

## **A sloppy end? Reconsidering reciprocity and ‘successful ageing’**

Sjaak van der Geest & Margaret von Faber

The authors explore the conditions for ‘successful ageing’ from the perspective of reciprocity. They have done anthropological research among older people in the Netherlands and Ghana. The Dutch study suggests that older people feel ‘unsuccessful’ if something fundamental is missing in their social contacts. Physical and cognitive decline are of course a nuisance but ‘normal’ if one grows older. One cannot blame them for it. Being deserted by children, other relatives and friends is however experienced as personal failure. The Ghana study shows that older people are sure that they will receive material and emotional support from their children and others if they have ‘invested’ in them during their vital years. Although carried out in very different societies, both studies underscore the decisive role of long-term reciprocity (‘general reciprocity’). This paper critically examines this ‘explanation’ of successful ageing. It is suggested that long-term reciprocity is no absolute guarantee for the maintenance of social contacts. Both in the Dutch and the Ghanaian study good social contacts appear to be the outcome of a mix of long- and short-term reciprocity. If conversations and meetings with older people lose their direct reciprocal dynamics (in ordinary terms: if they become unsatisfactory, boring) due to physical or cognitive limitations of the older person, the latter risks to become lonely, without ‘deserving’ it (i.e. in spite of his/her social investments in the past). In such a situation, life seems to end unfairly, or, to use Cicero’s terms, life becomes a play with a sloppily written end.