Perspectives on the Integration of Older Men and Women

Jenny de Jong Gierveld
Vrije Universiteit
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute
The Hague, the Netherlands
Gunhild O. Hagestad
Agder University College
Kristiansand, Norway
Norwegian Social Research
Oslo, Norway

This introduction to the special issue "Social Integration in Later Life" addresses the background ideas and concepts of the articles encompassing research into the extent and quality of older adults' integration in organizations, family, and personal networks. A rough conceptual framework is provided, distinguishing between types of integration and different units of analysis. The macro level of society and its social institutions as well as smaller groups and the social locations of individuals are addressed. On a macro level, integration and segregation are juxtaposed, building on classic discussions of integration, as well as recent ideas about social resources, welfare states, and rekindled considerations of age segregation. At the individual level, the concepts of integration and isolation and the subjective assessments of embeddedness and loneliness are contrasted.

Keywords: social integration; older adults; social isolation; segregation; embeddedness; loneliness

Policy makers across the Western world are currently dealing with the effects of population aging. Governments, especially in European countries, focus on questions such as, Will we be able to afford pension schemes in the future? How can we finance the rising costs of public health care that will result from increased demand as populations age? Social scientists, in the meantime, are discussing the broader impact of aging, for individuals,

families, and societies. In this discourse, issues of integration have been central since the early days of social gerontology. As Rosow (1967:8) pointed out in a classic volume on old age, "The most significant problems of older people . . . are intrinsically social. The basic issue is that of their social integration" (p. 8). In this collection of articles, we ask, Are older people in societies with aging populations in a state of integration and embeddedness, or are they segregated, isolated, and lonely? How, and to what degree, are they integrated in society, and what are the extent and the quality of older adults' integration and embeddedness in social organizations, the family, and personal social networks? Were Guillemard and Rein (1993) right when they stated that "with sufficient pensions, old age potentially becomes a phase of autonomy with full social participation" (p. 471)? Their basically optimistic view stands in contrast to some well-known pessimistic descriptions of contemporary life, especially in the United States. With regard to old age, there are books such as *Another Country: Negotiating the Emotional Terrain of Our Elders* (Pipher 1999). More generally, since the mid-20th century, a series of books have painted rather bleak pictures of modern society: *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman, Glazer, and Denney 1950), *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (Slater 1970), *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al. 1985), *The Good Society* (Bellah et al. 1991) and *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000). A key message across these volumes is that individualistic communities such as those in North America, oriented toward individual achievement and superficial relationships, are insufficiently oriented toward social integration (Johnson and Mullins 1987; Rokach et al. 2001). It has also been suggested that communities in Europe might do better in that social relationships there have been shown to be more oriented toward social integration and social support (Rifkin 2004; Van Tilburg et al. 1998). Consistent with such potential differences between social life on the two continents, it has been found that residents of the United States are more prone to risks of social isolation and loneliness than people living in many parts of Europe (Brehm et al. 2002:402). On the other hand, there are

authors such as Künemund (2000), who discussed Germany and other states where only a minority of those aged 55 years and over engage in integrative activities.

In this collection of articles, we address several aspects of social integration on the basis of our research and discussions among the authors. In 2002 and 2003, the authors of these articles participated in a theme research group, convened by Jenny de Jong Gierveld, at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences, located in Wassenaar, the Netherlands. The program group was oriented toward the social aspects of aging, especially the functioning of social institutions, cultural values, and norms, and the social networks that shape older adults' integration in society. The research focused mainly on the situation in European societies and the United States and Canada. These countries are all characterized by a certain level of social security, including pension plans for older adults. Structural and cultural variations between countries and regions of the world were also considered, however. The group was challenged by one member's reports of developing nations in Africa, most of which place economic and care responsibilities exclusively within the realm of the family.

