RESPECTFULLY TREATING THE ELDERLY: AFFECTIVE AND BEHAVIORAL WAYS OF AMERICAN YOUNG ADULTS

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There has been little research on how young people respect, or disrespect, older adults. This study explored the ways in which young adults connote elder respect by utilizing two different forms of data. Based on quantitative data from a survey of 521 college students, a set of 11 behavioral forms of elder respect was obtained. Out of these forms, 6 were identified as most frequently practiced. Additionally, by interviewing the subjects, qualitative data based on narratives explicating the dynamic practice of elder respect were obtained, and factors that hold a central significance to the development of respectful behavior towards elders are identified. Implications of the findings from both types of the data and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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The issue of respect for the elderly has been gaining increased attention from gerontologists (Palmore & Maeda, 1985; Streib, 1987; Post, 1989; Leininger, 1990; Chipperfield & Havens, 1992; Freedman, 1996; Mehta, 1997; Damon-Rodriguez, 1998; Ingersoll-Dayton & Saengtienchai, 1999; Sung, 2004). This trend may reflect a concern over the declining consensus on respectful treatment of elderly persons. Studies have reported on the tendencies of some adults to mistreat and abandon frail and sick elderly persons, to disrespect older persons by neglecting and disregarding their problems, and to support ageism through negative connotations and portrayals of older persons by language, humor, songs, and art (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988; Vasil & Wass, 1993; Hummert, 1994; Butler, 1995; Rowe & Kahn, 1998; Palmore, 1999; Kosberg & Torgusen, 2001; Sung, 2007). Such tendencies and ageism held by the young, for instance, college students, are often reported (Gekoski & Knox, 1990; MacNeil, Ramos, & Magagas, 1996; Palmore, 1999). These unfortunate incidents render the elderly valueless to society.

Without respect, a society cannot have a positive attitude toward the elderly, treat them with propriety, and integrate them into family and society (Damon & Rodriguez, 1998; Sung, 2001). Indeed, elderly persons who are respected tend to experience greater life satisfaction and elevated status, which, in turn, enhance their sense of usefulness and involvement in family, community, and significant others (Applegate & Morse, 1994; Ghusn, Hyde, Stevens, Hyde, & Teasdale, 1996). In their later years, in particular, the respect that the elderly receive from caregivers and others will have a significant psychological meaning that affects their quality of life (Noelker & Harel, 2000).

The growing concern over the treatment of the elderly necessitates a critical review of elder respect among young people. Empirical data on elder respect, however, are extremely limited in the United States and writings about elder respect have dealt with it in an invariably abstract form. Hence, elder respect has been a concept too general to provide clear guidance for practice and research. We need to distinguish between the specific forms of respect the young accord the elderly and develop a set of concrete forms.

Elder respect is practiced by young people toward elderly persons in a variety of forms as described in the following section. The younger population plays a crucial role in the support system for the elderly, and how they treat the elderly is not only crucial to the elderly, but also to the society in general. (Hereafter, respect for the elderly is called “elder respect.” The term “elder” here
denotes elderly relatives, neighborhood elders, elders at the workplace, and elders at large.)

To locate the potential source of change in any society, one has to examine its younger people. In the case of college students, exposure to a liberal atmosphere on college campuses and greater peer influence shape their social and academic life. As a consequence, they are likely to contract new values different from their parents’ and be less supportive of the traditional norms governing the way of treating older persons (Palmore, 1999). For this study, college students—a subset of the younger adult population—were selected as subjects.

Using a questionnaire survey to explore this issue, our study first explored the behavioral forms of elder respect that young adults most often practice. Following the survey, face-to-face interviews were conducted to obtain narratives, anecdotes, and certain personal experiences explicating how elder respect is practiced in interaction with older adults. These stories described and explained by the college students in their own terms. In order to better understand the practice of elder respect, such qualitative data is equally important as the scores on the behavioral forms; this is due to the entanglement of both affective and interpersonal factors in the practice. A combination of both types of data allowed the study to gain insight into behavioral as well as the affective aspects of the practice of elder respect.

