Personal relationships in late life: An introduction to the special issue[1]

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Improvements in living standards have brought unprecedented increases in longevity (Vaupel, 2010). In industrialized societies, most people can expect to celebrate their eightieth birthday and many beyond that. Moreover, epidemiological studies consistently show that personal relationships are among the best predictors of a long life. Large, controlled, prospective studies show that personal relationships reduce mortality independently of potentially confounding factors such as socioeconomic status, health-risk behaviors, use of health services, and personality (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Uchino, 2004). Despite their importance, research on late-life personal ties lags behind scholarship on early and middle adulthood. For example, of the 135 articles published during 2007, 2008 and 2009 in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (disregarding the special issues), only one article had an older-adult sample. Eighty percent of the articles' samples included people under the age of 60, 13% had samples which included the 60-plus group, and for 7% of the articles, age was either unknown or irrelevant (e.g., a unit of analysis other than the individual).

Although personal relationship researchers have largely neglected late-life issues,

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ageing scholars have not placed older adults' social worlds at center stage either. Health issues dominate the study of late life quality (Walker & Mollenkopf, 2007). Concerns about the costs of an ageing population and how older adults can maintain self-reliance have clear policy relevance. Elusive issues such as older adults' social embeddedness have received little attention. Clearly, the decision to devote a special issue of the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* to personal relationships and older adults is a timely one.

Late life is typically framed in terms of reduced social opportunities (e.g., a lack of structured daily activities stemming from employment), progressive deteriorative health changes, and increasing dissimilarity from mainstream adult life. Not surprisingly, being old is generally equated with being socially isolated and lonely (Dykstra, 2009). The general public considers loneliness a very serious problem for older adults (National Council on the Aging, 2000; Tornstam, 2007; Victor et al., 2002). In a 2004 US survey, 13% of those aged 65 and over agreed that loneliness was a serious problem for them personally (Abramson & Silverstein, 2006). Estimates from the general public were much higher: 61% of 18–34-year olds, 47% of 35–64-year olds, and 33% of those aged 65 and above considered loneliness a serious problem for most people over 65. Even older adults themselves overestimate the extent of loneliness among older people, although less so than among those under 65.

The adherence to the stereotype of lonely elderly (Tornstam, 2007) underscores the need for research showing that older people can adapt, enjoy life, and prosper. The first contribution to this special issue by Gloria Luong, Susan Charles, and Karen Fingerman nicely meets these requirements. Upon reviewing recent research on age differences in relationship quality, they conclude, contrary to popular belief, that personal relationships become "better with age." Studies in the review use diverse methods (e.g., large scale surveys, vignettes studies, and naturalistic data collections). Several mechanisms underlie older adults' positive relationship experiences: proactive efforts to limit interactions to the most

psychologically rewarding, cognitive biases that focus attention on positive rather than negative relationship encounters, and compassionate behavior from younger relationship partners.

Ageing is both biologically determined and socially constructed. The ageing experience is structured by the historical period and national context within which one ages and acquires a lifetime of experiences, cultural dispositions, and social and economic opportunities (Ryder, 1965). Nan Stevens and Theo van Tilburg aptly illustrate cohort differences in ageing in their work on friendship. Their 17-year longitudinal study in the Netherlands shows that friendship becomes increasingly important across cohorts. Younger cohort members were more likely to maintain friends as they aged than were older cohorts members. The authors attribute the increasing importance of friendship to increased relational competencies and improved structural conditions for making and keeping friends, which in turn are linked to processes such as detraditionalization and individualization, expansion of educational opportunities, and women's increased labor force participation

Five of the eight special issue articles are devoted to the partner relationship, reflecting the centrality of this tie (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). In their article on second couplehood in Israel, Chaya Koren and Zvi Eisikovits articulate the cultural specificity of ageing. The authors' describe Israel as poised between tradition and modernity, where normative guidelines for entry into a new partnership in late life are more strongly mixed when compared with other western societies. This ambiguity is reflected in the blend of secrecy and openness new couples employ when interacting with network members.

Pamela Lannutti's article on older same-sex couples' experiences with legally recognized same-sex marriage reveals the necessity of studying relationships in a historical context (Elder, 1995). Older adults in her Massachusetts (US) sample experienced tremendous changes in the legal and social status of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer

Americans, starting when homosexuality was defined as a mental disorder, the 1970s women's liberation movement, the 1980s AIDS crisis, and the 1990s politics of visibility. Lannutti skillfully relates experiences and marriage decisions to the timing of the possibility of same-sex marriage in the couples' lives. For some, same-sex marriage designated increased security and recognition, for others it was unnecessary given previous commitment decisions.

Both the previous two articles involved interviewing both relational partners. Linda Ko and Megan Lewis also use data from older husbands and wives, but explicitly focus on the interdependence between "his" and "her" reports of giving support, receiving support, and depression. Using the actor-partner interdependence model and data from the American Changing Lives of Older Couples study, the authors show that the salubrious effects of giving support (as reported by the giver) are mediated by perceptions of received support. Ko and Lewis make a solid contribution to the research literature by unraveling mechanisms underlying how support mitigates depressive symptomatology.

The shared history in long-term marriages is central to Sara Moorman's consideration of end-of-life care wishes. She focuses on husbands' and wives' reports of feeling understood in conversations about end-of-life health care preferences. "Feeling understood" implies confidence that the spouse will fulfill treatment preferences should he or she become incapacitated. Moorman's study is relevant given health care providers' recommendations to discuss treatment preferences with family members. Her findings show that relationship quality (as reported by the primary respondent) is associated with the perception that end-of-life care wishes are understood.

Dementia has recently been identified as the 21st century's single most significant health and social crisis (Wimo & Prince, 2010) and primarily affects older people. Most dementia patients are cared for by family members, who are affected personally, emotionally, financially, and socially. Norm O'Rourke, Amy Claxton, Anthony Kupferschmidt, JuliAnna

Smith, and B. Lynn Beattie thoughtfully focus on the well-being of the caregiving spouse. Their one-year longitudinal study in Vancouver, Canada, shows that idealizing one's spouse and relationship is advantageous for caregivers of Alzheimer patients. The authors view marital idealization as a means to deal with an existential threat to the marriage.

By studying older adults, we gain insight into our future selves (Harper, 2006). In families, grandparents and parents serve as role models for younger generations. In the final article, Todd Goodsell, Jim Bates, and Andrew Behnke draw on socialization principles in their creative analysis of images of fatherhood embedded in grandparents' family stories. Images of fatherhood vary by grandparent and grandchild gender. Fathers as good providers were a key theme in stories reported by grandsons, whereas the need to compensate for fathers' failures received greater attention in stories reported by granddaughters.

I hope that the research in this special issue will, first, encourage relationship scholars to more frequently consider context in their research, paying attention to shifting political, economic, and cultural landscapes. Second, this research should serve as a reminder that agency and proactivity in personal relationships are not restricted to the early phases of life. Finally, I hope that these studies provide inspiration to those aiming to determine how personal relationships help older adults maintain an autonomous and fulfilling lifestyle.

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