

**Literature Review**  
**‘Mutual Respect’**  
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# Literature Review

## ‘Mutual Respect’

What does ‘mutual respect’ mean and how does one have a relationship that is built on mutual respect? Can ‘Mutual Respect’ be used as a protective factor against abuse and violence? These are the core elements of my research. Firstly I will give some examples of meanings of mutual respect and then go through some literature to identify how it is recognized and displayed in relationships and communities. This may help to give ideas to encourage and foster mutual respect in relationships and in particular towards the elderly. Ageism is another component that will be explored as it is sometimes referred to as the cause for discrimination against older people in society.

Mutual is defined as a level of equality that goes both ways, being reciprocal; having the same relationship each to the other; possessed in common; of treating each other in the same way. Respect has a number of meanings and is used in a combination of ways for example; avoid interfering with, harming, degrading, insulting, injuring, or interrupting; treat with consideration, refrain from offending, corrupting, or tempting (a person, a person’s feelings, etc.).<sup>1</sup> In a work environment for example it is defined “as proper regard for the dignity of person or position”.<sup>2</sup> Ageism is defined as discrimination against people on the basis of age. It is a specific discrimination against prejudicial stereotyping of older people and could be considered a reason why younger people display a lack of mutual respect towards elderly people.<sup>3</sup> Personal meaning is also a key component to successful ageing according to developmental psychologists and even more so in old age because one’s sources of meaning are at greater risk, due to the loss of personal relationships, career and community roles.<sup>4</sup> The above definitions highlight that mutual respect is not a straight forward concept and one that can be quite challenging to define.

Some of the following items have been selected from a ‘Respect Checklist’ obtained from the ‘*when love hurts*’ website to stress that respect is a difficult topic for people to describe, individual perceptions are different, it can be a contextual matter for some and also feelings of being respected

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<sup>1</sup> The Australian Oxford Dictionary, Second Edition (2004) Edited by Bruce Moore, Oxford University Press, p1097

<sup>2</sup> University of Medicine and Dentistry, (2004) Office of Business Conduct/Corporate Compliance & Privacy  
[http://www.umdj.edu/rimweb/rim\\_mentor/m02\\_mentorresp/m02\\_00int.htm](http://www.umdj.edu/rimweb/rim_mentor/m02_mentorresp/m02_00int.htm)

<sup>3</sup> The Australian Oxford Dictionary, Second Edition (2004) Edited by Bruce Moore, Oxford University Press, p 23

<sup>4</sup> Proehl, R A Social justice, respect, and meaning-making: keys to working with the homeless elderly population. 32.4 (Nov 2007) (Practice Forum) (Saint Mary’s Center) p 301(7)

can vary from person to person. The list is to help individuals that are involved in an intimate relationship to identify respect in their relationship. It can be used as a tool for any age group and has been included in this report to emphasize that many people don't know what a respectful relationship feels like. The checklist begins with the feeling of being loved and how that might feel for individuals thus, when someone loves you, you feel valued, respected and hence feel free to be yourself. One should not be made to feel intimidated or controlled. In any relationship individuals have rights and must be treated with respect; that means that both people in a relationship should:

- Be willing to compromise
- Be allowed to feel comfortable being themselves
- Feel able to admit to being wrong
- Try to resolve conflict by talking honestly
- Foster an environment in which both are able to feel safe
- Respect each other's feelings, opinions and their friends
- Accept the others' wish to refrain from any activity
- Accepts changes in ones opinion over time<sup>5</sup>.

According to the Australian Government, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the basis for a safe community is formed by respectful interpersonal relationships. It is never too early to learn the values and practice the skills that enable people to develop and sustain a relationship that is ethical and non-violent. It is assumed that these values are learned in the home but this is not necessarily the case. Given the number of people that experience or witness violence and other forms of abuse in their homes, it is critical that respectful relationships education be delivered through schools, faith-based organisations, recreational and/or sporting facilities, formal care centres and other environments that are influential on young people. Supporting parents to be effective in raising respectful children, and skilling teachers, youth workers and community leaders to educate for respectful relationships is also critical to achieving the safety and wellbeing of all individuals, families and communities.<sup>6</sup> The Department further acknowledged that public campaigns are a critical partner in any social change process, with evidence to suggest that they work when they focus on positive messages that promote cultural and behavioural change. However, the report does