Types of Social Integration

Since the early days of social science, social integration has been addressed both at the macro level of society and its social institutions (e.g., Durkheim and Marx) and with reference to smaller groups and the social location of individuals (e.g., Simmel and Tönnies). On an individual level, integration has been discussed objectively, as an observable characteristic of people, or subjectively, as individuals' own experiences. In our articles, we address both levels and make some conceptual distinctions. At the macro level, we juxtapose integration with segregation, but we also build on Landecker's (1951, 1952) classic discussions of dimensions of integration. At the individual level, we contrast *social integration* and *social isolation*. In subjective assessments, the corresponding contrast is between *social embeddedness* and *loneliness*.

Landecker (1951, 1952) also suggested that concepts of social integration are applicable to both a social system as a whole and to smaller units within it. He outlined four subtypes of integration. First, *cultural integration* ranges from extreme consistency to a high degree of inconsistency among cultural standards within the same unit. Second, *communicative integration* involves shared meaning or communication. A system can be characterized

by free flow of communication or the presence of communication barriers. Such barriers, which might be based on age, race, socioeconomic status, religion, or residence, increase the risks of the segregation of subgroups and the social isolation of members. Landecker (1952) illustrated the concept:

> In the city . . . weaknesses in the interpersonal aspects of communicative integration can be seen in the anonymity, social isolation, and loneliness of the individual. On the other hand, for the inter-group aspects of communicative integration in the city, the study of group stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination would be relevant. (p. 395)

The third type of integration, *functional integration*, concerns the exchange of services and varies from extreme interdependence to a high degree of self-sufficiency. Connecting cultural standards and the behaviors of people, the fourth type, *normative integration*, is formulated as the degree to which the standards of a group constitute effective norms for the behavior of its members. Normative integration varies from an extremely high degree of conformity to cultural standards to a high rate of deviance.

Integration is mostly viewed as a positive phenomenon and isolation as a negative phenomenon. However, more nuanced points of view are possible. Being integrated in one group might make people vulnerable because it blocks alternative social anchorings. In this issue, two examples of this phenomenon are addressed, one with reference to partner relationships and the other in the wider family. Moreover, it is possible to find instances in which integration is blocked in a group as a whole but functions well within a subgroup, as is frequently recognized with regard to minority groups and subcultures.

Combining the types of integration, the levels of groups, interconnections between groups and subgroups, objective characteristics and subjective experiences, and positive and negative aspects would lead to an unwieldy typology. No good purpose is served by using such a large matrix of combinations. Here, we select some constellations of integration and examine their usefulness in understanding the lives of older adults. Some of the cases presented here are at the macro level and some at the individual level, and some move across levels. The contributions focus more on communicative, functional, and cultural rather than on normative types of integration.

Integration at the Macro Level

In the first section of this issue, attention is paid to social policy, institutions, values, and norms that shape the integration, segregation, embeddedness,

and isolation of older adults. This has been a neglected topic in recent gerontological research (Hagestad and Dannefer 2001). In focusing on adults in the second half of life, we investigate their sociostructural opportunities to interact with others from different age groups in paid work, unpaid work, formal and informal organizations, and building and maintaining personal networks.

Socioeconomic conditions are important determinants of the possibilities of older adults to be integrated in the ongoing activities of society. For those who leave the labor market through retirement, the basic level of income transfers via pension plans and social services are decisive in this respect. It is well known that such policies and programs vary between countries and over time, more specifically according to the nature of welfare regimes (Attias-Donfut and Arber 2000). In some welfare states, social protection systems are the main providers of income and care to the older generation and largely relieve families of such responsibilities. Esping-Andersen (1999) saw income transfers as the organizing principle of modern welfare states and related transfers to the risks of poverty and the marginalization of different age groups in society. Poverty among the households of older people vary sharply by social welfare systems across European Union nations. In 2002, for example, they ranged from 7% to 8% in Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands to 45% of elderly households in Portugal (Avramov 2002:121).

