

# Maxwell Perspective

Summer 2015

## Aging and the Family

*An important international conference highlights the mission of the Maxwell co-sponsored Aging Studies Institute.*

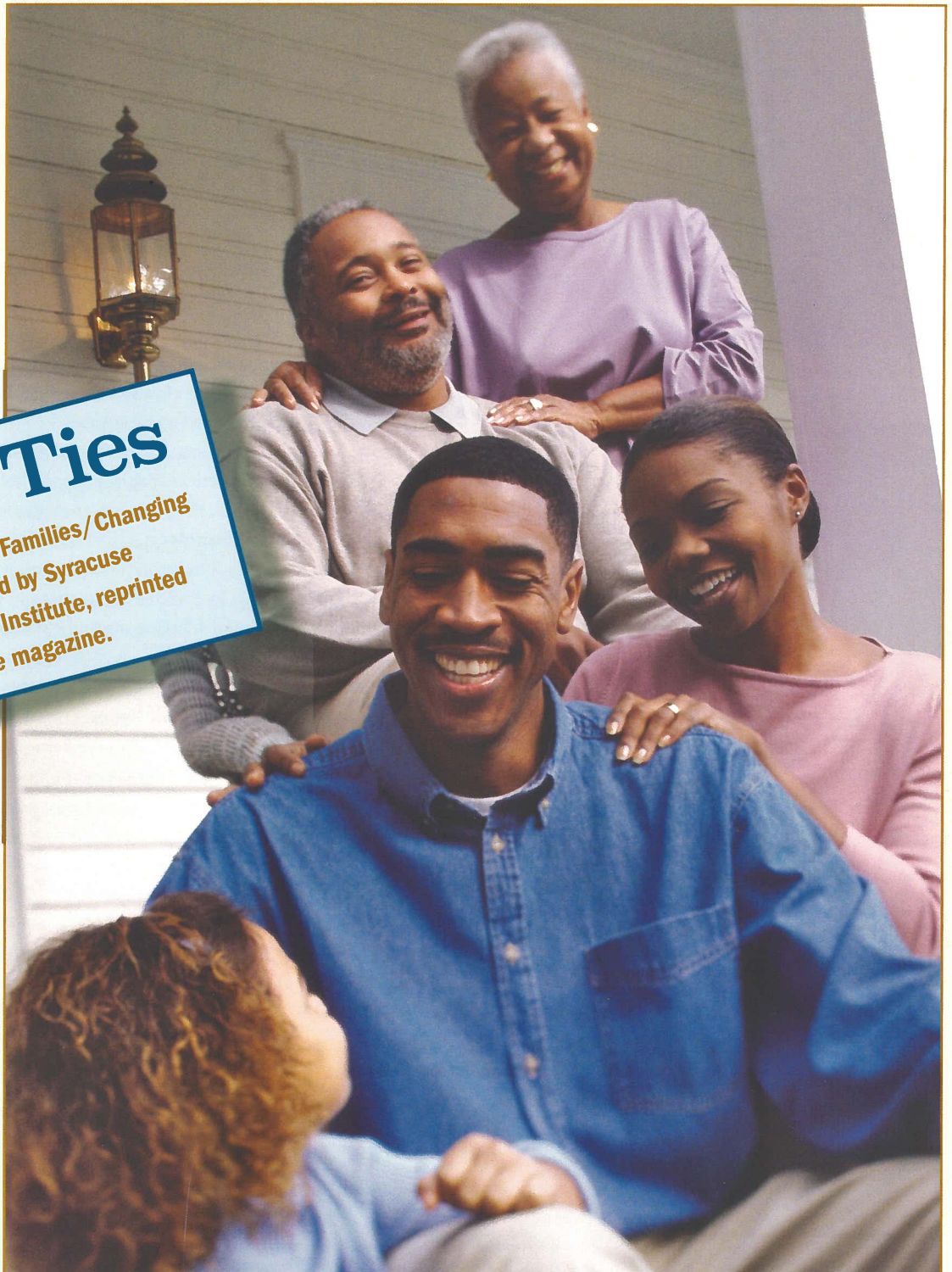
### Also in this issue:

Anthropologist and students assist new Tubman Park

## Family Ties

A report on the 2015 Aging Families/Changing Families conference, hosted by Syracuse University's Aging Studies Institute, reprinted from Maxwell Perspective magazine.

