FAMILY TIES and AGING

Ingrid Arnet Connidis

Butterworths
Perspectives
on
Individual
and
Population
Aging
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FAMILY TIES AND AGING

by

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In memory of my dear little Kari (1984–1985),
who showed me the magic of life
and family and the depth of a
mother's love

and

To my Mormor ("mother's mother"), Mrs. G. Arnet,
whose love and strength have kept us a family
of four generations, with admiration

BUTTERWORTHS PERSPECTIVES ON INDIVIDUAL AND POPULATION AGING SERIES

This Series represents an exciting and significant development for the field of gerontology in Canada. The production of Canadian-based knowledge about individual and population aging is expanding rapidly, and students, scholars and practitioners are seeking comprehensive yet succinct summaries of the literature on specific topics. Recognizing the common need of this diverse community of gerontologists, Janet Turner, while she was Sponsoring Editor at Butterworths, conceived the idea of a series of specialized monographs that could be used in gerontology courses to complement existing texts and, at the same time, to serve as a valuable reference for those initiating research, developing policies, or providing services to elderly Canadians.

Each monograph includes a state-of-the-art review and analysis of the Canadian-based scientific and professional knowledge on the topic. Where appropriate for comparative purposes, information from other countries is introduced. In addition, some important policy and program implications of the current knowledge base are discussed, and unanswered policy and research questions are raised to stimulate further work in the area. The monographs are written for a wide audience: undergraduate students in a variety of gerontology courses; graduate students and research personnel who need a summary and analysis of the Canadian literature prior to initiating research projects; practitioners who are involved in the daily planning and delivery of services to aging adults; and policy-makers who require current and reliable information in order to design, implement and evaluate policies and legislation for an aging population.

The decision to publish a monograph on a specific topic is based in part on the relevance of the topic for the academic and professional community, as well as on the amount of information available at the time an author is signed to a contract. Because gerontology in Canada is attracting large numbers of highly qualified graduate students as well as increasingly active research personnel in academic, public and private settings, new areas of concentrated research are evolving. Future monographs will reflect this evolution of knowledge pertaining to individual or population aging in Canada.

Before introducing the eighth monograph in the Series, I would like, on behalf of the Series' authors and the gerontology community, to acknowledge the following members of the Butterworths "team" and their respective staffs for their unique and sincere contribution to gerontology in Canada: Andrew Martin, President, for his continuing support of the Series; Gloria Vitale, Managing Academic Editor: Acquisitions, for her enthusiastic commitment to the promotion and expansion of the Series; and Linda Kee, Managing Editor, for her co-ordination of the production, especially her constant reminders to authors (and the Series Editor) that the hands of the clock continue to move in spite of our perceptions that manuscript deadlines were still months or years away. For each of you, we hope the knowledge provided in this Series will have personal value — but not until well into the next century!

Barry D. McPherson
Series Editor

FOREWORD

Even though changes are occurring in both the structure of the family and in the nature of familial relationships, the family *per se* continues to serve as a source of social interaction and support for a large proportion of Canadians. Contrary to the view of some, the majority of older people do live with, or have access to a family member with whom they can interact or turn to for assistance. However, there is significant variation in the nature, frequency and quality of this interaction or support. This occurs because aging is associated with a number of life events that can restrict or enhance the opportunity for familial relationships — marriage, divorce, widowhood, remarriage, health, geographical mobility and fertility rates. These familial relationships are influenced, as well, by such factors as gender, social class, living arrangements, and the past and previous lifestyles of family members.

This monograph analyzes four dimensions of family ties in the later years: the availability of kin; the degree of contact and type of interaction with kin; the nature and type of support or exchange relationships that evolve; and, the quality of familial relationships. Throughout, Dr. Connidis focuses on relationships involving a spouse, children, grandchildren and siblings; and on those unique family relationships which do not involve a spouse (e.g., the never married) or a child (e.g. the childless). In addition to critically reviewing the current literature on family ties and aging, the author enriches her discussion with recent qualitative and quantitative data from a number of Canadian studies, including her own study of 400 adults in London, Ontario. Details concerning these studies are reported in the Appendix, and they should be consulted prior to reading the monograph.

