

AGING AND THE FAMILY

Understanding Changes
in Structural and Relationship
Dynamics

Edited by Patricia Neff Cluster
and Sampson Lee Blair

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES
IN FAMILY RESEARCH

VOLUME 17

AGING AND THE FAMILY

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CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES IN FAMILY
RESEARCH VOLUME 17

**AGING AND THE FAMILY:
UNDERSTANDING CHANGES IN
STRUCTURAL AND RELATIONSHIP
DYNAMICS**

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FOREWORD

In Greek mythology, the story of Tithonus has long served as a lens through which aging has been regarded and defined. Although he was mortal, Tithonus was in love with Eos, the Goddess of Dawn. Recognizing that their relationship would come to an end with his eventual death, Eos asked her father, Zeus, to grant Tithonus immortality. As is often the case with myths, a horrible twist ensued, as Eos neglected to ask that her father grant Tithonus eternal youth, in addition to immortality. As a consequence, she remained young, while her lover continued to age, ultimately losing both his physical and mental capacities, along the way. Unable to die, he became a decaying husk, causing even his lover to recoil in fear and disgust. Aging is most certainly a natural and normal aspect of life, as we all grow older and, like Tithonus, begin to experience diminished capacities, as a consequence. Of course, while aging is a process through which we all, as individuals, will experience, it is also a process which affects families, both in terms of family structures and family relationships.

Understanding aging within the familial context begins with the recognition that, just as individuals age, so too do families. Borrowing the perspectives of developmental psychology, which emphasize the stages of life through which individuals pass, family life cycle theorists have long pointed to the fact that families go through an analogous series of developmental stages. Typically beginning with young couples with no children, families begin to establish roles and normative expectations concerning the nature of family structures and relationships. As both parents and children age, their relationships begin to change, as well, and they move as a family through the various stages. Ultimately, children begin to exit the home, going off to establish their own adult lives, while parents typically remain, and begin their passage through middle adulthood and their elderly years. These later stages, involving a multitude of issues concerning aging, are the focus of researchers from a wide variety of disciplines.

Families have a multitude of issues which accompany aging. Individual family members, as they age, often require assistance from younger members. Frequently, adult children, and even grandchildren, provide physical assistance, emotional support, and financial aid to elderly family members. In many instances, such support is reciprocal, with elderly family members supporting younger ones. These forms of assistance can, at times, place considerable strains and burdens upon families. Of course, aging also impacts the nature of relationships, not only across generations, but also those within generations, such as sibling relationships. And, understandably, aging affects spousal relationships, as the additional concerns about physical, cognitive, and financial stressors are often quite problematic, causing considerable burdens. Across all of these issues, it is also necessary to recognize that aging does not occur within a social vacuum – aging and

its ensuing impact upon families will vary tremendously across cultures, social classes, and most notably, across gender.

Over the past century, demographic shifts have served to create many of the aging issues which contemporary family researchers are now examining. Within the majority of modern, post-industrialized societies, life expectancy has increased, while fertility rates have declined. A combination of urbanization, increased materialism, and cultural change has all contributed to these demographic shifts. Many societies now have expanding populations of the elderly, with substantially smaller populations of youth. Such population change has consequences for everything from intergenerational relations to familial norms concerning the role of elderly family members. Simply, aging and its related consequences have moved to the forefront of familial concerns. Within this volume of *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research*, a collection of researchers from around the globe examine many of the aforementioned issues within families, as they relate to how aging affects family structures and relationship dynamics.

In terms of the provision of care to elderly family members, the variations across cultures can sometimes be quite substantial. In order to better illustrate such differences, Els-Marie Anbäcken, Anna-Lena Almqvist, Carl Johansson, Kazushige Kinugasa, Miho Obata, Jinhee Hyun, Jinsook Lee, and Young Joon Park examine how societal change has affected the roles and familial expectations regarding elderly care. In "Older Adults and Care: Reshaped Family Roles in Societal Change. A Comparative Study between Japan, South Korea, and Sweden," their team of researchers find that, while government programs and assistance for the elderly have changed, the role of family in such care is undergoing change, as well. Nguyen Huu Minh and Phan Thi Mai Huong find a similar trend in their research concerning elderly care in Vietnam. In "The Care of Older Adults in The Vietnamese Family and Related Issues," they find that, although traditional cultural norms place the responsibilities of elderly care upon their respective families, there is a wide array of social, economic, and demographic changes which have made such care increasingly difficult and tenuous. As with many countries, government social services are needed to take on the burdens of elderly care, but such programs and policies are often slow to be created and implemented, which can lead to considerable challenges for the elderly.

The care of elderly family members, while often performed by family members, is also supplemented in very tangible ways by paid caregivers. In " "Family Members do Give Hard Times": Home Health Aides' Perceptions of Worker-Family Dynamics in the Home Care Setting," Emily Franzosa and Emma K. Tsui examine the experiences of home health aides, with a particular focus upon their perceptions of the relationships they have with family caregivers. They find that home health aides regard themselves as essential to the care of their elderly patients, but that there is a delicate nature to their roles, relative to those of family caregivers. In their study, they offer several useful recommendations for how home health agencies could better define and negotiate the boundaries of care with family members. The dilemmas encountered by paid caregivers is further illustrated by Hien T. La, Cassandra L. Hua, and J. Scott Brown, in "The Relationship among Caregiving Duration, Paid Leave, and Caregiver Burden."

Using a large sample of paid caregivers, they find a significant linkage between the length of care and the overall burden borne by caregivers. The burdens upon caregivers are quite substantial, and given their tendency to increase over time, there exists a need for support programs for the caregivers.