will oversee the MAX Courses



SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY



# Family Ties

**A major, international conference, hosted by Syracuse University's Aging Studies Institute, explored how aging citizens fit in and contribute — here and around the globe.**

By **Renée K. Gadoua**

Conference photography by **Hannah Jean Stathis** and **Joe Librandi-Cowan**, Syracuse University Photo & Imaging Center (except where noted)



At the Aging Families/Changing Families conference (from top): Keynote speaker Andrew Cherlin; from India, Gurjeet Virk Sidhu (Panjab University) and Jacob John Kattakayam (University of Kerala); Syracuse University Interim Vice Chancellor and Provost Elizabeth Liddy, Cantor Professor Merril Silverstein, and keynote speaker Ingrid Arnet Connidis.



**W**hen Americans talk about aging, they focus on the problems of Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security — programs that, for many, merely symbolize the financial burdens of old age. That conversation, says Janet Wilmoth, misses an important dimension of aging studies today. Wilmoth, a professor of sociology at the Maxwell School, is also director of Syracuse University's Aging Studies Institute (ASI).

“Older adults are not drains on our economy, but a critical part of society,” Wilmoth says. “We don't always recognize the value of our elders. They are making critical contributions to their families and communities.”

The significant financial and caregiving contributions of elders were among the highlights of Aging Families/Changing Families, the June 3-6 conference ASI organized for the International Sociology Association Research Committees on Aging and Family. The conference — expan-

sive in its topical variety and international in its focus — drew more than 120 people representing 21 countries, and scholars made more than 75 presentations on original research.

As successful as the conference was intellectually, it was also a watershed moment for ASI. It was the biggest event ASI has organized since Syracuse University created the interdisciplinary research center in

2011, and it helped solidify ASI's reputation as a national and international leader on aging studies.

“We were able to attract a broad group of scholars because we are well-known among others who study these issues,” Wilmoth says. The conference also showcased the numerous interdisciplinary and international connections ASI scholars are already making.

ASI is a collaboration of Maxwell and SU's David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics. ASI's predecessor, the SU Gerontology Center, operated for 40 years and was one of the country's oldest university-based gerontology programs.

Today, more than 40 SU faculty affiliates from more than a dozen departments make up the ASI — roughly one-quarter with Maxwell appointments; one-quarter, Falk; the rest, other SU programs. The core group is

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*Janet Wilmoth  
Director, Aging Studies Institute*



housed in renovated space in Lyman Hall.

Merril Silverstein, Marjorie Cantor Professor of Aging, dually appointed in Sociology and Social Work, played a key role in bringing the conference to Syracuse.

“He is an internationally recognized scholar on aging families and has developed relationships with scholars in several countries, including Sweden, Israel, the Netherlands, and China,” Wilmoth says. “There’s a synergy between his work and what the rest of us do that has helped us further elevate ASI’s prominence in the areas of aging, families, and public policy.”

Several of Silverstein’s international collaborators attended the conference. Lu Song, who was a visiting scholar at ASI last year, and Shuzhou Li presented research from rural China; they study how economically driven migration of adults impacts those adults’ parents — members of an older, tradition-oriented generation. Silverstein’s collaborators in Israel, Ariela Lowenstein and Ruth Katz, presented on care for frail elderly. Veronika Salzburger, ASI visiting scholar from Germany who is working with Silverstein, and Karsten Hank presented research on how gays and lesbians in Germany relate with older parents.

Silverstein’s reach is further represented by his collaboration on the Longitudinal Study of Generations, a project begun in 1970 by University of Southern California scholar Vern Bengston. The study has tracked multigenerational families in Southern California for four decades, with a focus on family dynamics and their relationship to mental health. Bengston, author of *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down Across Generations* (Oxford University Press), presented a paper on intergenerational relationships and the transmission of religious values at the ASI conference.

That work goes on. This spring, Silverstein received a \$1.5-million grant from the John Templeton Foundation for an extension of his work with Bengston. The grant funds a three-year study on religiosity trends among baby boomers and their families. Additionally, the National Institutes of Health have funded a Silverstein project on religiosity and mortality risk. Between the two projects, Silver-

stein will survey and/or interview more than 1,000 individuals, including clergy and congregants. He and Bengston will collaborate on the analysis.