**VARIOUS EXPRESSIONS OF ELDER RESPECT**

Respect comes from the Latin term, repicere, which means to look back at or to look again. The idea of looking to, or giving attention to, can be used synonymously with words such as regard and consideration (Webster’s, 1996). Thus, attention is a central aspect of respect; we respect a person by paying careful attention to the person, by taking the person seriously, and by having sympathetic consideration of his or her needs and wants (Downie & Telfer, 1969; Dillon, 1992). Respect, however, calls for more than attention; it requires certain actions to be practiced that are deserved by the person (Gibbard, 1990; Dillon, 1992). Such actions or behaviors are intended to convey an altruistic and benevolent sense of regard to elderly persons. The behaviors are called moral if they are based on the younger persons’ internalized values of what they ought to do for older persons (Kunda & Schwartz, 1983).

Elder respect may be expressed in a variety of forms, e.g., showing consideration for the elderly, caring for them, complying with their
wishes, showing them courteous manners, or giving them seats of honor. These are open and matter-of-fact behavioral expressions that can be observed and recorded. Elder respect, on the other hand, can also be personal, carry an affective charge, and be culture-based (Downie & Telfer, 1969; Silverman & Maxwell, 1978; Leininger, 1990).

Earlier, Silverman and Maxwell (1978) distinguished the forms of elder respect based on data from a cross-cultural study of 34 societies. They inductively derived the following seven behavioral forms from having observed the way the elderly population was treated: service respect (doing housekeeping for elders), victual respect (serving drinks and foods of elders’ choice), gift respect (bestowing gifts upon elders), linguistic respect (using respectful language in addressing elders), presentational respect (holding courteous appearances before elders), spatial respect (furnishing elders with honorable seats), and celebrative respect (celebrating elders’ birthdays).

In recent years, expressions of elder respect have been described by a few studies conducted in East Asia. Palmore and Maeda (1985) described a dozen of ways in which the Japanese expressed elder respect. Mehta (1997) reported on similar expressions of Singaporeans. Ingersoll-Dayton and Saengtienchai (1999) reported on such expressions based on their study of Singaporeans, Thais, Taiwanese, and Filipinos. Based on qualitative data, these three studies described various expressions of elder respect. These expressions indicate the aforementioned seven forms identified by Silverman and Maxwell (1978) plus at least the following six forms (which are titled by the authors): care respect (caring for and serving elders; it also encompasses services respect), acquiescent respect (complying with elders’ words), consulting respect (seeking elders’ advice), salutatory respect (greeting elders), public respect (respecting elders at large), and ancestor respect (worshipping ancestors). Following these studies, Sung and Kim (2003), based on quantitative data from a survey of young adults in South Korea, identified basically similar forms (Table 1). Thus, the forms presented by Silverman and Maxwell are largely replicated by all the studies, suggesting that there is cross-cultural similarity among the forms. While these studies made significant contributions, they commonly did not examine elder respect among young people in the United States. Furthermore, they did not provide the details of happenings or events in the dynamic interactions between the respecter and the respected; also lacking were the interpretation or estimates of the experiences that both parties had in the interactions.
METHOD

This study was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, a questionnaire survey was conducted to identify the forms of elder respect. In the second phase, interviews were carried out to obtain narratives and anecdotes regarding the practice of the forms and factors that influenced the subjects to respect older adults.

The First Phase Study

A survey was given to a sample comprised of two separate groups of students at universities selected purposively—one group of 332 at a large public American university in the Midwest and another group of 324 at a large private university on the West Coast. Overall, the sample (656) was comprised of graduate students (32%) and seniors (68%). Their median age was 23 and 56% were male students. In terms of ethnicity, approximately 71% were Caucasian, 12% African Americans, 12% Latinos, and 5% Asian Americans. There were no major demographic differences in age and gender between the two groups. In terms of ethnicity, however, there were more Latino and Asian American subjects in the West Coast group than in the Midwest group (23% as compared to 9.1%). The subjects were also a part of 28 randomly chosen classes (class size ranging from 15 to 30) in social sciences and literature at both universities. These universities met the following selection criteria: (a) coeducational, (b) ethnically and racially diverse, and (c) located in different geographical areas (urban or semirural). An