The monograph begins with a historical analysis of aging in family units, along with a demographic profile of the living arrangements, the marital status, and the availability of kin for older Canadians. In Chapter 2, the reader is introduced to the importance of intimate family ties for the well-being and subjective health of older persons. For those who are married, role transitions such as retirement, widowhood, divorce or remarriage are important factors in shaping the social life of older adults. A unique feature of this chapter is the distinction made by the author between the never-married single elder and the divorced or widowed single elder. Moreover, the author presents evidence which seriously questions the commonly-held assumption that never-married elderly persons are isolated, lonely,

alienated or unhappy. Rather, they may very well have siblings and aging parents, as well as nephews, nieces or cousins with whom they interact.

In Chapter 3 the focus is on the frequency, purpose and quality of relations with children and grandchildren. Each of these relationships is viewed as a two-way interaction. This chapter also introduces the issue of elder abuse within the family environment, and stresses that for the childless elderly, a satisfying life in the later years is possible. Chapter 4 represents a unique contribution to the literature on family ties in the later years. Here the focus is on sibling relationships, a topic that is usually neglected in the gerontology literature, despite the fact that this potential relationship can last longer than that with one's parents or with one's spouse. Despite this potential, the saliency and frequency of interaction is usually considerably less than that with children and grandchildren. The final chapter raises methodological issues and unanswered research questions concerning family ties in later life, and initiates a discussion of policy issues cast in terms of C. Wright Mills' distinction between private troubles and public issues.

In summary, this monograph introduces practitioners, researchers and students to recent and important ideas about how family ties shape our life throughout the middle and later years. Despite the fact that the reservoir of family support is shrinking due to decreased fertility rates, and to increased mobility rates, divorce rates and the number of never-married adults, family ties are an important source of social interaction and support. This monograph will stimulate students and scholars in sociology, psychology, social work, family studies and gerontology to focus more of their research, policy and practice efforts on the changing structure and dynamics of familial role relationships throughout the life-cycle.

Barry D. McPherson, Ph.D.
Series Editor
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada
January 1989

PREFACE

Whatever our circumstances, family ties shape our lives and remain important to us throughout adult life. Aging is associated with a number of normal changes in familial relationships. We and our siblings grow up and leave home, some marry, some have children who eventually grow up and leave home, and some of these children, in turn, will marry and have children. At the same time, some family members are lost through death and others through divorce. The fundamental importance of family ties to social life has made aging and the family an area of major research activity.

The pervasive nature of family life is evident in the extent to which discussing the family ties of older persons involves issues related to other areas of interest. Family life both influences and reflects gender differences across the lifespan. Living arrangements are determined in large part by the availability of various kin, especially a spouse. Whether or not older persons have certain kin also affects the nature and source of support they receive when ill.

The objective of this book is to synthesize existing research and to present some original Canadian data on the family ties of older persons. Because the focus is on older persons rather than on the family *per se*, the discussion centres upon the four closest familial relationships common to this age group: spouse, children, grandchildren, and siblings. A counterpoint for discussion is those who do not have a spouse or child.

Chapter 1 presents the general orientation of the book, discusses the place of older people in the family, and provides data regarding the availability of various kin. In Chapter 2, the intimate ties of older persons are examined. Marriage, widowhood, divorce, remarriage, and single life are part of this examination. Intergenerational relations, the interaction between older persons and their children and grandchildren, is the subject of Chapter 3. Chapter 4 is devoted to sibling ties in later life. The book closes with a discussion of research and policy issues related to aging and the family in Chapter 5.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Since turning to aging as my primary area of research, I have felt fortunate to become part of a family of Canadian scholars who make research in aging a particularly enjoyable pursuit. I am very grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its support of my work, first as a Post-doctoral Fellow in Aging, and then through research grants (The Elderly in the Community, no. 492-80-0027; Aging and the Family, no. 492-85-0011). Through its Strategic Grants in Population Aging, the Council has been pivotal in stimulating Canadian research on aging. My aim to present Canadian information has been facilitated by the contribution of data from colleagues across the country. My sincere thanks go to: François Béland, Neena L. Chappell, Angela Connidis, Pat Conrad, Mary Englemann, William F. Forbes, Ellen Gee, Betty Havens, Victor Marshall, Anne Martin Matthews, Claire M. Morris, Carolyn Rosenthal, Judith Stryckman, and Elizabeth Osbaldeston Troyer.