Much of Silverstein’s work is consistent with a trend in aging studies: It is increasingly international and leads to important comparisons about aging in developed and developing countries. Developed countries have experienced a gradual increase in the proportion of older adults, Wilmoth explains. In the United States, it took 69 years (from 1944 to 2013) for the 65-and-over population to double as a percentage of the overall population (from 7 percent to 14). Developing countries are experiencing population aging at a much faster rate than developed countries. In China, for example, the 7-to-14-percent doubling is expected to take 26 years (2000 to 2026).

“How do these countries that are still developing economically deal with the explosion of aging population?” Wilmoth asks. “What does this mean for family dynamics? How do demographics in different parts of the world change family dynamics?”

From a conference with a broad range of topics -- including grandparenting, caregiving, marriages and unions, intergenerational relationships, sexual health, and migration — what follows is a small sampling of topics raised and new knowledge brought to light at Aging Families/Changing Families.

Information about Syracuse University’s Aging Studies Institute may be found at:

[asi.syr.edu](http://asi.syr.edu)

RENÉE K. GADOUA is a freelance writer and editor based in Manlius, N.Y.



## How We Live Together

*The erosion of traditional family structures has had well-documented impacts on children, but how will it eventually affect family elders?*

**I**n the United States, 8.2 percent of children live with mothers who experience three or more partnerships by the time the child turns 15. Changes in the economy have led to rising divorce rates and an increase in cohabitation and child-bearing outside marriage. How will those relationships and the absence of stable, long-term family structure affect elder care? It was the question raised by Andrew Cherlin, who gave the opening keynote address at the Aging Families/Changing Families conference presented by Syracuse University's Aging Studies

Institute (ASI). It was one of many presentations on ways that changes in family structures and economic factors affect elder care.

Cherlin is a sociologist and professor of public policy at Johns Hopkins University and author of *Labor's Love Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class by Family* (Russell Sage Foundation). A

frequently quoted social scientist, Cherlin is former president of the Population Association of America.

His keynote was titled "The Missing Middle Class," and pinpointed the ways that family instability has grown in America. In a time of rising economic inequality, he said, people without college degrees compete for a shrinking number of well-paying jobs. "High economic inequality includes a milieu of acceptance of alternatives to marriage," he said. "Kids need stable families. In the U.S., marriage is how people do stability. Lots of churning is not in children's best interest."

Now scholars suggest that churning is not in elders' best interests either. "Many children experience step-parents. Many may not live with their biological parents and may have complex family relationships," Cherlin said. "What does this mean for the frail elderly? How strong are those relationships?"

Cherlin is working with Douglas Wolf, an ASI associate and professor of public administration and international affairs at Maxwell, to investigate pressing questions of who will care for aging adults who do not have strong bonds with children or step-child-

**"There will be more complexity and diversity in future family patterns than there has been in the past."**

Douglas Wolf  
ASI associate and  
Maxwell faculty member



dren. They are collaborating on research looking at how declines in the amount of care from children will affect families and public policy. Working with Christopher Seplaki (University of Rochester) and Emily Agree (Johns Hopkins), they are attempting to characterize the diverse structure of families 20 to 25 years into the future, with attention to factors including the number of biological children and step-children, parents' marital status, and marital histories. The project has received financial support from the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on an Aging Society.

"The basic idea is that there will be more complexity and diversity in future family patterns than there has been in the past, even the recent past," says Wolf, who also serves as director of ASI's Center for Aging and Policy Studies. "Our ultimate interest is in the way that family patterns influence intergenerational relationships — parents helping their children and children helping their parents."

In another presentation at the ASI conference, Martin Kohli noted

the likelihood of "potential support deficits when intensive caregiver needs arise" among childless elders. Kohli is professor emeritus at the European University Institute in Italy and an expert on the life-course, a multidisciplinary approach to studying people's lives. "Childless people are adapting by building networks outside the nuclear family," Kohli said.

Kohli delivered the June 5 keynote at the conference, with the title "Generational Linkages in Aging Families." (His co-author on the paper about intergenerational support for elders in Europe is Marco Albertini of the University of Bologna.)

Kohli said European countries serve as a laboratory to study changes in family structures and support for elders. "They are further advanced in demographic change and aging," he said. "Some European countries [have] had to face the challenges earlier."

Another session, on long-term marriages and partnership dynamics, featured more research on these common themes of the conference:

- variation in later-life family forms, including long-term married couples;
- cohabitating couples;
- committed partnerships between heterosexual and homosexual couples; and
- the social network among childless older adults.