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of elder respect</th>
<th>1st Phase (N = 656) Rank</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>2nd Phase (N = 66) Rank</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acquiescent (complying &amp; listening)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care (giving care &amp; service)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic (using proper language)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salutatory (greeting)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consulting (seeking advice)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentational (holding polite manners)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precedential (giving precedence)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gift (presenting gifts)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spatial (furnishing seats of honor)</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victual (swerving choice foods)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrative (celebrating birthdays)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Rank is based on the size of frequency with which the form is cited.
anonymous, self-administered question was asked: “Please list two or more important behaviors or gestures by which you most often express your respect for older adults.” In all, 95% or more of the students in each class responded to the question. Three analysts participated in the content analysis of various expressions of elder respect cited in response to the question.

**The Second Phase Study**

The author conducted interviews with 66 subjects selected at random from the 656 subjects who responded to the questionnaire (2–3 students from each classroom, 33 at each of the two universities. Their telephone numbers were secured, and the subjects were subsequently called and interviewed by appointment. In each interview, the author outlined two semistructured and open-ended questions: (a) “The following are forms or behaviors young people use to connote respect for older adults. Please give your free opinion about these forms and your personal experience in practicing each of the forms with older adults.” These forms or behaviors were provided as a list of the six forms (along with typical expressions of these forms) identified in the first phase in a randomized order. (b) “From your recollection, who has influenced you most to respect older adults? Please state one or more such persons.” A list of influential persons was provided, which included parents, grandparents, other relatives, schoolteachers, mass media, and no one. As is characteristic of the semistructured interviewing method (Merton, Fiske, & Kendal, 1990), the subjects were allowed to introduce discussions of their own interest. Interview schedules required recording additional descriptive and verbatim data provided by the subject. The interview guide was pretested on 10 students not included in the sample. The interviews lasted on average 20 minutes at locations selected by the subject and the researcher. They were taped, transcribed, and then compared with field notes for accuracy. Three investigators participated in the identification of narratives and personal experiences reflective of the whole data. The ratios of males (52%) vs. females (48%), graduates (34%) vs. undergraduates (66%), and Caucasian-Americans (69%) vs. all minorities (31%) in the sample resembled those found in the survey.

**FINDINGS: THE SURVEY**

Respondents did not appear to have any difficulty in citing behavioral expressions that were most frequently exhibited to connote
elder respect and that were considered most important to them. The expressions were categorized into various forms as shown in Table 1. Most subjects (72%) cited expressions leading to 2 forms of elder respect, while the rest cited expressions indicating 1 or 3 forms. Based on their expressions, 11 forms (which are listed in the following paragraph) were identified and named. In the naming process, reference was made to the titles and meanings of elder respect described by the previous studies. The frequency with which each form was cited was assessed in terms of percentage; based on the percentage size, the forms were rank-ordered (Table 1).

In the ranking, acquiescent respect (complying with and listening to what elders say) was the most frequently cited important form (53% of all the subjects). The second most often cited form (32%) was care respect (giving care and services); the third (27%), linguistic respect (using respectful language); the fourth (17%), salutatory respect (greeting); the fifth (13%), consulting respect (seeking advice); and the sixth (10%), presentational respect (displaying courteous manners) (Table 1). The rest were cited by less than 5%: precedential respect (giving precedential treatment) (4%), gift respect (bestowing gifts) (3%), spatial respect (furnishing honorable seats) (2%), victual respect (serving foods of elders’ choice) (1%), and celebrative respect (celebrating birthdays) (1%).

**Most Frequently Practiced Forms of Elder Respect**

The following six forms were cited by more than 10% of the subjects, making them more common and practiced more often than others. Due to the frequent citations by subjects, these six forms are noteworthy and remarkable: (a) acquiescent respect, (b) care respect, (c) linguistic respect, (d) salutatory respect, (e) consulting respect, and (f) presentational respect.