Barry McPherson, the series' editor, and Linda Kee and Gloria Vitale of Butterworths have been a pleasure to work with and I thank them all for a job well done. I am grateful too for the helpful comments made by the anonymous reviewer. Joan LaHay and Marg Miller were extremely able and patient typists, and their efforts are greatly appreciated. My thanks also to Lorraine Davies, who collected and compiled statistics and tracked down hundreds of references.

Writing this book would not have been possible without knowing that my family was in good hands. Very special thanks to Joan McEvoy and Kathleen Morabito for taking such good care of my family, especially Kari and Kai (who arrived while this book was in progress), while I wrote about the families of others.

CONTENTS

TABLES AND FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

OLDER PERSONS IN A FAMILY CONTEXT

> My family has always been an essential part of my life, but the older you get, the more you feel ... how much you need each other. As long as you are together, it is like a tree growing.... The longer the tree is there, the stronger the branches become and the more you are knit into one. So, the more you are together, the more you realize how important it is to be together and stay together.
>
> 66-year-old married father of 2

INTRODUCTION

When we think of families we tend to concentrate on the nuclear family, that is, parents and their children living together in one home. Depending on our stage of life, this may refer to the family of orientation, comprised of parents and siblings, or the family of procreation, consisting of spouse and children (Nett, 1984). Over time, the nuclear family model has become less applicable as more families break the traditional pattern through divorce and remarriage. This model also downplays the significance of the never married and childless in family networks and minimizes the family relationships of those past the child-rearing stage — the middle-aged and elderly. As well, emphasis on the nuclear unit leads to the treatment of other domestic arrangements as abnormal (Nydegger, 1983). However, variations in family households often simply reflect the normal progression of family life and are, therefore, common in later life.

Because the life experiences of any age group are so closely tied to the family, examining the family ties of older individuals can lead to a better understanding of later life. In this book the focus is on familial relationships in older age rather than later life families. This emphasis avoids some of the pitfalls of attempts to define a later life family, such as the exclusion of childless couples (Brubaker, 1985). Selecting a chronological age as the time when such couples become later life families still excludes the never married. However, both the childless and never married, to varying degrees, are active participants in family life as children, nieces, nephews, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Therefore, they are an important part of the family network and do experience "family" life.

Most relationships in older age are continuations of those begun earlier in life and their nature is shaped by past patterns. Poor relationships will probably not become good ones because one reaches old age, while good ones are likely to remain that way. Thus, there is continuity in terms of the prior existence of relationships and the probability that their character is unlikely to change dramatically. However, change also occurs. Some long-term relationships are lost, primarily through death, while others are gained, most notably through birth (grandchildren and great-grandchildren) and remarriage. Change in the nature of past relationships may also occur in response to other changes associated with aging. Widowhood may lead to a reorganization of family ties and more time spent with other family members. Retirement may alter the marital relationship. Health declines may lead to shifts in helping patterns and dependency. Thus, family life in older age is dynamic and involves both continuity and change.

Four dimensions of older persons' ties with spouse, children, grandchildren, and siblings are discussed in this book. First, the *availability of kin* is addressed later in this chapter, through the presentation of Canadian data on the marital status, and the number of children, grandchildren, and siblings of older persons. Second, the *extent of contact and interaction* with available kin is discussed at the beginning of Chapters 2 (Intimate Ties), 3 (Intergenerational Relations), and 4 (Sibling Ties). Third, the *ties* between older family members and various kin are examined as potential avenues *for providing, receiving and exchanging services and aid.* Contact with and exchange of services among kin do not address the quality of kin relations. Thus, the fourth dimension of family ties is the *quality of familial relationships* in later life.

Wherever possible, Canadian information is used. However, research conducted elsewhere, particularly in the United States, Australia, and Britain, is also reported. It remains for Canadian researchers to determine the extent to which the family relationships of older people differ from those in other societies. However, research in some areas, for example, the relationships between adult children and their older parents, indicates similar patterns for Canada and the United States (Rosenthal, 1987a).

In order to supplement the published material on the family ties of older Canadians, a number of researchers in universities and governments across the country were contacted concerning information about the availability of children, grandchildren, spouses, siblings and parents. A description of these studies is provided in the Appendix, which should be read before proceeding further. In addition, data from my study of 400 older persons living in the community, referred to as the London study, are used. These respondents were interviewed in their homes for an average of one hour and forty-five minutes. Forty of them were interviewed a second time and quotes from these interviews are presented to exemplify key themes (for further details, see Connidis, 1987; Marshall, 1987).