Ingrid Arnet Connidis, a professor of sociology at the University of Western Ontario whose work focuses on family forms and the nature of commitment, delivered the conference's third keynote, "Commitment and Change: Constants of Family Ties over Time." She also presented her study of long-term partnerships among straight and gay couples.

## Stress on the Family

*How does the burden of supporting elders change life for the caregivers?*

**D**ouglas Wolf shifts the focus from elders being cared for to the health of caregivers themselves. He is doing research studying the nuances of caregiver stress.

"In the medical world, in the world of advocates, the overwhelming picture of elder care is stressful, burdensome, unpleasant," says Wolf, professor of public administration and international affairs at Maxwell and director of ASI's Center for Aging and Policy Studies. "It's not that this picture is incorrect, but I'm trying to disentangle



the sources of the stress." A key question is how much of the negativity of the caregiver comes from the caregiver tasks, and how

much is from the fact the person is failing?

He acknowledged the stress of taking care of a parent with failing health. "But just the knowledge of having an aging parent is stressful," he said. "Some of it must be the psychological burden of having a family member with great need. The stress can be even greater if your sister isn't helping. Everyone has a story about this."

But it's too easy to lump it into a caregiver problem, he said, adding that many people report great rewards from the role. The source of stress may lie in the "inevitability of decline," he said. "You're trying to do the best in a situation that won't improve. And our culture is not good at talking about death and dying."

## Sense of Duty

*The perceived obligation to care for the elderly varies by culture.*

**W**ho will care for our elders? In the United States, long-term care is considered a family responsibility. “People have a built-in idea that it’s a personal problem, not a policy issue,” says Merril Silverstein, Marjorie Cantor Professor of Aging and associate in ASI.

That perspective varies across the globe. In 2013, filial duty became a legal responsibility in China; the Chinese government now requires adult children to visit their aging parents, and employers are required to give time off so workers can do so. Germany also has a filial piety law.

At the Aging Families/Changing Families conference, a session on filial responsibility included presentations on China and Eastern Europe, and a comparison of seven Asian societies. Kamala Ramadoss, assistant professor of child and family studies at SU’s Falk College, described how immigrants from South Asia — especially those with children — speak of missing parents left in the homelands. “It’s the grandparents’ role to pass on culture,” Ramadoss said. “It’s very hard not to have your parents to teach your children.”

The sense of duty is especially strong for Indian sons who migrate, said Falk College doctoral student Dimple Vadgama. “They feel strong pressure to move their parents to the U.S. . . . There’s bad karma not to do it,” she said. Yet, if the parents come to the United States, “children bear the cost” of supporting them, Vadgama said.

The issues in family care transcend global boundaries, says Deborah Monahan, professor of social work and ASI associate, who moderated a conference session on filial norms. “Researchers recognize that families want to provide care to their older parents and relatives,” she says, “but that there are increasing constraints due to longevity and increasing frailty and health problems.”

## Grandmas and Grandpas

*Often elders discover that child-rearing chores come around a second time.*

**F**ifty percent of U.S. adults are grandparents by age 50, and three-quarters of those 50-59 are still working. In the Philippines, high fertility also results in many 50-year-old grandmothers. Italian women, on the other hand, are the likeliest in Europe to give birth over age 40 and become grandparents at 80.

That comparison allowed researchers attending ASI’s Aging Families/Changing Families conference to put their work into a larger context, says Madonna Harrington Meyer, professor of sociology at Maxwell and ASI associate. Harrington Meyer made a presentation based on her 2014 book, *Grandmothers at Work: Juggling Families and Jobs* (NYU Press). That panel also included research on grandparents in Italy, China, the Philippines, and Korea.

Harrington Meyer’s book, which won the Richard Kalish Innovative Publication Award from the Gerontological Society of America, addressed the impact of juggling work and family on women in their 50s and 60s. Of the 48 working, non-custodial grandmothers she interviewed, all but two or three said, “I’ve done more for my grandchildren than my grandparents did for me and I’ve done more than I expected,” she said. “A lot of them say, ‘I wish I could do a lot less parenting and a lot more grandparenting.’ They want to take kids to the zoo, but they’re taking kids to dentist appointments and shuttling them to lessons and classes.”

