

*N. Keating***CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON FAMILIES OF OLDER ADULTS***

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Families are a central feature in the debate about how societies will face the challenges of population aging. In much of the contemporary discourse about families they are viewed as fully responsible for the care and support of their older members, with national differences in whether this responsibility is seen as a societal obligation or an unreasonable burden. Researchers and policy makers have expressed rising concerns about how structural changes to families and their increasing geographic mobility may threaten their caring capacity. Across regions and countries, there is considerable research on whether older adults are embedded in stable family networks from which they can draw support if needed. A more muted theme about the place of families in the lives of older adults places older persons as agents rather than passive recipients in their families. Within this body of literature, there is evidence of the important role of older adults in strengthening cohesion in families, fostering generational connections and caring for younger family members. The transfer of resources from older to younger members is an important feature in both marginalized and affluent families in different regions of the world. It illustrates the way that older adults provide stability to their families in the face of rapid social change. In this paper an overview is presented of the international literature on these complex issues of the place of families in the lives of older adults. Myths about families, regional variation in beliefs about their roles and obligations, and evidence of family structure and household composition of older persons are addressed and regional differences considered.

Key words: *aging families, generational relationships, living arrangements, global families*

Introduction

Families ebb and flow as part of our everyday public discourse and our research agendas in aging. Often political, economic, and broader societal issues bring families back into the foreground. Population aging is the chief of these. There have been marked changes in families resulting from declines in fertility, shifts in the timing of family transitions, increased rates of divorce, and shifts in family structures from pyramids to

beanpoles [6]. The «postmodern family» [39] often is seen as characterized by structural fragility and a greater dependence on the voluntary commitment of its members.

The main theme in discussions of families worldwide has been great concern about the erosion of their ability to support their older members. An example comes from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's declaration of the International Day of Families in 2002. The theme was Families and Aging: Opportunities and Challenges. In the declaration he speaks to three. Migration of younger adults to cities has resulted in loss to older persons of traditional family support. Pandemics such as HIV/AIDS are forcing many older people in developing countries to care for children orphaned by the disease. And erosion of the concept of cradle-to-grave security in many developed countries results in increased risk to older citizens. He says:

Given these challenges, we must redouble our resolve to build a society for all ages — and we must build on families as the basis for achieving it. By helping families promote the active participation of their older members in society and development, we can ensure that older persons' invaluable gifts and experience are put to use, and give them the opportunity to continue learning throughout life. By helping families provide support networks and enabling environments, we can strengthen the bonds of solidarity between generations and combat ... discrimination against older people... Above all we must build on the understanding that the wisdom and experience of older persons form a veritable lifeline in families and societies alike. Older people are intermediaries between the past, the present and the future [43].

These are lofty goals about families as befits such a declaration. Families have become part of the international discourse around population aging. From many regions of the world, scholars emphasize the high levels of expectations of families to be the basis for the

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‘solutions’ to population aging. They argue that families are the key resource to their members [19]; that this is true especially in times of crisis and privation [23]; and that families should be a core element of national policies to support older adults [33]. Not all see this idealization of families as positive. A. Lowenstein [31] argues that many Western societies have placed undue burdens onto families who «continue to carry the major responsibility for eldercare in most modern welfare states».

What is a family?

If we are to reflect on the place of families in the lives of older adults, we need to start with an understanding of what is a family. This is one of the most deceptively simple questions, dealt with extensively by family scholars but less so by gerontologists. Definitions of families often are implicit, part of the received wisdom that can remain unexamined; embedded in culture and in our personal narratives. It is especially because we «know families» that we need to be vigilant about our personal and cultural vantage points, challenging our assumptions about family structure, family obligations and the embeddedness of older adults within families. As S. Ziehl [49] says, the family as an ideological phenomenon must be differentiated from the actual structural arrangements of families.

What are those actual structural relationships? Family structure includes the ties among people who are designated as part of a family group. Many family scholars use structure as the basis for their definitions. From this perspective families can be seen as «a set of relationships determined by biology, adoption, marriage, and in some societies, social designation» [5]; or as «two or more persons related by birth, adoption, marriage or choice» [15]. Speaking of families in Zambia [12], says that «through the matrilineal kinship system people know their ‘proper family’ which emphasizes maternal ties. Women’s children, especially sons constitute the most obvious members of proper family...».

How does one know who is «proper family»? There are two main ways in which family researchers and theorists set structural boundaries around family membership. These are through mapping a set of kinship ties, and through using households as the delineators of family membership. There are disciplinary differences and perspectives in ways of knowing about families, influencing who would be included and excluded depending on the chosen definition. Thus the scope of family membership is a contested issue.