Recently, the concept of social capital has been widely used to describe the resources available to groups of individuals (Coleman 1990). Social capital refers to levels of trust, norms and sanctions, and information channels within a social structure. Differences in socioeconomic resources, especially the level of socioeconomic *inequalities* in resources within populations, are related to well-being. At the aggregate level, strong associations have been found between socioeconomic inequalities and morbidity, mortality, feelings of deprivation, and loneliness (Kawachi et al. 1997). O'Rand (2001) postulated that inequalities within populations have socioeconomic and *psychosocial* components. In addition to the direct pathway connecting income inequality at the group level and individuals' well-being through their individual socioeconomic resources, there is an indirect pathway by which group-level inequalities reduce trust and increase people's perceptions of relative deprivation, leading to negative outcomes (O'Rand 2001:207).

An example of how culture may hinder access to basic aspects of the quality of life is ageist attitudes. Even today, very few employers see older men and women who are eager to work in old age as a potential pool of labor (McCann and Giles 2002, Remery et al. 2003). Restrictive attitudes

about the participation of older adults, or ageism, are not found exclusively in the field of labor but also relate to access to volunteer work, boards of organizations, and so on. Uhlenberg (2000:261-62) defined an age-integrated structure as one that does not restrict participation on the basis of chrono-logical age and one in which cross-age interactions take place. In both tra-ditional and modern societies, age integration is needed if individuals of all ages are to be "productive" participants in society. Note that *productive* is used not only in an economic sense here but also in the broader sense of contributing to family, organizations, or local communities.

It has been argued that retirement homes, retirement communities, or age-restricted organizations may increase social activity and help expand social networks among older adults, thus affecting social integration (Lawton 1980). But these institutions also promote extreme age segregation toward the end of life. In many ways, older people encounter a society that restricts opportunities for developing age-integrated personal social net-works (Uhlenberg and de Jong Gierveld 2004).

Bridging Levels: The Case of Transfers

Recently, several social scientists have investigated the relation between characteristics of society at large and familial integration. Kohli et al. (2000), for example, investigated social integration within the family and its rela-tionship to financial transfers at societal level. They argued that taxes and premiums paid by generations active in the labor market guarantee the finan-cial well-being of older adults, which in turn facilitates communicative and functional integration in the second half of life. On the basis of studies in the United States, Israel, France, Germany, Norway, and Sweden, Kohli (2005) described the family as an institution in which redistribution takes place, through inter vivos family transfers, mostly downward from the older to the younger generations and often targeted to the more needy children. He sug-gested that institutional variation across welfare systems creates different *transfer regimes* that affect older adults' social status and ability to maintain reciprocity and offers varying protection from risks of isolation.

Integration at the Individual Level

With increasing age, people's integration into society on the basis of their roles—especially in marriage, parenthood, and employment—changes. In the field of gerontology, several authors have addressed this process as

one of increasing *disengagement* and withdrawal (Cumming and Henry 1961). We suggest that losses of roles are reversible to a certain extent: Some older people start new partner relationships after divorce or widow-hood (de Jong Gierveld 2004); others invest in new friendships (Stevens 2001), deepen long-standing friendships, or dedicate more time to support children and grandchildren. At the micro level, social integration is a ques-tion of the extent to which individuals' lives are tied to the lives of others. *Social isolation* refers to the absence of relationships with other people. Thus, social isolation is an *objective*, observable characteristic of a person's situation. The central question here is, To what extent is a person alone? This concept is distinct from *subjective* social isolation, better known as loneliness:

> Loneliness is a situation experienced by the individual as one where there is an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (quality of) certain relationships. This includes situations in which the number of existing relationships is smaller than is considered desirable or admissible, as well as situations where the intimacy one wishes for has not been realized. (de Jong Gierveld 1987:120)

At the individual level, the opposite of loneliness is embeddedness. Earlier research has shown that the sizes of personal networks, and the variability and diversity across relationship types, serve to protect people against loneliness (de Jong Gierveld, Van Tilburg, and Dykstra 2006). Involvement in organizations is helpful, too; for example, church attendance and activities in voluntary associations help prevent or combat isolation and loneliness and increase social integration and embeddedness (Van Tilburg et al. 1998).

