

## **Intergenerational Relations, Wisdom and Wholeness**

A paper presented to ICUS XXI by  
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### Outline

This paper puts forward the proposition that wisdom has value to younger generations from two viewpoints:

- The learning of life skills and the ability to deal with uncertainty
- Understanding the self and the meaning of life.

The model of the aging mind proposed by Paul Baltes (Baltes, 1993) - which distinguishes cognitive mechanics from cognitive pragmatics - is used, along with other more spiritual views of aging and the connection of wisdom to aging is explored.

In addition, the concept of integration is explored, first as applied to wisdom in individuals, and then as a possible application socially.

### Framework:

The two dimensions of the human mind, cognitive mechanics and cognitive pragmatics, provide a framework for analyzing the mental functions that appear to improve with age and those that appear to decline. Cognitive mechanics is identified with the genetic and neurophysical architecture of the mind, and the base they provide for cognitive functioning, whereas cognitive pragmatics [which is compared to crystallized intelligence] is the dimension in which the enriching and compensating power of knowledge and culture can unfold.

The opportunity for younger people to engage in interaction with older people allows them to see beyond the mental decline associated with cognitive mechanics, as the brain and body age, and engage the dimension of elders that continues to grow and mature with age. Views of aging and death may have profound affects upon how young people live their lives (Erikson, 1985). Structured interactions between young and old (such as those that take place in families, communities or intergenerational programs) allow positive views of aging to develop as young people encounter dimensions of elders that are meaningful.

### Wisdom and Age:

One of the more important aspects of cognitive pragmatics is the development of wisdom. A number of authors suggest that there is an increase in certain types of intelligence with age. Betty Turock (Turock, 1988) refutes the negative stereotype of intellectual decline with age and presents a model that describes the development of integrative thinking, which is consistent with aging and wisdom. Intelligence is shown to grow over the lifespan, with experience and maturity combining to create greater integration of knowledge and affect.

Maria Taranto (Taranto, 1989) states that there is a lot of empirical support linking age and

wisdom, as do Sanford and Rhona Finkel (Finkel, 1991). David Maitland (Maitland, 1987) suggests that certain types of growth and learning can only be realized in later years because they spring from accumulated knowledge and development.

Vivian Clayton makes a distinction between cognitive ability (intelligence) and wisdom and suggests that the domain of knowledge associated with wisdom requires different measuring instruments. She further suggests - consistent with the other authors - that knowledge of human nature (inherent in wisdom) requires skills that differ significantly from those that apply to comprehending the impersonal, non-social realms of knowledge.

### Dimensions of Wisdom:

There are several dimensions of wisdom that may be significant for younger people.

1. *It is integrative*, i.e., the type of thinking associated with wisdom is integrative. Some researchers propose a more integrative approach to wisdom that views it as a synthesis of affect and logic or knowledge, and which involves a strong subjective component (Blanchard, Brannan, and Camp, 1987; Turock, 1988). Baltes, Staudinger and Maerker (1995) refer to one of five criteria for wisdom related knowledge as lifespan contextualization, which is implicitly integrative.

Robert Butler (1963) conceives the life review as a “naturally-occurring universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experience, and particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts; simultaneously, and normally, these revived experiences and conflicts are surveyed and reintegrated....this process helps account for the increased reminiscence of the aged....and that it participates in the evolution of such characteristics as candor, serenity and wisdom among certain of the aged.”

Erik Erikson (1985) emphasizes the emotional integration that characterizes his view of late life development, referring to it as “ego integrity”. He sees in the final stage of life cycle development the fulfillment of the preceding seven stages:

“It is the ego’s accrued assurance of its proclivity for order and meaning. It is a post-narcissistic love of the human ego--not of the self--as an experience that conveys some world order and spiritual sense, no matter how dearly paid for. It is the acceptance of one’s one and only lifecycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted no substitutions: it thus means a new, a different love of one’s parents. It is a comradeship with the ordering ways of distant times and different pursuits. Although aware of the relativity of all the various life styles which have given meaning to human striving, the possessor of integrity is ready to defend the dignity of his/her own life style against all physical and economic threats...”

and:

“Ego integrity, therefore, implies an emotional integration which permits participation by followership as well as an acceptance of the responsibility of leadership.”

He concludes:

“...it seems possible to further paraphrase the relation of adult integrity and infantile trust by saying that healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough

not to fear death.”

Butler’s elder who has successfully navigated the life review and Erikson’s mature adult who has achieved ego integrity appear to be one and the same. They both have attained qualities of character and have developed personalities that have value for younger people in family and society. Their views further underscore the affective dimension of wisdom. Taranto (1989) suggests that most common opinion studies of traits of the wise person report what looks like an affective or personality component of wisdom that identifies an empathic, gentle, peaceful, adaptable, patient, modest person with a sense of humor.