Kinship ties. Anthropologists have been in the forefront of mapping kinship ties. C. L. Johnson [24] argues that there are two main sets of such ties. The first is lineal or generational relationships. These are structural relationships that include parents, children, grandchildren and sometimes even great grandchildren. It may include people in generations past whose names are invoked as part of family folklore and heritage.

Generational relationships have been a major focus of our examination of the family ties of older adults. In all regions of the world there is much research on adult children as supporters to older parents and concern about whether ties between the generations are sufficiently robust that resources will be exchanged when needed [1, 11, 17, 32, 38, 48, 51]. There is increasing interest in relationships between grandparents and grandchildren arising from the need to understand the challenges to families and to older adults of grandparents caring for grandchildren [3, 4, 20, 25, 27, 36, 50].

While important, focus on these lineal relationships leaves out a set of same-generation relatives. These are collateral relationships that include relatives such as spouses, brothers and sisters, siblings-in-law and cousins. There has been much less research interest among social gerontologists in these relationships than in generational connections, perhaps because of our preoccupation with the potential for care to older adults from children and younger family members. Yet same-generation relationships such as those with siblings are the longest standing of all family relationships. Siblings may be in the best situation to support the maintenance of identity and sense of self in the face of health or other changes [10]. There is some research on marriage in late life [7] though more on the impact of widowhood on living arrangements and sources of care. Further exploration of regional differences in beliefs about «who’s family» might lead to increased understanding of who might be called upon for support.

A small group of family gerontology researchers, primarily in Europe and North America, has been building our knowledge of the full networks of family members of older adults [10, 13, 30]. It is through this research that we are beginning to see the support potential of older adults. Of course the subset of these people who would be available to assist could be much smaller and may differ considerably across and within regions of the world [26, 47].

Across regions of the world, structural family ties are institutionalized in laws and customs that set out rights and obligations of family insiders. Yet, these kin-

ship definitions tell us little about the dynamics, quality or history of these relationships, crucial omissions when we think of the intensity of family relationships in late-life caring situations.

Household definitions. The second main approach to structural family definitions is household-based. Family demographers and national organizations such as statistical bureaus that conduct population census and other national data gathering exercises favour these approaches. These definitions are unique in that family structure is bounded by co-residence in a household, often emphasizing spouse and parent child relationships. Two examples illustrate this approach. For the purposes of its census, the United States defines a family as «... a group of two people or more ... related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together» [44]. Similarly, Statistics New Zealand defines a family as «... a couple, with or without child(ren), or one parent and their child(ren), all of whom have usual residence together in the same household» [40].

There are considerable data-gathering advantages to household family definitions. Households which are place-based are easier to locate than families which may be dispersed. Nonetheless, such definitions can give us very different pictures of the families of older adults. For example, two older adults may have similarly large kinship networks. However, depending on customs in living arrangements in different parts of the world, household definitions might capture: many of these relationships in an extended family household, limited generational relationships, or an older person living alone—called a non-family household in some countries.

Like definitions of families, household definitions have embedded assumptions about the relationships among the members. Sharing of resources is assumed. For example, Statistics South Africa [41] defines a household as «... a group of persons who live together and provide themselves jointly with food and/or other essentials for living ...». Other countries define households similarly, including shared cooking facilities and living space. In the UK, a household is: «... one person living alone or a group of people (not necessarily related) living at the same address who share cooking facilities and share a living room or sitting room or dining area» [42]. In Israel it is «one person or a group of persons living together in a dwelling on a permanent basis ... at least 4 nights a week ... and who have a joint

budget for food»* [22]. Because of their household focus, such definitions most often preclude exploration of the sharing of resources with family members outside the household.

Notably, these definitions do not include the assumption of a kinship relationship among household members. Most family scholars also assume families and households are separate constructs. An example comes from P. Vera-Sanso [46] who says that South Asians make a clear distinction «between households which comprise those who eat together and families which include people who may or may not reside on the same property».

These difficulties in actualizing this difference become apparent when we look for family data outside the household which are less available at the national level. H. Bras and T. Van Tilburg [10] note that the compelling nature of «the large-scale existence of household lists in vital registers of various kinds within different regions and countries has led most family demographers to focus on the composition of household units». Yet the authors worry that «charting who [lives] with whom» has become the answer to the question of how people relate to each other. Thus, while the study of household composition has come to fruition, the study of kinship and kin ties has hardly begun.