While elderly family members who are in need of care is a frequent focus of researchers, care, and support within families can also occur wherein the elderly members of families are the care providers. In such instances, a multitude of factors can impact the forms and patterns of support. In “Gender Differences in Grandparent Caregiving and Life Satisfaction of Older Jamaicans,” Nekehia T. Quashie, Julian G. McKoy Davis, Douladel Willie-Tyndale, Kenneth James, and Denise Eldemire-Shearer examine patterns of caregiving provided by grandparents. Using data from a large and nationally representative sample from Jamaica, the team of researchers finds that while there remains a gendered dimension to caregiving, both grandfathers and grandmothers experience significant increases in life satisfaction, as a consequence of their provision of care. Understandably, the roles played by grandparents, and their subsequent impact upon grandmothers and grandfathers, may vary from one culture to another. In “Caregiving Grandmothers and Depressive Symptoms in South Korea,” Seung-won Emily Choi and Zhenmei Zhang analyze data from a large survey of aging in South Korea, with a specific focus upon how grandparenting affects the mental well-being of grandmothers. In their study, they find that active involvement in grandmothers is associated with declines in depressive symptoms, for those who live in multigenerational households with age. However, non-caregiving grandmothers are shown to experience increases in depressive symptoms with age.

Families and family roles are constantly evolving in conjunction with changing societal characteristics, yet in many instances, familial norms and expectations have existed for a considerably long time. In “The Meaning of ‘Filial Piety’ to Older Chinese Parents,” Yiqing Yang uses qualitative data, collected in rural China, to examine how one of the core traits of Chinese families – filial piety – is perceived by contemporary elderly family members. While China has undergone considerable change over recent decades, involving economic, political, and cultural change, filial piety is shown to remain as a core element of family life. There is, though, a recognition that, like so many other facets of family, filial piety does appear to be evolving. The perceptions of elderly family members can have far-reaching effects upon younger family members, as well. In “Geography Matters. The Role of Non-cohabiting Elderly in the Individuals’ Perception about the Quality of Life in a Medium-sized Portuguese City,” Rosalina Pisco Costa investigates how younger family members regard elderly family members, and the associated impacts which such perceptions have upon their lives. Through the use of qualitative data, she finds that younger family members have a very positive perception of older parents and grandparents, but also that the proximity of these family members has influence such perceptions. Demographic change, and particularly change involving residential patterns, may have substantial consequences for the perceptions of the elderly, as well as their involvement with other family members. The context of culture is again illustrated in “Being Women and Growing Old: Social Construction of

Identities and Experiences of Ageing in Contemporary Indian Families.” Using a mixed methodology approach, Chitra S. Nair examines how family structure and roles within Hindu families may affect the well-being of elderly women in India. Above and beyond the feminization of aging, demographic changes and traditional gendered norms often result in elderly women leading somewhat isolated lives, detached from familial roles. Nonetheless, the family represents the most important social context for older women.

The familial context, involving everyone from adult children, grandchildren, and extended kin, is certainly an important part of elderly individuals’ lives. However, understanding aging and the family also requires an examination of the more intimate and personal relationships of the elderly. In “Sexual Satisfaction in Long-term Marriages: Studying the Effect of Nonsexual Predictors in Old Couples,” Josip Obradović and Mira Čudina investigate the sexual satisfaction among long-term couples. Using data from older married couples in Croatia, they find that, while sexual factors are reliable predictors of sexual satisfaction, there are also a wide variety of nonsexual factors, such as emotional intimacy, recreational intimacy, physical attractiveness, participation in key decision-making, and marital quality, which likewise influence partners’ perceptions of sexual satisfaction. Kelsey N. Mattingly, in “Parental Divorce and Social Support Networks in Younger and Older Adults: Extending Modes of Biographical Disruption,” further explores the disruptive impact of parental divorce upon the social support networks of adult children. Through the application of biographical disruption models, the findings suggest that the long-term effects of parental divorce are rather complicated, but do have substantial consequences for the relationships and support networks of adult children.

Relationships in later life are often fraught with difficulty, as the aging process itself sometimes hampers individuals’ ability to remain active with their respective peer networks. In “Social Network Experiences of Older Adults: Differences by Gender and Relationship Status,” Ashley E. Ermer explores how relationship status and gender are associated with the social network experiences of older adults. Using a nationally representative sample from the United States, the study reveals how marital status produces a substantial effect upon the extent to which older adults are actively engaged with their social networks. Although gender differences are shown to be quite substantial, these differences are also intertwined with marital status. In the final chapter of this volume, Brynn Thompson examines the relationship between sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction, among older adults. The sexual lives of elderly couples are often frequently overlooked by researchers, but in “Marital Satisfaction in Older Adults,” the sexual quality of their relationships is shown to have considerable impact upon marital satisfaction. Gender, along with other factors, are also shown to influence marital satisfaction, but the findings do underscore the need for researchers to address the effects of sexual behavior upon other aspects of elderly individuals’ lives.

This volume of *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research* proposed a closer examination of how aging and its related processes affect families, both in terms of structural and relationship dynamics. Around the globe, there are numerous forms of societal change, including demographic shifts, urbanization,

economic growth, political upheavals, and cultural transitions, to name just a few. Collectively, these are changing the nature of aging itself and, of course, the lives of elderly family members. The studies included in this volume demonstrate that aging has far-reaching effects upon families, involving not just the elderly themselves, but all other family members and even those within their larger peer networks. By examining the nature of aging within the familial context, including its impacts upon the elderly and their respective families, researchers and practitioners may yet achieve a better understanding of new directions for future research and new ways of assisting those who are in need of aid as they go through the aging processes. We extend our sincere gratitude to all of the authors for their important contributions to this volume, and also to all of the anonymous reviewers who provided thoughtful and detailed reviews.

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