FAMILIES AND AGING

LINDA BURTON
Editor

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Introduction:
Families and the Aged:
Issues of Complexity and Diversity

Linda Burton

The family lives of older Americans are no longer as simple or as homogeneous as some historical accounts suggest (Elder, 1981; Hareven, 1978). Three interrelated phenomena, all of which have occurred in the last century, are transforming traditional perceptions and expectations concerning families and the elderly in contemporary American society. The first and most familiar is the “demographic revolution” (Uhlenberg, 1978; Wells, 1982; Watkins, Menken and Bon‐gaarts, 1987). Characterized by declines in mortality and fertility and a rise in divorce, the demographic revolution has “changed the complexion of family life” (Hagestad, 1988, p. 405). Individuals are now more likely to grow older in four- or even five-generation families, spend an unprecedented number of years in family roles such as grandparenthood, and be part of a more complex and varied web of intergenerational family ties (Bengtson, Rosenthal and Burton, 1990; Hagestad, 1986; Riley, 1983).

The second phenomenon affecting the family lives of the elderly concerns the dramatic increase in cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity in the American population. Through processes such as immigration and integration, and choices concerning nontraditional lifestyles, the American population represents a “potpourri” of family “lifeways”
These lifeways reflect the legacies of Asian, African American, Hispanic, Native American, and European cultural norms and beliefs about family, and the creation of alternative family arrangements by single parents, gay men and lesbians, and others. This diversity in family lifeways coupled with demographic transitions translate into a complex mosaic of family structures, processes, roles, and relationships for aging individuals.

In addition, the family lives of the aged are shaped by a third phenomenon—the social and economic condition of American society. For example, economic setbacks experienced in some families because of a troubled national economy prompt families to develop a variety of adaptive strategies to survive (Elder, 1974). While some families can rely on generating internal economic resources within the extended kin network to meet their needs, other families may be so economically pressed that they look to external sources, such as community social services, for help (Johnson and Barer, 1990; Stack and Burton, in press). The range of strategies developed by families to address social and economic challenges is thus another layer in the mosaic that is family life for aged Americans.

The purpose of this volume is to highlight the complexity and diversity of issues concerning contemporary families and the elderly. The topics covered are of course not an exhaustive treatment of this field of study; they do, however, address a broad array of scholarly, practical, and policy-related interests concerning contemporary family structures, processes, roles, and relationships as they affect and are affected by the lives of older Americans.

To begin, the complexity and diversity of contemporary families and the elderly can best be understood when discussed in the context of historical time. Tamara Hareven opens this volume with a comprehensive overview of the evolution of kin relationships and the elderly in America from the nineteenth century to current times. Given historical transformations in the structure and function of families, Hareven suggests that there have been major changes in the attitudes and the ability of families to provide assistance to older relatives. Hareven argues that these historical changes teach us a lesson—that in order for the needs of the current elderly population to be met, families and social services will have to jointly provide necessary support.

Complementing the work of Hareven, Christine Himes provides an insightful discussion of the effects of the "demographic revolution" on the family lives of older Hispanic, white, and African Americans. She notes that given declines in mortality and fertility, future generations
of older people may be part of more “top-heavy” vertical family structures. These vertical intergenerational family connections, however, may become quite complicated as older individuals become members of “blended” multigenerational families, a product of divorce and remarriage among their adult children.

In the chapter, “Divorced and Reconstituted Families,” Colleen Johnson explores the impact of marital dissolution and remarriage on the lives of older generations in families. Citing evidence from a longitudinal study of suburban families in which marital changes had recently occurred, Johnson describes the diversity of experiences grandparents have with their grandchildren when their adult children divorce and remarry.

An undergirding theme in this volume concerns ethnic and racial variability in the family lives of the elderly. Consistent with the theme of ethnic/racial diversity, Barbara Yee profiles the intergenerational family issues of an emerging group of older Americans—Southeast Asian refugees. Doreen Der-McLeod and Jennie Chin Hansen provide a description of On Lok Senior Health Services of San Francisco—a multietnic comprehensive support program for aged individuals and their families. Peggye Dilworth-Anderson explores the past and future of extended family supports for older African Americans. Carla Walls considers the role of black churches as an alternative form of “family support” for African American elderly. And David Eggebeen examines racial and other variables in intergenerational exchanges between the elderly and their adult children.

A recurrent family role addressed in a number of chapters is grandparenthood. Current research on grandparenthood indicates that the role is more tenuous and diverse in contemporary society than historically-based images of grandmothers and grandfathers suggest (Barranti, 1985; Bengtson and Robertson, 1985; Kivett, 1991; Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Presser, 1989). For example, there is tremendous variability in the amount of involvement grandparents have with their grandchildren (Troll, 1983; Burton and Bengtson, 1985; Hagestad and Burton, 1986). Some grandparents assume the role of surrogate parent to their grandchildren, while others remain relatively uninvolved. Within the context of variable involvement with their grandchildren, grandparents experience challenges as well as opportunities to contribute to the family development. Linda Burton and Cynthia deVries describe some of the challenges and opportunities voiced by 101 African American grandparents who participated in their qualitative studies of intergenerational family processes.
The emerging changes in the family lives of older Americans have not only drawn attention to the traditional family structures, processes, relationships, and roles, but also to topics rarely studied in the field. This issue highlights several of these topics. For example, Douglas Kimmel discusses family issues for older gay men and lesbians. Lori McElhaney provides an overview of the existing literature on dating among elderly Americans. Martha Moyer offers insights on a familial relationship that is becoming of increasing importance to the aged—the relationship between elderly siblings. Bonnie Genevay explores the issues faced by the elderly who live alone. And Lillian Troll and Vern Bengston examine the family relationships of the fastest growing subpopulation of the aged—the oldest-old.

This volume concludes with a focus on policy and programs for families and the elderly. Greta Winbush challenges us to examine the "conceptual" basis on which we design and administer social support to those who provide care for elderly family members. Majorie Cantor describes the necessary linkages that must occur between social services, community supports, and families to meet the growing needs of elderly Americans. Ute Bayen provides a guide to further readings in this area.

It is my hope that readers of this volume come away with heightened interest in exploring the complexity and diversity of families and aging. Clearly, this complexity and diversity will generate new research, policy, and program agendas that address emerging issues and needs for elderly Americans and their families. This volume is an effort toward that end—an effort toward fostering a "new look" at families and aging.
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