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## PSYCHOLINGUISTIC AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL COMPONENTS OF COMMUNICATION BY AND WITH THE ELDERLY

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GIAMPIERO BARTOLUCCI and KAREN HENWOOD

Social gerontological journals and texts emphasize the fact that, due to a dramatic increase in life expectancy, the elderly constitute demographically the fastest growing segment of the population (e.g. McPherson, 1983). For example, a British boy in 1875 could expect to live for 41 years and a girl for 45 years. A century later, the same children could look forward to 70 and 75 years, respectively. Thus, approximately 5 million were aged 65 to 74 in 1976 with a further 2.7 million over 75 years; the same pattern has of course occurred in North America. Social gerontologists have argued that psychological health in elderly is a function of C.N.S. activity and higher level cognitive functioning which are themselves mediated by frequent social contacts and communication (Kerstein and Isenberg, 1974; Keidel, 1980; Mindel and Wright, 1982). Yet, the actual study of this communication has received relatively scant attention. This is symptomatic of the fact that, apart from a few important exceptions (Langer *et al.*, 1979; Rodin and Langer, 1980; Schula and Hanusa, 1980; Blank, 1982), social psychology, sociolinguistics and communication science have not been concerned with elderly subject populations or with social issues related to the elderly.

Interest in the field of language and communication among the elderly has however increased recently (Cohen and Wu, 1980; Obler and Albert, 1980; Beasley and Davis, 1981; Walker, *et al.*, 1981). Most of this work relates to (1) the linguistic and paralinguistic correlates of aging (e.g. Helfrich, 1979; Belmore, 1981; Ramig and Ringel, 1983); (2) how the elderly are depicted in the mass media and the psychological implications it has for them (e.g. Gerbner *et al.*, 1980; Korzenny and Neuendorf, 1980; Davis and Kubey, 1982) and (3) linguistic, communication and hearing losses and disabilities among the elderly (Schow *et al.*, 1978; Portnoy, 1981; Weinstein and Ventry, 1982). There is surprisingly little on how the elderly are talked to or how they themselves talk to others. In other words, there is little available on the interactional dimension in communication that is of most direct relevance to the elderly themselves and to those who care about them and for them.

This special issue has a number of objectives. We wish to reflect the traditional and important concerns of work on gerontological language and communication (see the articles by Benjamin; Cohen and Faulkner; Emery; Kynette and Kemper; and Ramig). Beyond this emphasis upon the elderly communicator, we argue that communication opportunities provide an essential input for promoting "successful aging", but they are not sufficient. Having ineffectual conversations may be as bad as having very few. Hence, we focus upon the *quality* of communication as being an important precursor to psychological and physical health (see the articles by Boden and Bielby; Caporaël and

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