There are significant limitations to using household composition as a proxy for family relationships. V. N. Bedford and R. Blieszner [5] state this drawback very poignantly. «Imagine what it feels like to be an old family member in a society that equates family life with household membership. Their children, grandchildren, siblings, any parents who are still living, and other relatives, have been forgotten by family scholars, family therapists and policy makers».

Living arrangements as indicators of support potential

Despite drawbacks in these structural definitions of families, around the world, household composition is the most-used national indicator of family connections and support potential of older adults. As indicated both in family definitions of family scholars and in those of national census bureaus, living arrangements of older adults are believed to be «of crucial importance as determinants of [their] financial and social situation, the

* Notable in this definition is the explicit mention of the exclusion of some family members who are not living in the household. Among them are family members who have moved to a senior citizens' home, have been in hospital for one month or more, or who are in an institution for the disabled for one month or more. Many of these family members are older adults.

social support arrangements available to them, and the realized level of well-being or loneliness» [14].

Across regions, there are substantial differences in living arrangements of older adults and in beliefs about how families should be supportive to them. *Tabl. 1* shows the average number of people in households of older adults by region. Differences across regions are dramatic. The largest households of people over age 65 are in Africa, averaging 5.8 people. Smallest households are in Europe (1.8 people). Overall, older adults have smaller households than people of all ages. On average, older women have slightly smaller households than do older men. There is particular concern about the potential vulnerability of older adults who live alone who may have limited access to family support.

Table 1

Average Household Size by Region*

Region	All ages	All 65+	All women 65+	All men 65+
Africa	7.4	5.8	5.8	5.9
Asia	6.5	5.5	5.4	5.6
Latin America	6	4.5	4.4	4.6
North America	3.3	2.1	2	2.2
Europe	2.5	1.8	No data	No data

Data are drawn from several sources and there are differences between countries within regions, so are not entirely comparable

Source: [9]. Note: unweighted averages for 43 countries
Statistics Canada (2001). *Census of Canada* (household size). Unpublished analyses. Note: household size is capped at 7 persons

European Commission (2007). Unpublished analyses

Table 2

Living Arrangements by Region: Percentage Living Alone

Region	All ages	All 65+	All women 65+	All men 65+
Africa	2	9.7	12.3	7.3
Asia	1	7.3	10.2	3.6
Latin America	1.4	8.4	8.9	7.8
North America ¹	10.1	28.9	38.3	16.8
Europe	10	28	39	14

Source: [9]. Note: unweighted averages for 43 countries

Statistics Canada. (2001). Household Living Arrangements (10), Age Groups (17A) and Sex (3) for Population in Private Households, for Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2001 Census — 20% Sample Data. Retrieved on September 27, 2010 from <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/standard/themes/RetrieveProductTable.cfm?Temporal=2001&PID=59156&APATH=3&GID=431515&METH=1&PTYPE=55430&THEME=39&FOCUS=0&AID=0&PLACENAME=0&PROVINCE=0&SEARCH=0&GC=99&GK=NA&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=&FL=0&RL=0&FREE=0>

¹ Note: Data are for Canada only

European Commission (2007). Unpublished analyses

In *tabl. 2* there are aggregate data on the proportions of older adults who live alone. Across all regions, older adults are more likely than people of all ages to live alone and older women are more likely than older men to live alone. Differences are most apparent when North America (Canada) and Europe are compared with the other regions. For example fewer than 9% of older women in Latin America live alone, compared to almost 40% of older women in Canada. For Canadians, these statistics often lead to a sense of cultural guilt about can appear to be the uncaring nature of families in Canada compared to other regions of the world.

Beliefs about the relative advantages and disadvantages of different household configurations are grounded in ideologies about family rights and obligations and the needs of older adults. There are socio-cultural preferences and exigencies for living in nuclear family or extended family households, and in the desire and ability of many older people to live independently. These differ considerably. Many see household sharing as essential to the support of older adults [9, 35]. As K. Kinsella and D. R. Phillips [28] note, «At one time, living alone was thought to indicate social isolation or family abandonment of older people». They cite research from more developed countries indicating that older people prefer to reside in their own homes and communities, even if that means living alone. In these regions, the growth of households consisting of one older person is a result of factors such as greater longevity, increases in benefits and pensions; rising home ownership levels; increased availability of community support; and reduced public financing for living in nursing homes.