Torbjorn Svensson’s (1991) study of quality of life in older adults concludes that it is not a high intellectual ability that holds great meaning (and thereby adds to the perception of the quality of life) but the possibility of using the abilities the individual possesses. To be able to act, think, and use feelings wisely and to be looked upon as being wise will add to a person’s perception of being successful and thereby add to the perception of quality of life.

2. *Wisdom-related knowledge includes recognition and management of uncertainty*, an attribute of value to younger people, especially those who are at-risk and faced with an uncertain environment. Featherman, Smith and Peterson (1990) propose that adaptive competencies for career expertise (e.g., engineering) may facilitate successful aging after retirement, especially within career lines that routinely test the limits of performance capacity with challenges from uncertain change and ill-structured tasks. They suggest that the *reflective planning orientation* – rather than the rational problem solving approach – may hold similarities to wisdom and aid in post retirement life management. In a similar vein, Baltes, Staudinger and Maerker (1995) list recognition and management of uncertainty as one of their five criteria for wisdom-related knowledge. Blanchard, Brannon and Camp (1987) discuss contextualistic and integrative approaches to the concept of wisdom. In their contextual approach, the individual actively processes an often uncertain environment to make judgements and decisions. This approach places wisdom in the domain of pragmatics of intelligence and illustrates its relationship to one of the fundamental life skills, one that is often highly prized in society.

3. *Wisdom has a dimension of acceptance*: coming to terms with and accepting death; accepting a life that has been lived; and generally accepting what cannot be changed. Butler (1963) expresses this viewpoint in his presentation of the life review; and Erikson (1985), Finkel (1991), Roberts and Cunningham (1990), Fischer (1987) and Blazer (1991) refer to the same idea from slightly different frameworks. Eugene Thomas (1991) in his interviews with Hindu religious renunciates goes a little further: death is not only regarded as an inevitable and natural process that should not be feared or avoided, but as a part of life to be enthusiastically accepted and embraced! Others point out that wisdom involves the acceptance of human limitations and the limits of knowledge and understanding –Achenbaum (1991), and Taranto (1989).

4. *Wisdom involves self transcendence*. Blazer (1991), Achenbaum (1991), and Chinen (1989) list self transcendence as a requirement for growing wiser, and Clayton (1982) suggests that: wisdom-related knowledge transcends the individual’s response; it capitalizes

on certain basic needs and tendencies inherent to all, irrespective of cohort membership and historical period; and actions and judgements guided by wisdom will reflect these basic needs and tendencies of a universal nature.

Serenity, an attribute sometimes associated with wisdom (Butler, 1963; Fischer, 1987), also offers a number of transcendent qualities. Kay Roberts and George Cunningham (1990) who developed and tested an instrument to measure the concept of serenity list ten attributes, which include: the ability to detach from desires and/or emotions; a sense of connectedness with the universe; a trust in the wisdom of the universe; a way to give unconditionally of oneself; and forgiveness of self and others. In everyday situations in some intergenerational programs, acts of caring that are self transcendent are routinely witnessed. For example, the 87 year old Foster Grandparent who overcomes morning aches and pains to visit the abandoned children who expect her, or the older volunteer who takes care of "AIDS babies" in the local hospital knowing that they may die in her arms (New York City Department for the Aging, 1988).

Self transcendence, it seems, may result from different activities in different cultures. Eugene Thomas (1991) makes this point in detailing his dialogue with Hindu renunciates who have taken a pathway of self denial. The Judeo-Christian tradition, however, is rich in examples of self sacrifice as well as self denial. Community service activities for young and old may not only build a civil society but one that is "wiser".

Using the model of a wise older person presented above, especially the dimension of integrity, wisdom is a state of being "whole" as an individual. But what about the need to be whole as a society? If the concept of integration on the individual level is applied to societies, a concept of social integration can be proposed, which links the wisdom of elders with the energy of youth.

Social and family roles of elders vary by culture, but a few are worth mentioning. Red Horse (1980) describes the elderly in Native American extended families, who assume mutual responsibility, and family obligation increases with age. Ego integrity increases with age. Ego integrity and personal identity are achieved through a harmonious balance between work and vital family affairs. Interdependence leads the elderly not into retirement, but into the mainstream of the family. The elders provide life span wisdom through which the family gains a sense of order and permanence, and the fabric of culture is preserved.