THE PLACE OF OLDER PEOPLE IN FAMILIES OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

Several myths about family life persist despite numerous studies that do not support them (see Marshall and Rosenthal, 1983; Nett, 1981; Shanas, 1979). The predominant myth is that the elderly are neglected or abandoned by their families, especially their children. This Golden Age myth assumes a better past for older people, based on three assumptions: (1) that three-generation households predominated in times gone by; (2) that three-generation households signify better family relationships, and; (3) that the respect accorded older persons in the past can be equated with affection (Nydegger, 1983; Shanas, 1979; Swain, 1979).

Contrary to popular belief, the typical family household of the nineteenth century was nuclear, comprised of one generation of parents and their children, throughout the Western world, including Canada (Darroch and Ornstein, 1984; Nett, 1981). Only recently have multigenerational households become a possibility. In the past, much higher mortality rates and lower life expectancy across the life course made the likelihood of multiple generations living together a rarity.

In 1871, Canadian households comprised of three generations ("stemlike households") were typically formed as a consequence of a widowed parent moving in with a child and his or her family. When a child did live with older parents, it was more often sons than daughters who did so, "as one would expect in a society where control of property was largely vested in the male line" (Darroch and Ornstein, 1984:164). Thus, three-generation households reflected either the power of older parents through control over land or, more commonly, the dependence of parents on their children following the loss of a spouse. Furthermore, at the turn of the century, publicly-funded assistance for older people was either non-existent or extremely limited, making three-generation households a forced choice for those elderly who could no longer function alone. Although living with children in old age might, therefore, be more probable, it did not necessarily reflect a happier situation.

Although the elderly in times gone by appear to have received greater respect from younger family members and the community at large, such respect was based on economic power rather than either age per se or being more loved than the elderly of today (Fischer, 1978; Nydegger, 1983). Indeed, in the few instances where accumulated power among the elderly occurs, the consequence is typically intergenerational conflict and competition, not improved familial relations (Nydegger, 1983). Similarly, attempts to find evidence of a "Golden Isle" have led to the general conclusion that age alone is very rarely a basis for preferred status in any culture (Nydegger, 1983). Moreover, studies of hunting tribes, such as the Inuit and a number of Native Peoples, provide support for the predominance of

nuclear families throughout most of human history that preceded the agricultural revolution (Gough, 1971). Thus, the present household structure typified by the nuclear family is not a new phenomenon.

Of course, discounting the assumptions that comprise the myth of a Golden Age does not establish that families of today provide better relationships or support for older adults. However, the modern family has clearly not deserted its older members. Indeed, the network of contact and exchange among nuclear households has resulted in the characterization of today's family as modified extended (Nett, 1984; Shanas, 1979). Family ties beyond the nuclear family household operate on a principle of revocable detachment wherein "dormant emotional ties can be mobilized when they are needed or desired" (George, 1980:79). Some have argued that there is now greater, not less, opportunity for extending family ties (Abu-Laban, 1980b). The history of immigration means that there are now more families with multiple generations living in Canada. As well, the impact of geographic distance has been minimized through speedier methods of communication (telephone) and travel (car, plane), enhancing the opportunity for contact among family members. The near universal provision of family care and support for older members in different cultures and historical periods indicates greater continuity than change in how families treat their elders (Swain, 1979). The novelty of today's situation rests in the relative numbers of old people, particularly the significant increase in the number of very old, who are most likely to become frail.

The potential for conflict in families may be greater today, not because there is less love shared nor because older family members are neglected, but rather because the demands and expectations are greater. Laslett (1978:478) argues that the family has increased in importance "as a source of personal identity and satisfaction in life". However, the demands placed on the family in this regard often exceed the family's ability to meet them, thus creating a potential source of guilt and conflict. Contrary to popular belief, then, the importance of the family has been heightened, not diminished. But, this creates additional strains within the family. The increased emotional significance of the family and its isolation as an appropriate forum for expressing strong feelings, increases "the likelihood that emotionally charged interactions — both positive and negative — will occur" (Laslett, 1978:487). This underlines the importance of exploring the *qualitative* aspects of older people's familial relationships — closeness, solidarity, and loyalty. It also stresses the need to consider the negative aspects of family life that may occur because of structural strains in the kinship system.

THE LIVING ARRANGEMENTS OF OLDER CANADIANS

The living arrangements of older Canadians are indicative of both their continued involvement in a family setting and a trend toward living alone in the