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<sup>5</sup> A guide on love, respect and abuse in relationships. *Respect Checklist*. When love hurts website [www.dvirc.org.au/whenlove/respect.htm](http://www.dvirc.org.au/whenlove/respect.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Time for Action: The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2009–2021 - A Snapshot. Australian Government, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs website. [http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/pubs/violence/np\\_time\\_for\\_action/snapshot\\_summary/Pages/p2.aspx#4](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/pubs/violence/np_time_for_action/snapshot_summary/Pages/p2.aspx#4)

acknowledge that there has been a failure to invest in primary prevention strategies and past communication campaigns have not been sustained or sufficiently aligned to ensure coherency in messages to the community.<sup>7</sup>

There has been very little research conducted into the topic of mutual respect for the elderly in a domestic or home environment. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has recognised that there is a need to develop a global strategy for the prevention of elder abuse and have conducted a study entitled “*Missing voices: views of older persons on elder abuse*”. The study was conducted through focus groups from eight countries being Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Canada, India, Kenya, Lebanon and Sweden. Abuse was perceived in older people to be in three broad areas: Neglect, Violation and Deprivation. Key categories of abuse identified by participants were; structural and societal abuse; neglect and abandonment; disrespect and ageist attitudes; psychological, emotional and verbal abuse; physical abuse; legal and financial abuse. The study also established that the topic of elder abuse was one that many older adults found very difficult to discuss. The report also found that gender and socio-economic status played a role in elder abuse. The study identified one of the most painful forms of mistreatment identified by older adults was disrespect.

*“People talk down to us- call us ‘sweetie’ or ‘dearie’- tell us what to do”. (Canada)*

*“Respect is better than food and drink”. (Lebanon)*

One of the studies recommendations was to mobilize civil society through raising awareness of the widespread magnitude of elder abuse. Disrespect was linked to verbal and emotional abuse as well as to neglect, it was considered more pervasive and all-encompassing. Ultimately it was an indicator of poor social attitudes towards older people, with many groups considering that the younger generations were particularly disrespectful. Generally there was agreement that social values and attitudes had changed dramatically. The media was blamed for influencing and promoting ageist attitudes and negative stereotypes of older people, influences to which the youth are particularly vulnerable. By contrast previous generations were mentioned as being more sensitive, caring and polite towards their parents and grandparent whilst younger people today were considered to be more disrespectful and careless towards older people. This was blamed on the collapse of family bonds and authority shifting to children. (Lebanon) Disrespect was also discussed as a problem on public transport. (Brazil and

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<sup>7</sup> *Time for Action* The National Council’s Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children. 2009-2012. A *Snapshot* March 2009  
[http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/pubs/violence/np\\_time\\_for\\_action/snapshot\\_summary/Documents/A\\_Snapshot.pdf](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/pubs/violence/np_time_for_action/snapshot_summary/Documents/A_Snapshot.pdf)

Austria)<sup>8</sup> A vulnerable time for older people was considered to be retirement, particularly for men, it was a time when everything suddenly changed and an individual's productive capacity was lost as well as one's professional and/or vocational role.<sup>9</sup>

Mutual respect is something that can be learned and fostered as a child. It is one component of a respectful relationship that can be shared throughout life and form the basis of many other relationships. Carol Wohlfeil discusses the importance of mutual respect in the parent-child relationship. She defines respect as the “*willingness to show deferential consideration, appreciation, and regard for another's opinion, wishes, and judgment*”. Adults generally understand the importance of demonstrating respect to those who are considered their equal, or those in a position of authority. Yet parents can mistakenly view respect as a one-way street, placing themselves on the receiving end of what is considered their just due. Considering themselves to be older and wiser, life givers and providers to their children, and any difference of opinion that may be demonstrated by their children would be considered displaying disrespect. The foundations for mutual respect, according to Judy Arnall, lie in the importance of treating children as one would want to be treated. As human beings, “*children have the right to feel all their feelings, to have their body's dignity respected and are entitled to expect to be treated worthily*”.<sup>10</sup>