The Hispanic grandparents in Emily Israel Raphael's study viewed themselves as possessing wisdom and emotional expertise by virtue of their age and life experience. They did not appear to undergo a dramatic change in role upon retirement, having maintained a balance between work and family throughout their lives. Compared with grandparents in general, as reviewed in other studies, these Hispanic grandparents reported better relationships with their parents, fewer regrets, and less self-doubt about their roles as grandparents. Carolyn Gutowski (1994) lists five areas of regenerative grandparenting as: nurturers, family historians, mentors, models of aging, and sages.

Maitland (1987) identifies societal attitudes that inhibit progress toward successful aging.. He also discusses the need for interconnectedness with others, as well as the need for adequate images of aging.

### The Need for Social Integration

It is important to clarify that intergenerational programs have goals beyond their functional objectives. For example, in a program where adjudicated youth provide needed services to older adults as the functional objective, the primary goal may be exposing the youth to the life history, memories, experiences, “ego integrity” (Erikson, 1985), and “longer time horizons” of the elders they will meet (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1986; Brabazon, 1995). It is also thought that young people can facilitate the life review process in elders (Butler, 1963). *Interaction on any functional base produces the requisite exposure and the benefits to young and old that flow with it.*

However, it is important that a functional base exists. One of the problems sometimes encountered in mentoring programs is dealing with the question “What are we supposed to *do*?” Lack of clarity in this area causes uncertainty and can produce ineffective relationships. If only the functional objectives exist, however, there is no longer an intergenerational program in place, since the services involved could equally be provided by someone from the same age band or a professional.

In an intergenerational agricultural program operated by the New York City Council for Church and Social Action in the 1980’s, older adults who had migrated from the South in and around the second world war helped inner city youth to grow vegetables. Through the course of each summer, the youth learned the following lessons and *values* from the elders, in addition to the actual agricultural skills:

- Immediate gratification is not available
- Patience is needed to produce results
- Nurturing is required for best results

These values were quite different than the survival skills they knew from the streets, and the learning of them was one of the primary goals of the program, which existed in addition to the functional goals, i.e., learning agricultural skills.

*If young and old are brought together on any functionally valuable basis, their life cycle roles become apparent, i.e., the exchange of valuable characteristics between the two populations occurs. Any intergenerational program therefore contributes to social integration<sup>1</sup> in addition to its functional goals, and this should be recognized as a legitimate end in its own right.*

From an organizational viewpoint the processes of “differentiation” (specialization of function or role) and “integration” (coordination of specialized functions) are key to its success. Differentiation has been important since the early history of mankind as individuals have taken on specialized roles in the hunting for or gathering of food, to participation in complex organizations today. The degree of integration is what determines the effectiveness

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<sup>1</sup> Integration is used here in the standard organizational sense: the coordination of organizational functions that have been specialized and “differentiated”. An organization that has no way to re-integrate the functions that are deliberately specialized for the sake of efficiency is doomed to dysfunction.

of the group. For example, in a modern corporation lack of integration between the production and sales departments can lead to more goods being sold than produced, leading to a crisis of customer confidence.

In family and society, the roles of different family members and age bands may be decided by culture, tradition, law or natural selection. It seems likely that “naturally selected” attributes that contribute to the health and continued existence of the group become embedded in or underpin aspects of custom, tradition or law. However, if a family member or age band develop or are forced into a non-contributing or redundant role, “integration” becomes a problem. Only roles that are important to the functioning of the group are addressed in organizational theory concepts of integration. So, defining the roles of elders is critical if there is to be any real integration. Additionally, the roles of elders cannot be easily identified unless there is first some analysis of their life cycle roles or age related attributes (Butler, 1963; Erikson, 1985; Brabazon, 1995).

Some life cycle characteristics of elders are briefly mentioned here with some references to how they are programmatically applied:

- There is an **inclination towards caregiving**, for older men as well as women (Louis Harris and Associates, 1992; Goleman, 1988; Coles, 1993; Heisel, 1993; Freedman, 1994), which is applied in a wide range of programs, such as: child care (Southeast Florida Center on Aging, 1990; Newman, Vander Ven, and Ward, 1992), tutoring (American Association of Retired Persons and the National Association of Partners in Education, 1992), after school programming, mentoring, foster grandparent programs (with at-risk infants, children, teen parents) (Walls, 1987), family preservation and programs that work with families with disabilities (Miller, 1986).
- The **change of power relationships** that takes place with the change in role from parent/child to grandparent/grandchild can be characterized as a reduction in “coercive power”<sup>2</sup> (Mintzberg, 1973; Brabazon, 1995). This change in relationship can also be characterized as a **decrease in “formality of structure”** (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1986; Brabazon, 1995). Both of these changes contribute to the confidante and counseling roles exhibited by elders in relationship to children (Nahemow, 1993). These attributes are applied in programs that require young people - especially those who are at-risk - to confide in mentors and to learn social skills or values from them (New York City Department for the Aging, 1990; Isabella Geriatric Center, 1995; Freedman, 1988; Henkin, Perez-Randall, and Rogers, 1993; Corporation for National Service, 1990).
- The **time horizons of elders** are more extended than other age groups, based upon interpretations of contingency theory (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1986; Brabazon, 1995). These extended time horizons are invaluable in teaching planning skills - skills that many young people have in short supply (New York City Department for the Aging, 1992; Henkin, Perez-Randall, and Rogers, 1993; Freedman, 1988).

