INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

In the very first issue of *Alternative Lifestyles* I published a paper entitled “Neogamy and Older Persons: An Examination of Alternatives for Intimacy in the Later Years” (Dressel and Avant, 1978). The purposes of that article were to summarize the available literature regarding elders’ alternative lifestyles, to provide a theoretical orientation for the understanding of neogamy in later life, and to raise issues which required further or initial investigation. Having edited this current special issue on “Alternative Lifestyles and the Elderly,” I reread the 1978 article with some degree of amusement regarding the kinds of information which were not available in putting that article together and with a greater degree of satisfaction that, only two years later, much better quantitative and qualitative information is being generated. Indeed, I feel that the articles in this current issue are illustrations of that claim.

This issue presents six manuscripts which focus on varied alternative lifestyles found among the current cohort of older individuals. Each manuscript makes a unique contribution to the literature on alternative lifestyles and the literature on social gerontology as well. The largely descriptive or exploratory nature of the collective works indicates how underresearched is neogamy among elders. The authors represented in this issue lay the groundwork on which others may build future research efforts in this area.

In the first article Klemmack and Roff provide “hard” (that is, quantitative) data to address popular claims regarding the normative climate in which older people pursue alternative lifestyles. Many popular and scholarly articles in the past several years have presented qualitative data, case studies, or speculation to support the perception that older people are viewed as sexless and as traditional in their lifestyle orientations. These mythologies, it is believed, are translated into normative expectations for behavior. The data provided by Klemmack and Roff, however, challenge such a truism and indicate at least some support for alternative lifestyles of old people. While the approval is not overwhelming, is situation-specific, and comes from a sample
with an above-average level of education, these data will force us to qualify our claims regarding the nature and extent of norms affecting elders. At the same time that the data offered by Klemmack and Roff aid in the revision of a popular claim, they also reinforce our notions of the presence of double standards of aging and of sexuality for older males and females regarding perceptions of appropriate age- and sex-related behaviors. The sample questioned imposed more constraints on sexual behaviors and lifestyles appropriate for older women than for older men. The respondents also reflected cohort differences regarding sexual liberality, with the older cohorts less willing than the younger respondents to endorse alternatives. Thus, despite the glimmer of acceptance offered by the Klemmack and Roff data, the current cohort of elders still operates within rather strict norms of age-appropriate and sex-appropriate behavior endorsed by their age peers. One can anticipate, however, a loosening of norms within future generations of elders.

Usher and McConnell also provide us with "hard" data, theirs focusing specifically on an older sample's interest in and reasons for house-sharing. Propositions from exchange theory are utilized in predicting one's likelihood to favor this living arrangement. The authors find that while exchange theory is useful for predicting positive attitudes toward house-sharing on the basis of instrumental needs, it is not predictive of support for reasons of socioemotional need. Rather, their data imply a synergistic effect regarding the elder's capacity for intimacy through the sharing of one's home: Those individuals who are already socially integrated are more likely to endorse house-sharing than are those who appear to be socially isolated. Usher and McConnell also note their elder respondents' preference for house-sharing with a middle-aged individual and their reluctance to enter into such an arrangement with someone defined as old. It appears that these respondents reflect the tendency of older people not to define themselves as old and to stereotype other old people negatively.

The Streib and Hilker article provides a useful qualitative complement to Usher and McConnell's quantitative data. Through participant observation of and structured interviews with elders residing in a communal living arrangement, the authors are able to identify both functional and dysfunctional aspects of shared