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Aging and Older Men: Thoughts, Reflections and Issues: Introduction

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Efforts across many fields engaged in addressing the population of aging in this country have tended to create a nearly homogeneous cohort that often does not recognize the heterogeneity of aging across gender, race, ethnicity, geography, socioeconomic status, cultural and sexual orientation. The diversity within aging members of our society brings about many variations and unique issues that need to be recognized and explored by policy makers and practitioners. Among these is aging related to gender, which has tended to pay much less attention to men than women. Content analysis of journals and texts on aging has revealed a significant lack of content on men, in particular, aging and elderly men (Kosberg, 2002; Tobin, 1997). This lack of a significant knowledge base places policy formation and practitioners at a distinct disadvantage when developing policy, programs and services for aging men. This emphasis is not an attempt to replace the work being done on aging women but to augment that work with equal efforts focused on the issues of men and aging men. Kosberg (2002) notes that this “. . . responsibility emanates not from a ‘power’ perspective, but from concern for the overlooked needs of any particular group” (p. 37). Likewise, significant attention must be given to the heterogeneity and diversity of men’s lives. Differential experiences are not only evident between men and women but exists as a consequence of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic, educational and historical factors that impact the experience of aging for men (Thompson, 1994; Gonyea, 1994).

These differential contexts for aging men need to be studied, explored and entered into the literature.

This special issue is an effort to contribute to this needed content. It evolved through men and women meeting and sharing their interests in aging while acknowledging the dearth of material available on men and aging men. In particular, it was noted in discussion among the future authors in this collection that what material does exist about men tends to focus on them as perpetrators of violence, as secondary players in family issues, or as living privileged lives in contrast to women (Fleming, 1998; Kosberg, 2002; Thompson, 1994). This collection of articles provides additional knowledge to understanding aging men as complex and diverse and with particular issues and assets.

The first article by *Jordan I. Kosberg* examines the breadth of special issues and challenges facing older men, including men from diverse backgrounds. He provides a helpful overview of the physical and psychosocial challenges facing aging men and the nature of available resources. Importantly, the article addresses the issue of engaging men and reaching out to them that is in itself a significant issue for policy makers and practitioners. Understanding men's help-seeking behavior or tendency to not seek out help is a key element of any effort to engage men in services that can be helpful to them and their families. The article advocates for increased attention to the needs of older men and means by which formal services and programs might attempt to reach them.

Gary L. Villereal and *Alonzo Cavazos* examine the changes in machismo behaviors in Mexican/American men as they age. The authors note that, while the socially negative connotations of bravado and suppressed emotions are the hallmarks of machismo, machismo also encompasses a sense of protecting the honor and welfare of the family, having a strong work ethic, being a good provider, and living up to responsibilities (Galanti, 2003). Machismo is related to youth, according to the authors, and there is a significant shift away from machismo as men age. Older men are more willing to undertake household chores and grandchild-care responsibilities than their younger counterparts, and tend to view relationships with women on a more equal footing. The authors conclude by stating that more research is needed to study

the power dynamics and roles of Mexican/American husbands as they age.

Karen Bullock reports on the findings of a major study of grandparents raising grandchildren (Bullock, 2004). She has taken this opportunity to look closely at the role of elderly men as caretakers of their grandchildren. Little is known about the contributions and adjustments that older men make in their effort to raise grandchildren. The study includes a diverse group of men with the majority being African-American men. She reports that these men report a greater sense of powerlessness than do grandmothers and experience increased sense of social isolation. Men are not accustomed and are not prepared to provide many of the daily activities and parenting tasks. This study suggests that further research on grandfathers in the role of parenting grandchildren needs to provide further knowledge on how to assist and support these aging men in this new role.

What does it really mean to be an aging man? How old is old? Do men celebrate or mourn (or both) changes in their physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental beings as they age? *Robert Blundo and Tamera Estes* bring pathos, humor and reflection into their article that recounts stories from men who face the aging process. They explore by means of a collection of men's anecdotes on life as they turn "sixty or something." They suggest that aging, particularly of men, as a social construct needs to be reexamined as society's concept of age and aging change with technology that increases longevity.

The article by *Eddie Davis* explores the notion of social injustice as it relates to African American men, Euro-American men and the American Social Security fund. Davis reviews the historical development of the Social Security benefits plan for American workers, drawing the conclusion that, because of Jim Crow laws, Black Codes and white preferential hiring practice, African American men were likely to receive Social Security benefits than their Euro-American male counterparts in the past. Additionally, statistically, African American men's life expectancy is considerably lower than that of Euro-American men, therefore greatly reducing the likelihood that they will be able to draw Social Security benefits for any length of time after retirement, despite the fact that African-American men have substantially paid into the Social

Security system. Finally, Davis tackles the morass of proposed policy changes in the Social Security program as Baby Boomers approach retirement age in 2008.

Gregory Gross and *Robert Blundo* have broached an important topic that is seldom discussed even though it is a significant part of our present culture in this society today—aging male sexuality. They have taken this opportunity to look at the social construction of masculinity in our Western society and the impact of medicalization and commodification are having on an aging man's sense of masculinity as a consequence of erectile dysfunction. Little if any serious discussion is included in the social work and social policy literature that address the significance of the construction, of masculinity in reference to sexuality and sexual dysfunction much less the implications of this on aging men. The demands being placed on men to maintain a sense of dominance and control in a society that disrespects aging is explored and offers and opportunity to bring these issues into the literature.

Lenard Kaye and *Jennifer Crittenden* provide a context for appreciating the uniqueness of male gender roles and expectations in hindering both the utilization of social services by aging men and the practitioner's provision of social services to aging men. They explore eight specific issues facing aging men in their attempts to manage life circumstances and how policy and practice can learn to address these issues. The concerns needing to be addressed in developing policy and interventions include areas such as the loss of a spouse, retirement, physical health changes, depression and suicide, substance abuse, sexuality, and older men as victims of abuse. In order for social policy, training of practitioners, and interventions responsive to aging men, considerable knowledge building and dissemination needs to take place.

Deborah Bowen's interview with Albert White Hat, Sr., and Sylvan White Hat, Sr., elder men from the Lakota tribe of the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, seeks to honor an indigenous culture and belief system while comparing that belief system to Saleebey's (1992) strengths-based model of social work practice. Lakota men historically were strong in the sense of emotional and spiritual strength vested in family ties and a spiritual and physical connectedness to everything in the universe. Acculturation and forced dependence on the majority culture's welfare and

economic system has ostensibly disenfranchised Lakota men of their outward strength, as evidenced by alcoholism, poverty, unemployment and lack of educational resources. However, Bowen found that strength, honor, integrity, and tremendous hope for future generations is alive and well among Lakota men.

In the final commentary and discussion, *Roberta Greene* and *Michael Wright* make note of the contributions and pose a series of questions raised by the articles for further exploration and research.

These articles demonstrate the wide range of areas and content that can help provide a growing understanding of the nature of aging for men and the many issues facing diverse groups of aging men. It is the authors' hope that these readings will stimulate further exploration and interest in looking into the lives of aging men. Out of this effort will come better policy and practice innovations that will benefit men and their families.

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