Italian social-welfare policy is generous toward mothers, said Cecilia Tomasini of the University of Molise, but Italy also experiences high rates of divorce and relationship breakdowns. As a result, about 66 percent of children in Italy are cared for by grandparents when they are not at school or with a parent, she said.

Another session on grandparents’ roles demonstrated how compelling the topic has become — and how deep the collaborations at the Aging Studies Institute can be. A paper given there, about grandparents adopting children in their care, was co-authored by Vernon Greene, professor of public administration and international affairs at Maxwell; Carrie Smith, associate professor of social work at SU’s Falk College; recent Falk graduate Kate Kietzmann; and Deborah Monahan, professor of social work at Falk.

In the United States, grandparents and other relatives raise 7.8 million children. These “kinship caregivers,” Monahan says, are often a crucial child care resource for families experiencing stress or temporary parenting due to illness, incarceration, or death of a parent.

“Understanding the factors that are predictive of adopting children in kinship care,” says Monahan, “will help programs target services more effectively. Helping kinship caregivers and the children in their care is also important in promoting their health and social well-being.”

**“[Grandparents] want to take kids to the zoo, but they’re taking kids to dentist appointments and shuttling them to lessons and classes.”**

*Madonna Harrington Meyer  
ASI associate and Maxwell faculty member*



## Planning for Later Life

*Is there more countries can do to come to terms with the cost of an aging population?*

To provide for citizens whose working lives are done, China introduced the New Rural Social Pension Scheme in 2009, and 100 percent of rural inhabitants now benefit. The federal allowance is reducing the poverty level for older families and reducing inter-

generational transfers (financial assistance from children) — this according to Ling Xu of the University of Texas at Arlington and Hui He of Xiangtan University in China.

Their session at ASI's Aging Families/Changing Families conference was among a few that suggested that there are unrealized roles for governments in the support of retired, elder citizens.

In Sweden, for example, part-time work (mostly by women) affects care for the elderly. Ulla Rantakeisu and Lena Ede, from Karlstad University, described how the use of part-time employees creates blurred lines between work and free time, stressing workers and possibly damaging employees' ability to provide care for elders.

They study policies that encourage more full-time jobs within agency budgets, and how that shift would provide broader social benefits.

Similarly, Douglas Wolf, professor of public administration and international affairs at Maxwell, is studying how U.S. states could adopt policies to help with caregiving. They may include family leave for step-parents and in-laws, longer unpaid family leave, and extending family leave policies to smaller companies. "The U.S. lags behind in enlightened social policy on this," he said.

He and three colleagues presented data from

Italy, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, and the United States during 2000-14. The project studied the effect of the recent economic crisis on generational relationships. It looks at co-residence — mainly, young adults living with their parents and people 65 and older living with their children and/or grandchildren. During economic downturns, unemployment rises and extended families with little other choice find themselves in co-residence, with natural attendant strains.

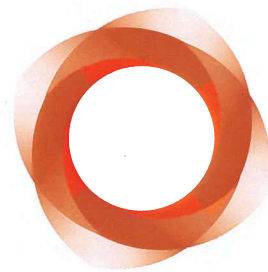
Aging Americans, as a group, hold untapped political power to address policy, said Robert Hudson of Boston University's School of Social Work. In the U.S., long-term care is a residual problem, and the frail elderly are "out of sight, out of mind," Hudson said. The Obama administration's decision in 2011 to drop the Community Living Assistance Services and Supports program from the Affordable Care Act is, he said, the government's latest failure to make public long-term care insurance a priority.

"Older people also make up a strong political voice with powerful support from groups like AARP," he said. But "dependent elders continue to be relegated to marginal positions as recipients of public assistance and Medicare." He called long-term care and an increased public role in elder care a civil right and societal obligation. "We simply have to raise it as a political cause," he said.

Hudson's call to action reflects ASI's mission of producing and disseminating research to inform the public about population aging. To that end, ASI will soon prepare policy briefs for each of the conference keynotes, to inform future policy discussions. ■



At the Aging Families/Changing Families conference (from top): Peter Oberg, University of Gävle, Sweden; Maxwell faculty member Douglas Wolf; Falk College professor Deborah Monahan; keynote speaker Ingrid Arnet Connidis; Maxwell sociologist Madonna Harrington Meyer; keynote speaker Martin Kohli; and Shuzhuo Li, Xi'an Jiaotong University, China.



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