This Issue's Contributions to the Study of Social Integration in Later Life

In this issue, we address some aspects of the social integration and embeddedness of older adults in society at large, at the level of formal and informal groups, and via personal social networks. We seek to identify fac-tors that appear to secure integration and embeddedness and those that increase the risk for segregation, isolation, and loneliness. Through a com-parative orientation, we explore the potential impact of social policies, institutional arrangements, culture, and earlier life-course patterns.

Macro-Level Perspectives

The structural and cultural forces at work in age segregation are addressed by Hagestad and Uhlenberg. They argue that the social structuring of age in contemporary Western societies assigns persons who are in different life phases to separate social spheres—institutional, spatial, and cultural—and de facto affects the degree of society's cultural, communicative, and normative integration, threatening the social participation and embeddedness of old and young.

Oppong examines the lives of old people in sub-Saharan Africa. Being confronted with impoverishment, massive labor migration, and the effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, today's older adults face the heavy burden of being the last resort at home, to whom younger generations return at the end of the day. At the same time, the society's cultural, functional, and normative integration is at peril, and traditional social safety nets are disintegrating. These changes have serious consequences for older adults' integration and embeddedness, and their fundamental well-being is in jeopardy.

Ginn and Fast show that social policies not only affect adults' participation in paid work and the timing of their exit from the labor market but also influence engagement in other life domains, such as family and friendships. Welfare regimes are found to have a substantial effect on time preferences and time use, according to data from a comparative survey of 20 countries. Under some regimes, women in particular are blocked from realizing their preferred investment in social roles and relationships.

Time allocation in paid work versus other types of engagements is also a key topic for Fast, Dosman, and Moran. Analyzing time-use data from Canada over the period from 1971 to 1998, they show that social participation in later life changes gradually from being job oriented to being community and family oriented, but with some distinct patterns by age, cohort, and gender.

Perspectives on Social Integration
Through Personal Networks

Although their main focus is on the socially integrative properties of marriage, Stevens and Westerhof also consider cultural and policy contexts. Working in a research tradition that goes back to Durkheim's perspectives on socially integrative properties of marriage, they use survey data from the Netherlands and Germany to compare characteristics of their respondents' marriage bonds in terms of social involvement and companionship. Their data show that the impact of marriage on social integration and loneliness

is different for men and women and also varies significantly between the two countries.

The impact of long-standing, close nonkin relationships on social integration is investigated by de Jong Gierveld and Perlman, who compare social-network data from the United States and the Netherlands. In both countries, many older adults were found to have friendships of long duration. Although these friends, with whom individuals had shared many life events, usually did not live close by, they were an important factor in social integration. Contacts tended to be intensified if help was needed. The data show that long-standing friends feature on the list of important people in older adults' lives.

Kin as well as nonkin relationships are central in the article by Dykstra. The lives of childless older adults are commonly considered to be neither structured nor supported institutionally, as opposed to the lives of parents. The analyses critically evaluate such claims by focusing on pathways into childlessness and the effect of childlessness on the size of personal networks in the Netherlands and Germany. Dykstra finds that parenthood does have a positive effect on social integration.

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Jenny de Jong Gierveld is a professor emeritus in the Faculty of Social Sciences, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and an honorary fellow of the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, The Hague. Her research interests include demographic aspects of aging populations and the relationship between living arrangements, partner relationships, familial embeddedness, and the loneliness of older adults.

Gunhild O. Hagestad was educated both in Norway and the United States and has held academic posts at the University of Chicago, Pennsylvania State University, Northwestern University, and the University of Oslo. Currently, she is a professor of sociology at Agder University College in Kristiansand, Norway, and a senior researcher for Norwegian Social Research in Oslo. The main topics of her research are intergenerational relations and life-course patterns in aging societies.