Next, the groups from two universities were compared by the frequency of the cited forms. Overall, both groups were similar in terms of the frequency cited for each form, except for acquiescent respect. The subjects on the West Coast cited acquiescent respect more frequently than did those in the Midwest ($X^2 = .72$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). What might have accounted for this difference is that in the West Coast group there were more Latinos and Asian Americans than there were in the Midwest group (23.6% vs. 10.2%). The higher percentage of these minority subgroups most likely contributed to the West Coast group scoring a higher frequency for acquiescent respect when compared with the Midwest group (55% vs. 51%) (cf. both groups combined: Latinos 64%, Asian Americans 59%, African
Americans 54%, Caucasian Americans 52%). Some differences between the two groups for consulting respect emerged when compared by age, although they were statistically insignificant. Moreover, no difference occurred when compared by gender.

**FINDINGS: THE INTERVIEWS**

The interviewer elicited useful information from all subjects who willingly participated. Results of the interviews were summarized into two components: (a) narratives and anecdotes involving how the six forms of elder respect were practiced in the subjects’ interaction with older adults, and (b) verbatim data on factors that had a central significance in the respondents’ development of elder respecting behavior.

**Quotations and Anecdotes on the Practice of Elder Respect**

The Most Significant and Frequently Practiced Forms

Data presented below are quotations and narrative accounts drawn from the subjects’ stories. These specific quotations are chosen because they are illustrative and representative of the data on the forms most often practiced by the subjects and considered important to them.

**Acquiescent respect (complying and listening).** Fifty-eight percent of those who cited acquiescent respect as the most frequently practiced form of elder respect reported “compliance” as a practical way of showing acquiescent respect, whereas 42% of the same group reported “listening.” The data indicates that one of the practical ways of displaying acquiescent respect is by complying with rules set by elders. When queried about her practical ways of showing elder respect, a senior student of sociology stated, “I follow family rules and what my parents tell me to do, including keeping curfew.”

Another senior student from Nebraska revealed, “My parents usually discuss with me before setting up rules to be observed by family members. So I obligingly comply with those rules.”

Almost all Latino and Asian American students in the interviews expressed a stronger tendency to acquiesce to elderly relatives within the family context. This tendency reflects previous findings on acquiescent behavioral pattern of young people in Latino (Damon-Rodrigues, 1998) and Asian (Sung & Kim, 2003) families.

Moreover, the subjects revealed how they practice acquiescent respect towards an elderly person outside of the family. A junior student majoring anthropology reported, “I would accept advice
and suggestions of elderly persons who pay attention, concern, and help me out to resolve this.”

Meanwhile, a graduate student of political science offered the following candid explanation:

It’s part of my daily job to comply with rules set up by the research director at my university and directives outlined by my supervisor at my part-time work place outside the campus. These are just my daily routines.

Various opinions on the treatment of older people, however, were also introduced. For instance, a graduate student in French literature said the following:

Everyone has equal rights and therefore no preferences should be given because of age, gender or social status. It depends on what older persons do to others. We respect those who have done something good for us.

This opinion calls attention to the importance of reciprocity in inter-generational relationship.

Another way acquiescent respect was practiced was by listening to elders when they spoke. For instance, a senior student in public administration revealed his feelings about practicing this form:

When my parents and their friends talk, I listen to them even when I am bored. I don’t interrupt them. I occasionally nod or smile while listening to them.

A junior majoring in German language gave a similar remark:

I do have my own feelings about how I should do certain things. But I usually listen to my old folks when they advice and suggest as to how I should do, even if they might not seem very helpful.

A graduate student in art history gave a somewhat different opinion:

I sometimes cannot stand my workplace supervisor. Yet no matter what it costs me, I listen to him and follow his directives. Above all, he is an old timer who runs the department. I do this for my own conscience.
Although listening does not necessarily imply complying with the rules and directions established by the elderly, a relatively large number of the subjects understood that listening was an important form of elder respect. The subjects seemed to prefer listening to acquiescence, as it tends to be less subservient and more interactive.

Care respect (giving care and services). An array of altruistic behavior of care respect was cited, which may be broadly classified into two types: (a) caring for elders with an affective touch, including being kind and considerate to them, having concern for them, resolving anxiety for them, and taking care of them when they are ill; and (b) providing services in terms of doing work or taking action for elders, such as housekeeping, maintaining contact and spending time with them, living in proximity to them, and assisting them in crossing the road or carrying a heavy load. Caring was clearly a social relationship between the subject and the elderly that was comprised of tending to physical needs and providing tangible support as well as emotional feelings based on affection, intimacy, and reciprocity.