Contingency theory is an approach to organizational structure and operations based on the following views (Morgan, 1986):

- i) Organizations are open systems that need careful management to satisfy and balance internal needs and to adapt to external circumstances
- ii) Organizations can be conceived of as interacting subsystems
- iii) The appropriate form of organizing depends on the kind of task or environment with which

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<sup>2</sup>The ability to mediate punishments

one is dealing

iv) Different approaches to management may be necessary to perform different tasks within the same organization.

- The value of **memory and the life review** are widely accepted (Butler, 1963; DeBagno, 1993; Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 1988; New York City Department for the Aging/b, 1992; Perlstein and Bliss, 1994). They are key qualities for oral history and life review programs (Charnow, Nash, and Perlstein, 1993; Sweitzer, 1993), intergenerational neighborhood planning (Kaplan, 1994), storytelling and some arts projects (Perlstein and Bliss, 1994), mental wellness (New York City Department for the Aging/b, 1992), and transmission of culture (DeBagno, 1993).

An important goal of public policy, as applied to cross-generational issues and programs, therefore, should be to encourage social (generational) integration and discourage social (generational) fragmentation. In order to accomplish this, generationally divisive policies should be avoided - since lack of integration in organizations leads to dysfunction - and opportunities to bring young and old together for socially valuable purposes should be encouraged.

### ***Public Policy Arguments that Support the Concept of Social Integration***

There are a number of arguments in favor of public support of intergenerational programs. Some significant ones are offered by Eric R. Kingson (Kingson, 1989), Harry R. Moody and Bob Disch (Moody and Disch, 1989), and Paul R. Nathanson (Nathanson, 1989).

**Kingson suggests:** "...there is a growing need for intergenerational programs and approaches to public policy....(which) provide some important and unique contributions to contemporary American society. These contributions include responding to challenges emerging from an aging society, by developing productive roles for the aging population, bridging stereotypes associated with age, and promoting understanding between the generations that discourages generational competition. These programs and policies can support families and communities through their involvement in family caregiving and the linking of community agencies."

**Moody and Disch offer:** "...a rationale for public support on behalf of intergenerational programming that invokes an ideal of citizenship. This rationale is contrasted with the more commonly cited "sentimental" justifications such as promoting life satisfaction, attitude changes and good feelings."

**Nathanson takes the position that:** "...a political imperative for such (intergenerational) programs does exist and that such programs may lead to a questioning of government benefits provided solely on the basis of chronological age."

*If these differing approaches to social policy are compared, they may be viewed as consistent in encouraging social integration as part of their overall rationale.* Policy that works in the opposite direction, whether by design or "unintended consequence" (Schram and Mandell, 1992), will tend to produce greater fragmentation and additional, unanticipated social problems. The natural working of intergenerational relationships should be considered a socially positive force that makes the life cycle attributes of young and old available to one another. Nathanson's view of government benefits provided solely on the basis of chronological age makes sense in this context, since such an approach tends to put

age cohorts in competition and contention with one another - the opposite direction of social integration.

In Kingson's analysis, social integration is served by responding to the challenges of an aging society, developing productive roles for elders and bridging age related stereotypes - understanding facilitates integration. Moody and Disch's support for the ideal of citizenship is appropriate because it highlights an important characteristic for team building - being a good team player on a social level - which clearly facilitates social integration. However, the "sentimental" justifications for intergenerational programming should not be disregarded, even though they are not likely to produce results for an advocate seeking to persuade a "hard-nosed" policy maker. "Life satisfaction" implies that an individual is at least satisfied with their life cycle role--they are well integrated--and if "attitude changes" are away from negative viewpoints and towards accepting and appreciating other age groups, they will certainly facilitate social integration.

Other kinds of intergenerational initiatives not mentioned above, such as developing curricula on aging in schools (Couper, 1992), also have their unique contributions to make to social integration. Understanding the process of aging and where it fits into the whole life cycle contributes by building understanding of other age groups, and reducing fear and stereotypes of aging. It is also possible that wider access to such education, as well as exposure to "live" elders, could impact the excessively youth oriented culture that has developed in the latter half of this century.