In everyday life respect has great importance. One envisages that children are taught, to respect their parents, teachers and elders. One is taught to respect school rules, traffic laws, family and cultural traditions. Individuals learn to respect other people's feelings and rights, the truth, and people's differing opinions. One comes to value respect for such things and may even shake their heads at people who have not learned to show respect. Individuals develop respect for those who they consider exemplary, and so come to the belief that at some level all people are worthy of respect. One may come to learn that jobs or relationships are unbearable without respect. An individual may even learn the price of disrespect if they violate laws or traditions or expectations, whether they are in agreement with them or not. Calls to respect are part of public life; one is called to respect human life, members of racial and ethnic minorities, gender, sexual orientation, age, religious beliefs, nature and the environment. One also learns that one must respect himself/herself. Respect and self-respect are

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<sup>8</sup> WHO – Missing voices: views of older persons on elder abuse (2002) Geneva, Switzerland, p 12-14  
[http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder\\_abuse/missing\\_voices/en/](http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder_abuse/missing_voices/en/)

<sup>9</sup> WHO – Missing voices: views of older persons on elder abuse (2002) Geneva, Switzerland, p 14  
[http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder\\_abuse/missing\\_voices/en/](http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder_abuse/missing_voices/en/)

<sup>10</sup> Wohlfeil, C. The Importance of Mutual Respect between Parents and Children  
<http://www.helium.com/items/1282441-mutual-respect-between-parent-and-child> accessed 9 January 2010

deeply connected and it is very difficult to respect others if one does not have self respect and others do not respect them.<sup>11</sup>

Kant's ethical theory is the claim that all persons are owed respect purely because they are persons. They are rational beings and therefore are owed respect. To be a person is to have a status that is unlike that of any other kind of being. It is an end in itself demanding dignity. Respect is appropriate and also morally and unconditionally required. One formulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative, which is the supreme principle of morality, commands that our actions express due respect for the worth of persons. "*Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end.*" The fundamental moral obligation for us all is to respect persons according to Kant, therefore what is a morally right action is thus expressed in respect for persons as ends in themselves, whilst morally wrong actions are expressed as disrespect for persons by not valuing them as ends in themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Respect is the core element of a mutually respectful relationship therefore, gaining consistency of mutual respect through generations and in particular towards the elderly promises to be a long and complex journey. There is a general lack of research on the topic both locally and overseas however, the World Health Organisation's comprehensive study of elderly people addressed the views of elder persons surrounding abuse in domestic situations and emphasized it as worldwide problem. This provides hope and also scope for research because it would appear from the report that the world is suffering from a lack of mutual respect. Community awareness campaigns surrounding domestic violence, abuse and neglect have been promoted in the media and by local communities but the campaigns fall short on addressing domestic violence towards the elderly. Ageism is another area that needs further exploration to address if it is a new trend or rather something that has been emerging overtime. Research relating to whether it is getting worse, whether it is based on socio economic status or cultural background would also be worthwhile to identify patterns of mutual respect or the lack of it. The Australian Federal Government does appear to have taken a lead role through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, by identifying that the basis for a safe community is formed by respectful interpersonal relationships. It is hoped that the

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<sup>11</sup>Respect *First published Wed Sep 10, 2003. Substantive revision Mon Dec 14, 2009* Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/respect/>

<sup>12</sup>Respect *First published Wed Sep 10, 2003. Substantive revision Mon Dec 14, 2009* Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy 2.2 Kant's Account of Respect for Persons <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/respect/#KanAccResForPer>

Government can continue to make it a priority and provide the necessary resources, funding and research to continue the campaign.

The perception of lack of mutual respect for the elderly is shocking and saddening in equal measures. Some strategies and plans give some answers but also inevitably pose further questions. Much more research and many conversations are required to help our elderly know what it is like to feel part of a mutually respected relationship and to be able to treat and be treated with mutual respect. One must hope that the journey toward mutual respect will raise awareness and empowerment for older people and hopefully a positive outcome of societal change. It is remarkable for so many people to live to be old: this is something that the world has been striving for and working towards. As the universal declaration of human rights suggests '*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.*'<sup>13</sup> The elderly should be able to live in dignity and free of all forms of abuse and the core element for this commences with respectful relationships.

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<sup>13</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1. <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

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### Background Reading

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