For a senior student of Spanish language who visited her relatives once a month, care respect consisted of verbally communicating that she cares about them and actively doing something beneficial for them:

I spend time with my mom and grandma by talking with them over the phone. I visit them and lend a hand with cleaning, washing, or organizing something in their houses that needs order. If they want something, I get it for them.

The following statement was made by another considerate senior student in psychology:

My grandparents’ biggest worry seems to be my safety and health. I don’t want them to worry about me all the time. So, I often talk to them about what I do and how I feel. I also discuss with them things that concern me. By doing so, I feel I can reduce their anxiety about me.

A graduate student also from psychology who lived a few hundred miles from her retired teacher voiced a similar sentiment:

I often call Rosemary, my former teacher. I try to keep in touch with her who is living alone. I tell her that I want to be her home to help
her . . . When she is unwell, I am going to visit her more often and care for her.

A junior student studying philosophy made the following statement:

Back home, I and buddies of 4-H Club used to visit a nearby home for older folks and did some caring for them. I mean such things as accompanying outings, giving shaving, singing songs, making phone calls, etc. We will be doing these this summer when we are back home.

Although not all the subjects visited the elderly frequently, nearly all of them recognized the importance of maintaining contact with the elderly—whether they were relatives or nonrelatives—to alleviate their isolation and to keep them as part of the subjects’ lives. Such affective feelings and willingness to care for elderly relatives and other older persons were expressed by nearly all of the subjects regardless of their gender, ethnic, cultural, or geographic origins.

A few of the subjects, however, revealed that they experienced an emotional distance from their parents. For instance, a senior student of geography described the difficult life he led under an authoritarian father and his resentment towards his father. Despite his negative feelings, the student was conciliatory:

Let’s face it, my dad with my mom have struggled to bring me up. He could have gone without bringing me up. So, when they get to that age I should take over. I mean, I have to care for them in their old age.

This response illustrates the strength of internalized values and norms. It also suggests that normative factors and repayment for aid and services are mutually reinforcing. Finally, a graduate student of political science outlined his stance:

It’s a common sense that we young ones need to help older folks cross the street or carry a heavy object. We do these at our own free will. It’s really up to our conscience and heart.

This stance implies that the ultimate player in the realm of elder respect is the young themselves who, according to their conscience, decide how and to what extent they should assist the elders.

*Linguistic respect* (using respectful language in addressing older adults). To convey elder respect, the subjects used such terms as
mother and father when they referred to their parents. In formal contexts with nonrelatives, they used titles such as Minister or Reverend, Madam, Mr., Dr., Chairperson, Prof., Director, etc. They also avoided inappropriate language when speaking to older persons.

A senior student majoring in English literature revealed his cautious approach to the practice of this form:

I do not swear at old people even if they tell me something I don’t like.
I don’t give them a negative feedback on what they say.

In addition, a graduate student of German literature visiting from Boston revealed how she learned to speak to older persons:

I try to be sensitive to the kinds of words I use in talking to older persons. Once I was paddled by a teacher for swearing at them. I don’t raise my voice when I speak to them.

A graduate student of Chinese language expressed her concern regarding addressing older persons:

We sometimes see students calling older persons and professors by their first name without being really intimate with them. I think it’s a little out of line. They should call the older persons by their last name with Mr., Mrs., or Prof.

Another senior in public administration stated that she always said “thank you” to older persons for even trivial things she received from them. In both informal and formal situations, the subjects took effort to use appropriate language in addressing older persons.

Salutatory respect (greeting elders). Types of greetings toward the elderly usually reflect their social worth. The subjects cited ways of greeting in both informal and formal contexts, including hugging and kissing elders, shaking hands with them, making eye-contact with them, looking at them with an expression of intimacy, acknowledging them when one sees them, and saying “how are you?”

A junior majoring in American history reminisced about her earlier experience:

The first thing I learned from my parents was saying “hi” to visitors, and hugging and kissing them. I think it is a basic way of interacting with others.
A graduate student in East Asian studies explained how she usually greets older persons,

> When I see older persons, I try to be careful and restrained because they are older. Then I say “Hello,” making eye-contact with them, and acknowledging them.

For a student who emigrated from Asia, greetings were more formal:

> When I meet my older relatives and professors, I greet them by slightly bending my body forward. This is how my folks greet elderly persons in my family.

Interestingly, the following was offered by a doctoral student in economics:

> For me, the most difficult part of my learning Japanese is how to connote respect to older persons according to their social status. I have to change suffixes and prefixes, or even phrases and sentences to adjust the level of respect appropriate to individual persons’ age, status, and relation to me.

**Consulting respect (asking for advice).** The subjects consulted elders over matters related to their family and living. A graduate student majoring in Japanese history described his feelings about consulting respect:

> I ask my grandparents and my hockey coach for their opinions and advice on decisions I have to make on my personal matters because I value their experience, wisdom, and willingness to help me. In my volunteer service group, we made it a rule to ask older members for advice and counseling on how to develop service programs.

> Meanwhile, older persons who are consulted would most likely feel respected for their age and experience and purposeful and useful for the society. Hence, the practice of this form is likely to bring beneficial results for both the young and the old.

**Presentational respect (showing courteous manners).** Wearing modest and proper apparel, grooming in an ordinary or moderate way, and exhibiting polite postures and gestures were cited as expressions of this form.
A graduate student majoring in German literature said the following matter-of-factly:

I think proper attire and manners are basics of our social life. These are what I learned from my folks at home and school.

Meanwhile, a junior in anthropology, an Asian American, introduced a slightly different expression,

I usually give something to my grandparents and their friends with two hands. And, usually I stand erect when they enter the room.

For most subjects who cited presentational respect, however, it appeared that this form was used mostly in the formal context outside the family.

Other forms—precedential, gift, spatial, victual, and celebrative, mostly symbolic displays of elder respect—are forms not infrequently practiced among older adults. Only a few subjects, however, cited these forms. A possible explanation may be that many younger people may not be able to practice these forms due to financial and physical reasons.

The following are quotations regarding the general meanings of elder respect obtained from interviews. These were selected on the basis of their relevance or insightfulness.

People should treat each other on an equal footing. But my parents are a different case. I respect them more than anybody else. They work hard and care for me. I started to respect them as I became older and more conscious of their love and aid for me.

My relatives were particular about my manners and language in addressing to older persons. I think my attitude toward older persons has been built up by their influence.

My folks back home always told me to respect the elderly. Once when their friend visited our home, I refused to kiss the visitor’s cheek. For this misbehavior, I was deprived of Coke for two days.

I lived separately from my parents who were divorced when I was young. I learned “how to treat others courteously through television and movies.”

I would pay respect to those older persons who have done something for me and other people. We need to repay them for that. They are the elderly who earn our respect.
I would like to know more about older people—their knowledge and experience as well as their issues and concerns. Some form of school teaching on how the young and the old can understand each other is desirable.

We need to teach the next generation how to respect others, so that when they grow up, they would pass the value to their children. From my own experience, much depends on how older people bring up younger ones.

Although the meaning of these anecdotes cannot be generalized, they do reflect the subjects’ perceptions and feelings on elder respect.

**Influential Figures in the Development of Elder Respect**

Finally, persons who influenced the subjects to respect the elderly were identified. Table 2 represents a list of these persons along with the frequency with which they were cited and their ranking based on the frequency size. The three most frequently cited are parents (91%), grandparents (33%), and other relatives (13%). Those less frequently cited included friends (9%) and school teachers (5%). Five percent (three persons) attributed the mass media as an influential factor while 3% of the subjects denied having had any type of influential figures. A further analysis was conducted by dividing the subjects into the Midwest group and the West Coast group. The two groups were compared using the frequencies with which the influential persons were cited or not cited. The key

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persons who taught</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>51 (91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparents</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16 (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other relatives</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7 (13)</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mass media</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3 (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Some interviewees cited more than one person who taught.*

*Persons cited by 5% (3 persons) or more are shown.*

*Rank is based on frequency size.*
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This is a rare and unique study that clarifies how young people respect older adults in the United States. For the study, a survey and interviews were carried out in combination to obtain data on both behavioral and affective aspects of the practice of elder respect.

From the study, a typology comprising six outstanding forms of elder respect has emerged. The distinction among these behavioral forms highlights specific ways in which younger adults respect older adults. In the description of the holistic meaning of elder respect, all of these forms would have to be considered, as each of them indicates a different way of elder respect. The forms may be categorized into two broad types: (a) one involving some behavioral activity or physical work such as caring, serving, and consulting; and (b) the other involving symbolic displays of respect—those falling into acquiescent, linguistic, salutatory, and presentational forms. Thus, the typology is an amalgamation of these two types, reflecting the necessity for fulfilling both types to describe a more complete definition of elder respect.

This study specifies the various forms of elder respect that younger adults most often practiced and considered to be important. It is based on quantitative data that were not made available by previous studies. The set of the forms provides a tool with which we can discuss elder respect in a concrete and systematic way. Furthermore, the set will be useful in developing a more comprehensive typology of such behavioral forms that might be used to assess the quality of eldercare and the moral aspect of intergenerational relationships. Moreover, the data from the narratives and verbatim data collected through interviews provide insight into the younger adults’ perspectives on elder respect interlaced with affective as well as physical aspects of intergenerational exchanges.

There were two ways that were identified for expressing acquiescent respect, which was the most frequently cited form: (a) complying with rules set by older adults, and (b) listening to them when they spoke. Although the act of listening did not always equate to complying with the orders and directions of older adults, the young lucidly
appeared to understand that listening is an act of showing elder respect. Listening occurred to be a highly important form for a large proportion of the subjects, which the subjects might have preferred due to its less subservient and more interactive nature. It is also noteworthy that care respect was another frequently cited form. In fact, respect is closely interrelated with care, as care is one of the various demonstrations of respect (Downie & Telfer, 1969; Kelly, 1990; Dillon, 1992). It reflects the value of caring for others with affection, benevolence, and sympathetic concern. Consulting elders over personal matters and asking them for advice was another frequently cited form. Older persons who are consulted would feel respected and esteemed for their age and experience, while younger adults may gain insight and learn from the wisdom and experiences of elders. Hence, practicing this form brings beneficial results for both of the generations or parties. Greeting elders, another identified form of elder respect, is a social behavior that the subjects learned at an early age. Proper language used in addressing older people was an important medium by which the subjects connote elder respect. Moreover, those who come into contact with elders—employers, supervisors, professors, or elderly dignitaries—usually tended to dress modestly and neatly and maintained a posture that is polite and courteous.

Practicing some or all of these forms may pose as a challenge for the younger generation due to various constraints and responsibilities. Some of the constraints and responsibilities include obligations towards wives and children, work situations, and social and environmental factors such as financial capability and being a long distance from parents.

Examination of the content of narratives and verbatim data revealed that some forms of elder respect were practiced more frequently in informal contexts while others were exhibited more often in formal settings. Many subjects expressed their eagerness to convey their respect to their mothers and grandparents more in informal situations. This pattern reflects a greater degree of respect accorded to the subjects’ closest relatives and the instinctual relationship between a child and his or her relatives, particularly with the mother. In contrast, the practice of other forms, which tend to be mostly symbolic expressions of respect (acquiescent, linguistic, salutatory, and presentation) tended to occur in a more formal and ritualistic social context, e.g., public gatherings, formal meetings or ceremony. This pattern was applicable to presentational respect (behaving in a courteous manner) in particular. Other forms of respect, such as acquiescent, linguistic, and salutatory forms, were practiced in both formal and informal social contexts, as well as with both elderly relatives and nonrelative elders.
Ethical literature identifies a major philosophical view that our ethical tradition commands lifelong parental reverence (Blustein, 1982; Post, 1989; Chappell, 1990). There is, however, some debate about the relative importance of materialistic factors as opposed to affective factors in determining reverence (English, 1979; Selig, Tomlinson, & Hickey, 1991). Findings of the present study suggest that neither affect nor reciprocity is always required for elder respect in the case of close relationships such as a relationship between a parent and an adult child in the context of family. Even if an adult child resents the way his parent treated him as a child, he would still show respect toward the parent by some form of respect. In other cases, reciprocity appeared to be a major factor: aid and support from older adults appeared to affect the amount of respect connoted by subjects in a significant way. In some cases, however, material and normative factors seemed to be mutually reinforcing how one displays respect.

