximum choice to midlife workers by combining available exit pathways from work with policies that facilitate reemployment. In contrast, the Mediterranean countries have strict rules that create age barriers in the labor market for older adults in such a way that women's work preferences cannot be realized. The same rules make early state pensions available mainly to men. Welfare states also differ in the extent to which they support individuals (mainly women) who seek to combine employment with family obligations. Thus, country-specific institutional settings can both constrain and expand the opportunities for older men and women to decide for themselves, weighing the costs and the benefits of different kinds of social integration, in different life domains.

Themes of gender and welfare regimes are also addressed by Fast, Dosman, and Moran. These authors investigate cohort differences and cohort changes during the period from 1970 to 1998 in time spent by midlife and older men and women in paid and unpaid work. They argue that performing a substantial amount of productive unpaid work (domestic work, caring for others, volunteering) that meets the needs of the persons themselves or others in their social context will enhance social integration. Using Canadian data, they show that, as expected, time spent on paid work declines in later life, and it declines more rapidly with each successive survey year. However, how much time was spent on paid and unpaid productive activities—providing varying types of social integration—proved to be conditioned by welfare regime contexts within which persons found themselves.

Taking us to a very different region, Oppong sees the lack of welfare protection as compounding difficulties facing older adults in many parts of Africa. The current economic hardships, the migration of young people, and, last but not least, the HIV/AIDS pandemic affect established patterns of interwoven institutional networks of marriage, family, and informal welfare and threaten integrative community bonds. More and more, the responsibility

for guaranteeing an integrative, secure environment for young children is exclusively in the hands of grandmothers with limited resources. In the sub-Saharan region of Africa, this type of grandmotherly care provision is viewed by governments and nongovernmental organizations as the most culturally appropriate, sustainable, and cost effective approach to a mounting social problem. In contrast to official assumptions that the "African extended family" is in charge, the reality is that grandmothers are doing the bulk of the caring for orphaned grandchildren. In addition to shouldering this responsibility, the women need to find ways to support themselves, in policy contexts in which pensions are rare or nonexistent. Oppong challenges the view that the efforts of grandmothers strengthen social integration and describes families and communities in which integrative forces are being fragmented or shattered.

Social Integration and the Micro Social Context

As noted above, Hagestad and Uhlenberg make a plea for more attention to the negative consequences of socially created separations between age groups. Institutional, spatial, and cultural age segregation at the macro level is mirrored in the age homogeneity of individuals' social networks. Older adults are, to a large extent, living their lives separated from persons in earlier phases of the life course, except in the family sphere. The authors express concern about the dominance of age-homogeneous social relationships in the networks of current and future cohorts with high proportions of childless individuals. Will childless adults be integrated and feel embedded?

The link between parental status and social integration in cohorts born during the first part of the 20th century is the focus of the article by Dykstra. She shows that older adults who never had children, whether residing in Amsterdam or in Berlin, whether male or female, nominated fewer persons as network members, on average, than individuals who were parents. The childless were also more likely to include extended kin in their networks, but this greater activation of kin ties did not match the numbers of descendants (children, children-in-law, and grandchildren) in the networks of parents. Moreover, those who never had children did not have extensive friendship networks. It appears that Hagestad and Uhlenberg's concern is warranted: The childless might be vulnerable in late life.

Although there may be agreement on how small and age-homogeneous networks represent constraints and vulnerabilities, de Jong Gierveld and Perlman stress the positive contributions of special, long-standing age-homogeneous

friendships in the networks of older adults. These authors focus on friendships that have lasted for more than 20 or 30 years in the United States and the Netherlands. Moves, divorce, and widowhood increase the risks of losing touch with friends, as well as the frequency of contacts. Macro-level factors also affect the durability of long-standing ties. The fine-tuned public transport system and greater geographic stability in the Netherlands facilitate the maintenance of bonds. In the United States, the availability of a car is a critical factor. Although long-standing friendships sometimes have the quality of being “dormant” bonds, these relationships prove to be activated and highly significant in times of need.

In work on the integrative functions of personal relationships, a high-quality marriage bond is usually considered to be an integrative kernel and a cornerstone of personal networks. Stevens and Westerhof raise the possibility that the partner bond can also have a *privatizing* effect, encapsulating couples in isolated dyads and blocking possibilities for integration in a wider circle of kin and nonkin relationships. Comparing samples from Germany and the Netherlands, they draw a continuum of social involvement. At one end are German men, for whom marriage appears to be strongly privatizing. Dutch women are at the opposite end. For them, marriage is strongly related to social integration. Their findings raise questions about contrasts between the two societies that may explain the differences. Would we concentrate on cultural factors, contrasts in welfare and work policies, or differences in community characteristics?

Summing Up

As we have seen, the articles in this issue invite reflection on several characteristics of the social networks of older adults: age heterogeneous versus age homogeneous, with a partner versus without a partner, with versus without children. Nearly all the contributions illustrate the enduring significance of gender. We hope that the issue will inspire further explorations of how different levels of social integration are related in the integration of older adults, from welfare regime types to age-based social institutions, from community to networks and dyadic ties.

Kees Knipscheer is an emeritus professor of social gerontology at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He received his master's degree and PhD in sociology from Tilburg Universiteit and was appointed in 1989 at Vrije Universiteit. Between 1990 and 2004, he was one of the principal investigators of the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam.