

TIED TO EACH OTHER THROUGH TIES TO THE LAND:
INFORMAL SUPPORT OF BLACK ELDERS IN A
SOUTHERN U.S. COMMUNITY

ABSTRACT. This paper is about informal support of older blacks in a rural community in North Carolina. It explores the use of various theoretical ideas related to reciprocity and exchange. The observed intragroup variation in informal support is categorized into six coping strategies, all related to whether or not informants own land. Landowning elders are able to obligate children and other potential helpers by allowing them to settle on their land. The resulting residential enclaves are important sources of informal support. In contrast, landless elders are tied to landowners and to each other in various kinds of relationships, and differ considerably in their ability to mobilize informal support. Geographical proximity emerges as an important constraint on helping behaviors, and the concept of delayed reciprocity explains some of the seemingly nonreciprocal exchanges.

Key Words: informal support, reciprocity and exchange, minority aging, coping strategies

“Colored people around here do nothing for me.”

“You want me to tell you who helps me out?
Oh Lord, I couldn’t begin to name them all...”

INTRODUCTION

These remarks by two black elders who live in the same community reflect individuals’ differential power in relationships. They also echo the controversy over the amount and adequacy of informal support of black elders. Not all black elders are embedded in a large and supportive kin network; these two speakers’ differential ability to obtain informal support is predicated on what they have to give in return. This paper builds on the work on intragroup variations in black elders’ informal support, and it explores the use of various theoretical ideas related to reciprocity and exchange.

Focusing on the relationship between land and informal support, this paper examines the kinds of bonds that tie people together and the kinds of resources they bring to exchange. Elders’ ability to mobilize help for obtaining food, transportation, help with chores, company, comfort, and information depends to a large extent on their relationship to the land. Landowners can surround themselves with children and other kin because they possess a resource of important exchange value: land on which to allow others to establish a home. By letting them settle on their land, these elders create a pool of potential helpers who are indebted to them, and they exercise considerable power to call in this debt. Landless elders, having fewer exchange resources, are less secure; they vary considerably in their ability to obtain informal support. Yet even the poorest have something to give, and some of their seemingly nonreciprocal exchanges are understood more clearly with reference to favors done in the past.

This temporal dimension of exchange is ignored in Dowd's (1975, 1980) theory of aging as exchange, in which aging is viewed as a loss of power due to a loss of exchange resources "until all that remains ... is the humble capacity to comply" (1975: 587). Dowd's perspective does not explain some of the seemingly nonreciprocal exchanges observed during this study. Although some elders consistently received more than they gave, they did not correct such imbalances with compliance which, in many cases, would have had to consist of total submission.

This paper contributes to an extension of Dowd's theory of exchange by showing that partners in long-standing relationships consider past favors when they evaluate the equity of current exchanges. It contributes to the support literature by revealing constraints on children's helping behaviors, and by documenting important intragroup differences in black elders' ability to obtain support. Children cannot automatically be counted on for help; they are more likely to be useful if they are nearby. Keeping them nearby is a major goal of several coping strategies used by elders in this community.

MINORITY AGING AND INFORMAL SUPPORT

Numerous studies have examined the role of family members in providing informal support to older blacks. Some of the earlier studies on the black extended family created an "informal support systems' euphoria" (Sokolovsky 1985: 14), based largely on the perception that members of minorities, and particularly blacks, are blessed with large supportive kin networks that can be mobilized in times of crisis. Subsequent studies exploring more explicitly the different kinds of informal support provided to elders – by whom, under what circumstances, and how frequently – have painted a more complex picture and have offered sometimes inconclusive or even contradictory evidence.

Studies on blacks' informal support have compared either blacks with whites (Cantor 1979; Hanson, Sauer, and Seelbach 1983; Hatch 1991; Hoyert 1991; Jackson 1980; Johnson and Barer 1990; Mindel, Wright, and Starrett 1986; Mitchell and Register 1984; Mutran 1985), or have examined blacks only (Chatters, Taylor, and Jackson 1986; Jackson 1969; Taylor 1985, 1986, 1988; Taylor and Chatters 1986, 1991). Some of the comparative studies found that blacks had larger support networks and relied more heavily on informal support than did whites (Johnson and Barer 1990; Mitchell and Register 1984; Mutran 1985). Johnson and Barer (1990), for example, reported that inner-city blacks had more active informal support networks and were more satisfied with these relationships than were whites, although there were no differences in the actual instrumental help they received. Mitchell and Register (1984) found that although whites had more frequent contacts with their children and grandchildren, blacks were more likely to receive help from them and to live in extended households. Mutran (1985) found that older black parents both gave and received more help than did older white parents. Others have pointed to black-white differences in the direction and kind of support between generations

(Jackson 1980; Hatch 1991; Hoyert 1991; Mindel, Wright, and Starrett 1986).

Those who examined only elderly blacks found considerable intragroup variation in the kind and extent of informal support, depending on a complex interplay of several demographic and familial variables. Among the predictors of informal social support are regional/cultural differences between southerners and northeasterners (Chatters, Taylor, and Jackson 1986: 99, Taylor 1985: 494), urban-rural differences (Jackson 1970), gender differences and differences in the proximity and availability of helpers (Taylor 1985), differences in the choice of helper (Chatters, Taylor, and Jackson 1986), occupational status (Jackson 1969), income (Taylor 1986), and the presence or absence of children who serve as links to other support (Taylor and Chatters 1986).

THE CONCEPT OF COPING

The notion of coping in old age is important in gerontology. It has been used as the guiding assumption for many studies of adaptation to the changes, and particularly the losses, that occur with aging. Coping has been defined variously in terms of attitudes, behaviors, resources, and institutions; it includes reactions such as prayer (Gibson 1982, 1986) and attitudes such as making the best of a situation or putting up with a situation. The concept of *coping styles* has been used to refer to more complex behaviors such as Uncle Tomism, appearing to agree with persons in authority, or avoiding them altogether (Dancy 1977: 32–33). *Coping structures* refer to ingroup support systems such as the family or the church (Moore 1971: 89). *Coping resources* have been defined as the means available for dealing with stress, whereas *coping strategies* are the “specific responses to stressor or problem situations aimed at diminishing stress” (Kahana, Kahana, and Kinney 1990: 73). The coping strategies described in this paper can be regarded, for the most part, as long-range adaptations to endemic poverty in a community that is still blighted by the legacy of a plantation economy.

METHODS

This paper is based on participant observation, farm records, informal visits, and formal interviews with 35 black informants, conducted in Mayfield (pseudonym), a township in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Although the black sample was part of a larger study that also included 38 whites, this paper focuses on the 35 blacks because they exhibit striking intragroup variations in their ability to mobilize informal support. These variations are particularly interesting because they occur among people who might be considered homogeneous in income, cultural background, residence, and occupation: poor rural blacks who have lived a long time in the same community and who farmed all their lives.

Members of the nonrepresentative purposive sample ranged in age from 59 to 90. Although informants varied in functional status, as measured by the ability to perform activities of daily living (ADL), all lived in the community. One man

required long-term care in the sense that he could not have remained in the community if someone had not provided daily care. This is not to say that the others did not need help, but whereas the long-term care recipient was totally *dependent*, the majority of informants were *interdependent* to varying degrees.¹

I lived in the community from 1980 to 1982. Several black ministers introduced me to their congregations and gave me an opportunity to explain publicly the purpose of my presence in Mayfield and to recruit respondents. Throughout my stay, I participated in many events involving elders both in groups and individually, and in both age-segregated and age-integrated settings. These events included Sunday church services, Bible study, social gatherings, revival meetings, agricultural extension service demonstrations, family reunions, congregate meals for seniors, tobacco auctions, and many informal family meals. Because many black elders in this community had no transportation, I "carried" many of them to places where they had to go (doctor's office, hospital, grocery store) or wanted to go (church, visiting, sight-seeing). These trips not only allowed me to reciprocate the hospitality and information that respondents gave me throughout my stay, but also were particularly instructive about informal helping patterns.

After 12 months of participant observation in Mayfield, I conducted the formal interview, a combination of the OARS Multidimensional Functional Assessment Questionnaire (Duke University Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development 1975) and my own questionnaire about land (ownership, attitudes, history of relationship to the land) and social support (kinds of goods and services exchanged, relationship to exchange partners, frequency of interaction, and geographical distance from exchange partner). The underlying theoretical assumption was that geographical proximity might be more important than kinship as a predictor of social support. I also obtained information on sources and amounts of income, other resources, and work history to serve as context for the exchange relationship. The findings reported in this paper draw on all of the sources listed above.

SETTING

Mayfield has a dispersed population of 2,243 persons of whom 54 percent are black. Although no representativeness is claimed here, Mayfield is probably typical of other southern communities with a similar history of a plantation economy based on slavery and its aftermath. Most blacks in Mayfield had worked the land all their lives; not all of them were able to own land: 20 of the 35 persons in the sample were landless. Both the landed and the landless had many children: the landed had an average of 5.6 children, and the landless 6.8. Both landownership and children are relevant to a discussion of informal support in this community because land was the major productive resource during the working years of this cohort, and children were an important source of labor in the system of sharecropping. The more children a sharecropper had, the more land he could farm in a given year. In contrast, landowners had an interest in limiting the number of their children in order to minimize the

fragmentation of their land at the time of succession and inheritance. The fact that this cohort represents the last generation of sharecroppers is also relevant because the end of the sharecropping system meant that their children had to look for off-farm employment.

Regardless of racial differences, rural elders in general have been shown to be worse off than their urban counterparts as to income (Lasseby and Lasseby 1985), health (Goudy and Dobson 1985), housing conditions (Bylund 1985), and access to social and other services (Kroust 1986). Yet they also have been shown to be lifelong residents of stable communities, with the attendant advantages of this situation: historical antecedents, long-standing relationships entailing instrumental and affective exchanges with relatives, neighbors, and friends, and a sense of identity and continuity tied to place (Rowles 1984; Van Willigen 1989). In Mayfield, this community stability was clearly related to landownership (Cf. Groger 1983). Although blacks could and did own land, it was not a source of wealth for those who had managed to acquire it. The landed and landless were equally poor: their annual mean household income was \$5,617 and \$5,732 respectively, and their mean per capita income was \$2,912 and \$2,866 respectively. Of the 15 landed households eight had incomes below the poverty level, and 11 had incomes below 125 percent of the poverty level. For the 20 landless households, comparable figures were 13 and 15 respectively.

Land, however, was of overwhelming importance for continuity, stability, and security – in short, a place to stay. Sharecroppers had to move frequently; if one owned land, no matter how little and how poor in quality, one could not be asked to leave. Landowners had a decisive advantage over the landless in two ways: not only could they stay, but it was also easier for their children to stay in the community by settling on that land, typically in a trailer, and by seeking off-farm employment nearby.² Table I shows that landownership and landlessness result in different patterns of proximity with children: landowners' children are more likely to live next door, whereas the landless are more likely to share a household with their adult children. As will be shown below, these differences in residential patterns have implications for the kind, reliability, and continuity of informal support.

COPING STRATEGIES

In view of the widespread poverty among blacks in this community, and the scarcity (if not complete lack) of services, to what extent do their potentially most important helpers – children and other kin – provide the support without which they might not survive? As a group they have many children; thus, theoretically, they should receive all the help they need. Actually, however, this is not the case. It is not unusual for all but one of 10 or 12 children in a family to live in New York, Baltimore, Detroit, or Philadelphia. Having no land to settle on, many of the sharecroppers' children migrated to northern cities in search of work; there most of them have menial jobs and are struggling to support themselves. They are just as likely to send their children back home to be taken care of as to send significant financial support. Landowners have a definite

TABLE I
Proximity of children of landed and landless

	<i>Landed households</i> (N=15) N (%)	<i>Landless households</i> (N=20) N (%)
Number of households with adult children living next door	10 (66)	3 (15)
Total number of children next door	16	3
Number of households with coresiding adult children	3 (20)	6 (30)
Total number of coresiding adult children	4	12

advantage over the landless because they can and do allow their children to settle on the land, thus enabling them to live rent-free and pursue off-farm employment not far from their homeplace. For many, the difference between having to pay rent and living rent-free is the crucial factor in the decision to stay or to leave.

Because land is so important in this community, it is not surprising that coping strategies revolve around land, both for landowners and for the landless. The six major strategies are (1) creating a compound, (2) joining a compound, (3) pooling resources in extended households, (4) sharing poverty/making do, (5) drawing on a lifetime of banked favors, and (6) educating one's children. These strategies are not the respondents' own categories, but emerged from the analysis of interviews about the meaning of land to the informants. With the exception of educating children – one man (Mr. H., described below) had created a compound *and* educated his children – these categories are mutually exclusive. Each of these strategies is described below and their frequencies are summarized in Table II.

Creating a compound – a settlement of several residences – emerged as the major strategy and as an effective way in which landowners surround themselves with kin. By doing so, they create a pool of potential helpers who are obligated to them and who enhance their status as landowners. Eleven of the 15 landowners had one or more children and/or other relatives living on their land either next door, in the immediate vicinity, or both. Two others had one adult child and one had two adult children living with them.

Mrs. F. owns 25 acres, which she inherited from her parents. Hers is the largest compound, with eight independent households: her own, her daughter's next door, and those of three brothers, one sister, and two first cousins. She has reciprocal exchange relationships with all of these family members: her three brothers and her daughter provide transportation whenever she needs it; the grandsons, brothers, and cousins plow her garden; her sister and her daughter

TABLE II
Coping strategies used by landed and by landless

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Landed</i> (N=15) N (%)	<i>Landless</i> (N=20) N (%)
Creating compound ^a	11 (73)	0
Joining compound	0	6 (30)
Pooling resources in extended households	0	6 (30)
Sharing poverty/making do	0	4 (20)
Cashing in on lifetime favors	0	3 (15)
Educating children ^a	3 (20)	0
Unaccounted-for exceptions	2 (13) ^b	1 (5) ^c

^a The coping strategies were mutually exclusive except for one individual who created a compound and educated his children. This overlap explains why the total for individual strategies of the landed adds up to 16.

^b One had no children; the other was a social isolate who allegedly refused contact with his children because they drank too much.

^c His children lived in the North; although he was 76 years old, he had a full-time job in a nearby town.

take care of her when she is sick; they all visit; and one brother and her sister give her advice. In turn she gives them a place to live by letting them stay on her land; she sews and mends for all of them; she lets them cut firewood; and she provides child care. Mrs. F. feels that she has all the help she needs, and sometimes more company than she wants. Clearly her informal support network meets the functional criteria of supplying "meaningful support in times of crisis and on an ongoing basis" (Cantor 1979: 442).

Although the other compounds are smaller (the mean was 4.8 households and the mode was four), their function is the same for all of those who created them. Mrs. L. has 10 children, of whom three – two sons and one daughter and their children – live next door all around her; one son lives with her. Her three sons, her son-in-law, and her grandson all have off-farm jobs in the area, but they also work her land. Four people provide Mrs. L. with transportation, by far the most important service in rural places, and one that landless individuals without any kin nearby lack most. Mrs. L. receives all the help she needs in nine of ten areas of instrumental needs.

Mrs. E. owns 16 acres with her husband, who had farmed until 10 years previously, when he took a job as a maintenance worker in a hospital. Mrs. E. has worked for a commercial chicken farm for the last 26 years. The land in their section is so poor that nobody wants to rent it. The E. family plows their land without planting "just to keep it open," for to them its value lies in the fact that they would have a place to stay when they grew old, and that it enabled three of their four children to live near them. The fourth, a son who lived in New Jersey at the time of the interviews, was planning to return and to build on the land because of the high cost of living in the north. Landownership enabled the

E. children to stay, and they in turn helped to keep the land by paying the property taxes when the parents were unable to do so. Mrs. E. summed up the significance of land and children in a way that sounded like a general rule: "Land means a lot because when you get old you have a place to live. Children are a great help. If you can't pay the taxes, the children can help you out. If you have no children, you are pitiful."³ If the children had gone away, they would not have had the same stake in the land; if they had established households elsewhere, they might not have been able to contribute in the same way.

Mr. H., who had plenty of land but only four children, created a variant type of compound. He has a son who lives in Delaware, a retarded son who lives at home permanently, and a daughter, a schoolteacher, who lives at home but is hoping to marry soon. Depending on whom she marries, she may or may not settle on her father's land. In the meantime, Mr. H.'s own household and that of his third son make up his compound. He did not have enough children to create a large compound, but he had enough land to create one. Of his 196 acres, he sold 11 contiguous half-acre lots to 11 young black couples, thus creating a whole settlement of people indebted to him. They considered his selling them the land as a great favor because they would have found it difficult to buy land otherwise. Whites would have been unlikely to sell house lots to blacks, and most blacks do not have enough land to sell. Mr. H. now is independent and competent. His own resources, including his children, make it unlikely that he will ever have to call in the favor he bestowed on those 11 young couples. Nevertheless, they constitute a potential resource.

Joining a compound is the reverse side of creating a compound because a compound can only exist if somebody joins it. Old compound joiners, however, unlike the children of compound creators, may be more of a liability than an asset to the compound creator. Joining a compound is a strategy used by two categories of persons: old landless sharecroppers who had a landowning relative and who derived at least some instrumental benefits from living on that relative's land, and return migrants. In this study, all four persons in the first category were women. Two were childless and in extremely bad health, living in trailers on land that belonged to their brothers; the other two, whose children had migrated north, were living on their in-laws' land. Unlike the compound creators, however, these women lacked a pool of people to call on, not because filial responsibility had broken down, but because their opportunity structures were very slight. For transportation and other chores, such as carrying water, they had to rely exclusively on people who themselves were old. Although these people could not meet all of their essential needs, the services they provided were essential, and living on their land represented a definite advantage to the compound joiners.

Return migrants, the other category of compound joiners, found themselves in a more favorable situation because they controlled desirable exchange resources, namely money and status acquired outside the community. After spending their working lives in the north, they returned to their native community with comparatively large retirement benefits.

Consider the case of Mrs. W. who had spent her working life as a salesperson in a department store in Pennsylvania. Her parents had been sharecroppers who eventually were able to buy some land. In the 1960s she inherited one acre from her mother and bought another two acres at the same time because she and her husband knew they wanted to retire in North Carolina. Together they received \$780 a month in Social Security in 1982. Mrs. W. also worked part-time and earned \$140 a month. This amount brought their annual income to \$11,040, well above the mean for the sample. Mrs. W.'s three sisters and one brother also were able to obtain plots of land from their parents; as a result, they all live close enough together to constitute an active network for the exchange of transportation, house-watching services, child care, nursing care, company, food, and gossip. When Mrs. W. and her husband retired to Mayfield, one of her sisters "lent" her a granddaughter for three months to help her get settled.

Mr. I., the other return migrant, retired to Mayfield from a construction job in New York in 1979. In 1962 he had bought 1 1/2 acres of land for a house in anticipation of his retirement. He and his wife had an annual income of \$10,200 from a private pension and Social Security. A nephew and a number of cousins and sisters-in-law live within a five-mile radius. Mr. I. is an important resource for all of these relatives: he helps on farms, provides transportation, does chores for all of them, and enhances their status through association with them. In return he enjoys their companionship and appreciation.

Pooling resources by living in an extended household is another effective way for landless persons to share limited resources. Although landowners have what would be required to establish an extended household, namely a place to live and kin to live with, this strategy is used predominantly by the landless. Extended households consist of the older individual or couple, one or more of their adult children, either with but more likely without a spouse, and one or more of those individuals' children. The largest of these households contained eight members; the mean was 5.5.

Mr. and Mrs. F., retired sharecroppers, live in a big run-down frame house for which they pay \$30 a month. They have 12 children: three sons and three daughters within six miles, one son and one daughter 25 miles away, one daughter in New Jersey, and three adult daughters who, with two of their own children, live with them. One of the daughters who lives at home is unemployed; another works as a laundress at the Holiday Inn in the nearby town; the third works in a textile plant. Mrs. F. cooks, sews, and mends for all but the daughter in New Jersey. They all share food, household items, and clothing, and whoever has money pays the bills.

Mr. B. sharecropped until 1969, when at age 51 he took a job as a janitor in the local school. At age 62 he retired on disability. He has five children, of whom four – three adult daughters and his 16-year-old son – live with him and his wife. Also living in the household are two children of the older daughters. The two older daughters work in a hosiery plant; the youngest daughter was looking for work at the time of the study. When the two older daughters found jobs, they saved enough money to make a down payment on the house in which

the family now lives. They decided that they would be able to own their own home only by pooling their resources. The house is modest by most standards, but greatly superior to the few dwellings that are for rent in this community.

Sharing poverty or making do: Some landless individuals had no opportunity either to join a compound or to live in an extended household. Their coping strategies were limited to what might be called "sharing poverty" because the few persons in their support network were so poor themselves that they could do little for each other. Yet they constantly shared the few resources they had (cf. Mitchell and Register 1984: 53; Stack 1974).

Mr. A., 79, a sharecropper all his life, was receiving \$150 a month in Social Security in spring 1981. In April his food stamps, worth \$18 a month, were discontinued for reasons he did not understand. He earns a little extra money by cutting grass and doing chores for neighbors. By his own admission, he owns "nothing but six foot back yonder at the church," a grave for which he pays \$2 a month. He lives rent-free in a shack owned by the woman whose farm he had worked; in return he tends her yard. He fetches his drinking and cooking water at his landlady's house, and collects rainwater or fetches water from a pond for other purposes. Mr. A. was in visibly poor health, and admitted to feeling bad most of the time. He has high blood pressure but cannot afford the medication or the trip to the physician's office, for which he would have to pay someone.

Mr. A.'s social support is of the most tenuous kind. Although he has nine children (six sons and three daughters), of whom seven live within six miles and two live twenty miles away, he sees only two daughters: one lives across the street from him, and the other three miles down the road. He does not want to see the others because they drink too much. The daughter next door, who has a teenage daughter and a small baby, is struggling herself to survive. Separated from her husband, she used to work in a sawmill but had to give up her job when she had the baby. Mr. A. lends her a little money sometimes, which she pays back when she can. In return, she does his laundry and some housekeeping for him. The other daughter, who lives three miles away, sometimes does his shopping.

When I visited Mr. A. one day in August, he was waiting for his granddaughter to bring him some buttermilk, his meal for the day. He is bound to both daughters by strong ties of reciprocity, in which they share the few resources they control. It was Mr. A. who insisted that "colored people around here" did nothing for him and that his landlady and "a white fellow down there" were the only people who helped him.

Cashing in on a lifetime of favors: Like those who shared poverty, people who used this strategy seemed to control few exchange resources, at least when viewed in terms of immediate reciprocity. Yet, if one examines their exchanges over a lifetime, a different picture emerges. Unlike those who shared poverty, two of these individuals had children who could and did support them generously and consistently. It was clear that these elders were drawing on their accumulated credit of lifetime service to their children, using "a life course accounting system" (Antonucci and Jackson 1987: 296).

Mrs. J., a 59-year-old widow, had raised 19 children, 10 of her own and nine from her husband's first marriage. She and her husband had worked as sharecroppers. When her husband died, she was 58 years old and thus too young for survivors' benefits under Social Security. At the time of the interviews, she earned about \$100 a month by doing part-time housework. The difference between what she earned and what she needed was made up by contributions from her children, who "help out, give money, and pay the bills." Mrs. J. lives in a new house that one of her daughters, who lives in a trailer next door, is buying. Her attitude is not that of a person who has nothing to give but compliance because she has lost all resources (Dowd 1975). When she speaks proudly about how her children take care of her, she never fails to add why they are doing it: she raised them, and now they are paying her back.

Mr. K., 83, lives with his wife on \$378 a month in Social Security and \$37 in food stamps. They pay \$50 a month to rent a dilapidated frame house that sits on the land of one of the men for whom Mr. K. had farmed. Mr. K. has 11 children, who are of little or no help to him. Three sons live within 15 miles: one works on a farm, and two work as janitors in a nearby institution. Another son, who lives in South Carolina, is disabled and works only occasionally; his six other sons live in New York and Baltimore, where three work as cooks, one as a construction worker, and one for a trucking company. His only daughter cleans houses in Long Island. The son who lives five miles away provides occasional transportation to places where Mr. K. does not feel comfortable driving himself.

The most important persons in Mr. K.'s informal support network are four white men. One of these men, whom he calls his "white daddy and first banker," that is a prime source of money for Mr. K. The others he calls his "second and third bankers" – that is, persons he can also ask for money. He refers to his second "banker" as his "best friend and right hand." The fourth man also would lend him money if Mr. K. asked. Mr. K. used to work for all four of these men: for the "white daddy" for 20 years in his tobacco warehouse, and for the others on their farms. The fourth person is a blind man who owns a store where Mr. K. works when the owner's wife has to go out. Mr. K. describes his main function as protecting the blind man, for which purpose he carries a gun. They make a touching pair, clearly deriving comfort from their interdependence. When one observes Mr. K. shuffling along with difficulty, one wonders about his ability to protect anybody, including himself, but he does look out for himself. When he is alone with the owner, Mr. K. can take anything he wants from the store, including money. When the owner's wife is present he is allowed to take home merchandise on credit. His three "bankers" provide him with a constant flow of small amounts of money, which he does not repay.

In a sense, Mr. K. is making paternalism work for him and cashing in on the favors he did for these men by accepting underpaid employment over the years. He is a jovial, outgoing, gregarious man, whose demeanor indicates that he knows that they know that he knows that he is poor and they are well off because they exploited people like him.

Educating children was a strategy undertaken by this cohort only infrequently

and against great odds. Mr. and Mrs. G. have five children: one son is an accountant in Atlanta, another is the business manager of a college in Winston-Salem, and their three daughters are schoolteachers in Ohio and New Jersey. The children's children are all in private schools and are doing very well; the oldest grandson wants to be a doctor. In October 1980 the children gave a reception for their parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary, to which 250 guests came. The celebration was a series of public tributes by the children to their parents; the theme was how the parents, under the most adverse circumstances, had put all five of them through college. The parents themselves like to tell this story of their own sustained efforts over the years to motivate their children to stay in school.

The parents used a deliberate strategy that enabled them to match the children's motivation with financial support all the way through college and graduate school. They themselves had only a fourth-grade education; they felt keenly that "something was missing" and believed that education was important. When the children reached high school age, the parents gave up farming and took jobs at an institution for handicapped children. Mrs. G. worked as a cook; Mr. G. worked the night shift as a boiler man and the day shift as a mill-worker. For a number of years he had three jobs. By the time the children had finished college, the parents were so used to working that they kept their jobs. Eventually they were able to buy their own farm, which they still worked at the time of the interviews. They had retired from their jobs with relatively good Social Security benefits and overall satisfactory resources. Both of them drove a car; they ate at the senior nutrition site, where they also worked as volunteers.

Although all of Mr. and Mrs. G.'s children have left home, they remain in close and frequent contact. The children constantly send gifts, and would send money if their parents needed it. In addition to organizing and paying for the anniversary reception, they bought their parents a Caribbean cruise, something quite unusual in this community. Because Mr. and Mrs. G. are healthy and financially secure, and needed neither money nor other help, the children resorted to this rather extravagant way of repaying their parents' extraordinary efforts. The parents could have bought the cruise for themselves, but the fact that their children did it for them was a source of pleasure and pride to everyone concerned. The parents bragged about it, and the children coyly minimized it by comparing it to what their parents had done for them. They made it clear that no matter how extraordinary the gift, it could never balance the exchange relationship. While the parents praised their children's accomplishments, the children continued to talk about their educational achievements as if they were the parents' accomplishment. The verbal expression of praise and gratitude assumed high exchange value, in which parents and children competed with each other. Nevertheless, the children would be indebted forever to their parents.

By educating their children, Mr. and Mrs. G. "cheated" themselves out of the comfort of having their children settle around them and form a compound, for in this community social mobility usually implies geographic mobility. Mr. H., who recruited nonkin for his compound, was more fortunate than Mr. and Mrs. G. in that one of his educated sons could settle next door. As the principal of the

local school, Mr. H.'s son enjoys prestige in the community, in which his father shares by association.

DISCUSSION

Considerable intragroup variations exist in the informal support of black elders in a seemingly homogeneous community. The different strategies for mobilizing support are expressions of the differences in exchange resources controlled by elders. Landowners had a decisive advantage over the landless because they could and did obligate children and other kin by allowing them to settle on the land. These settlers in turn constituted an active, reliable, and continuous source of support, providing landowners with an impressive capacity to call in help. By creating compounds, landowners overcame the potentially damaging effect of geographic separation from their children, which many landless persons experienced.

In contrast, the support rallied by the landless who joined a compound was more episodic and more incidental. These individuals were more likely to have only one person in the compound who provided help. Return migrants also had ties to the land, which they were able to exploit for their reintegration into the community. The fact that they brought exchange resources earned outside the community – money and prestige – facilitated their reintegration.

Those who managed to educate their children took the risk of finding themselves without offspring nearby, for social mobility also meant geographical separation. Children in this community were potentially more useful when they were at hand. In fact, whether or not they were nearby, they could be truly useful only if they achieved a certain degree of well-being. In the case of the families who educated their children, the parents themselves achieved relative economic success. Although they did not have to call on their children for material support, the children went out of their way to publicly acknowledge their filial responsibilities.

Those who did not own land or who had no landowning relatives, depended on pooling resources in extended households, cashing in on a lifetime of accumulated favors, and sharing poverty. Because of their thin support structures, they did not always receive all the support they needed. Yet in spite of their poor exchange resources, they were engaged in constant and vital exchange relationships. One could say that the smaller the exchanges, the more crucial they were for day-to-day subsistence.

Geographic proximity of potential helpers emerged as an important condition for the provision of informal support. Although landowners were better able to create supportive bonds through the ownership of land, the social bonds of the landless also were shaped by relationships to the land. To say that the landless had no connection to the land would be to ignore the fact that they had worked as sharecroppers all their lives. Their landlessness caused their children to be dispersed more widely. Thus the same forces that had made the landless elders more likely to need informal support also made it more difficult to mobilize such support. If their children were not available to form an extended household or even to share poverty, they were more likely to be living in the north, where

many of them had to struggle to support themselves and thus were of little help to their parents.

Without reference to the concept of delayed reciprocity, some of the behaviors described above would appear lopsided and nonreciprocal. Elders who apparently have nothing to give are not reduced to giving compliance, a sign of subordination and powerlessness, unless one considers expressions of gratitude as such a sign. All share the few things they possess, and some are quite adept at drawing on their lifetime "bank accounts" of accumulated favors. Actually, the expression of gratitude serves as a reminder that those who apparently do not reciprocate the generous support they receive now are being in fact repaid for what they did in the past.

Because Dowd's theory of aging as exchange lacks a temporal dimension, it cannot adequately account for such drawn-out transactions. In a later formulation, Dowd (1984: 102) conceded that the rule of reciprocity may be suspended for old people who could "receive more than they are owed under the norm of reciprocity." Using Mayfield as a case study, one could argue that the rule of reciprocity is not suspended, but that a variant type of the rule applies – that of delayed reciprocity. Where immediate reciprocity is characterized by a minimum of obligation and a maximum of social distance, delayed reciprocity is an expression of diffuse and generalized obligation which characterizes kin or other close relationships of long standing (Sahlins 1965). Thus seemingly non-reciprocal exchanges reveal themselves as reciprocal when they are seen in a life-course perspective.

It has been pointed out that there is no room for altruism in exchange theorists' bleak scenario of human relationships in which each partner tries to obtain the utmost benefit (Cf. Cheal 1988). There is also no room for interpreting repeated and lasting nonreciprocal exchanges as anything but aberrations. To explain such nonreciprocal exchanges, Dowd's formulation resorts to deference and compliance, concepts that are as difficult to operationalize as is altruism. In spite of these difficulties, Dowd's theory of aging as exchange has generated many "influential ideas" (Morgan, Schuster and Butner 1991: 287) and provided a framework for examining old persons' informal support. The usefulness of this framework could be enhanced by incorporating a life-course perspective with reference to delayed reciprocity. Like "classical" social exchange theory, the perspective of delayed reciprocity allows one to impute self-interest as the motivating force in exchange behaviors. But unlike "classical" social exchange theory, the notion of delayed reciprocity can explain nonreciprocal exchanges without reference to either altruism or compliance.

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NOTES

¹ The notion of total dependency seems straightforward, but the perception or experience of total dependency may well be culturally variable: several black females should have had someone to look after them daily, but in the absence of such a person and in the absence of other alternatives, they managed somehow.

² This is of particular significance in connection with the apparent increase in rural homelessness in the United States (Fitchen 1991).

³ A number of blacks in Mayfield who had owned land had to sell it because they could not pay the property taxes.

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