Meanwhile, elder respect appeared to be a culturally related obligation—the obligation that stems from the subjects’ position in the family, social groups, organizations, and society, as filial children, responsible members, loyal workers, and trustworthy juniors. In many cases, the sense of obligation provided the primary explanation for elder respect. In particular, Latino and Asian American students consistently expressed their tendency to acquiesce to the elderly. Caucasian Americans emigrated from Lithuania, Hungary, and Armenia also expressed a similar tendency. Several subjects belonging to these ethnic subgroups even expressed feelings of guilt for not properly fulfilling this obligation of acquiescing to their elders. Some other subjects, however, reported little or a complete lack of cultural expectation to respect their elders. For these subjects, the practice of elder respect seemed to be motivated by their own personal choice rather than by social obligation. They practiced elder respect selectively or individually as a case-by-case situation as opposed to universal or categorical practice. When—or if—they did practice elder respect, these subjects tended to do so by a simple expression. And even when they accepted the obligation to show respect, the subjects established boundaries and limits in the extent of their expression of respect.

Expressions of certain forms appear to be undergoing transitions and modification. Listening seems to be a modification of the traditional form of obedience and submission. Additionally, consulting respect, a newly emerged form, involves open communication and mutually beneficial exchange between generations. Thus, expressions of elder respect forms appear to be shifting from subservient to reciprocal or egalitarian. They also appear to be shifting from complex forms to simpler ones. For instance, complicated lingual
expressions of greeting and paying courtesy are not as frequently heard and seen as they were decades ago. Also, the young tend to be selective; they would not express respect to any and every older person automatically. These changes and patterns seem to reflect a new culture in which they reside. To what degree such shifts engender positive or negative effects on the well-being of the elderly is an empirical question that gerontologists need to be aware of and pay attention to.

The majority of the subjects cited the influence of parents, grandparents, and other relatives as a key factor that led them to respect elders. Clearly, socialization and role modeling by family members were suggested to be the most important factor. This underscores the crucial role of the family in instilling values in early ages (Harre & Lamb, 1983). An interesting corollary is that there is little evidence of influence on elder respect from schoolteachers (6% in Table 2).

Elder respect will remain a vital issue in our aging society, and concern over the purported decline of elder respect persists. But has not this concern been an age-old concern of human society? More than two thousand years ago, Plato displayed insight by focusing on the youth as the impressionable period when reverence should be stamped on the mind of the learner. He trusted reverence to check the rise of insolence in the young (Hastings, 1908). In the East, before Plato, Confucius emphasized the importance of elder respect by stating, “Filial piety today is taken to mean providing nourishment for parents, but even dogs and horses are provided with nourishment. If it is not done with reverence for parents, what is the difference between men and animals?” (Analects, Bk. 2. Ch. 7). The concern expressed by these great scholars still pervades the modern society as it has over many generations in the past.

One should not be overly concerned or discouraged, however, for there is an indication that young people still respect the elderly, as demonstrated by this study. There is room for optimism and change as long as such a positive sign exists. We must struggle to preserve this sign, for without it, the disrespectful treatment of the elderly may increase.

Nevertheless, this exploratory study does have limitations: the sample was drawn from only two universities selected purposively, and situational factors surrounding the subjects were not fully accounted for. Furthermore, the study allotted limited time and cost to the survey and interviews. These constraints could have delimited the scope and depth of exploration. Future research should use a wider range of representative samples that include younger adults not attending college and older adults who assume greater care-giving obligations. Finally, future research should carry out longitudinal studies to account for the following issues,
among others: the changing trend in the way of respecting the elderly, appropriate forms of elder respect in varied contexts of social relations, and older adults’ perception of these forms.

REFERENCES