In areas where none of these resources is available, living alone is viewed negatively. Research in rural China has shown a paradoxical situation in which living close to children but not with them is more damaging to morale than having children at a distance [37]. Most studies in less developed countries indicate that older people want to live with their children or at least close to them [28]. Do older adults in these regions live in an ideal family world? We must resist naive romanticizing of family situations of such older adults. Many result from caring but also from the exigencies of poverty, lack of available housing, and the resource needs of younger generations.

Family changes and beliefs about family support

Contemporary concern about families and households stems in part from beliefs that many older adults may be at risk of having no family support. Lower birth

rates and increased longevity have resulted in a verticalization of families with more generations but fewer people in each generation. The family policy literature is replete with alarm about how these family changes have eroded caring capacity because of the small numbers in younger cohorts [2]. Yet these same changes also mean that intergenerational relationships may have become increasingly important and longstanding [17].

Similar concerns arise from increased diversity of contemporary partner relationships. Researchers are beginning to map diverse marital and partner experiences including marriage and remarriage, cohabitation, and long distance partnerships [8, 14]. In a number of countries (e.g. Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Canada, South Africa, Norway, and Sweden), same-sex relationships now can be formalized into marriage [16]. A critical question that arises from evidence of this diversity of collateral relationships is whether these «choice biographies» [14] are evidence of strengthened families that have expanded ties, or of weakened families because of lack of clarity in family rights and obligations within such networks.

A second issue that requires further exploration is that of the relationships between household composition and the sharing of resources in later-life families. Global economic recessions and persistent poverty in some regions have drawn our attention to families' actions to buffer their members through living together to pool resources and face unmet needs regarding shelter [23, 50]. Yet household composition can mask the directionality of sharing. In a context of scarce resources, older adults may provide housing to adult children returning home after divorce or who are taking refuge because of unemployment [21]. In many regions of the world they raise grandchildren because parents have died, are unable to provide care because of mental health or addictions problems; or because the parents have had to leave their home communities in search of employment [20, 34, 50]. There is much to learn about these dynamics across the family lifecourse.

Our understanding of how resources are shared among family members across households also is growing. In North America and Europe, there are relatively low levels of within-household sharing of resources because of likelihood of older adults for living alone. Yet there is much evidence there and in other regions of transfer of wealth from older adults to adult children in the form of money or property; of child care provided to (non-resident) grandchildren; and of help provided to older family members by children at a distance [51] including young people who are international economic migrants who send remittances home [21].

Living alone does not mean being unconnected to family members. A. Varley and M. Blasco [45] admonish us to consider carefully our assumptions about the ideal living arrangements. In reference to older women in Mexico they conclude: «we should avoid reading [older women's] living alone as inherently undesirable or as a sign of past bad behaviour on their part or current failings on the part of the younger generation».

Surely it is not surprising that complex family forms might be related to equally complex family living arrangements. It would be a great step forward to begin to use language and research methods that connect the two: network households (children and older parents living separately but nearby), by-turns households (network families in which older parents rotate among sons' residences), skipped-generation households, [37] are indicative of such arrangements. As K. Glaser et al [18] have argued: «understanding family support systems requires a clear picture of the number, types and location of kin available to provide that support».

Are families a safe haven or are they crumbling? The debate continues. In some parts of the world families have the resources and social contexts to support one another. Paradoxically, it is in these more affluent regions that the belief in the fragility of family resources is strongest. M. Kohli et al. [29] have said that challenging the idea of the decline of families is «sometimes like fighting against windmills: raising empirical arguments against myths that seem to remain untouched by them».

Of equal concern is the strength of beliefs that families can provide support to older members in the face of economic recession, war, poverty and pandemics that can compromise families' ability to support and increase the vulnerabilities of their older members. «One of the most firmly established myths in the collective mind is that the family provides a roof under which all of its members are gathered and sheltered... Such myths obscure many inequalities within families... conflicts, as well as hostilities and negotiations» [19].

Neither naïve faith in family strengths and obligations nor despair about their caring capacity will advance understandings of the family lives of older adults. The juxtaposition of regional beliefs about family strengths and obligations and the place-based constraints on family support provides the basis from which to map differences in structural and resource limitations of families. We have much to learn about both the vulnerabilities and capacities of families of older adults.

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КРИТИЧЕСКИЕ РАЗМЫШЛЕНИЯ О СЕМЬЯХ ПОЖИЛЫХ ЛЮДЕЙ

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В спорах о том, как общество реагирует на постарение населения, основной характеристикой является семья. В большей части современных дискуссий она считается полностью ответственной за заботу и поддержку своих пожилых членов, с разницей в разных странах лишь в том, видится ли эта ответственность социальным обязательством или бессмысленным бременем. Исследователи и политики выражают возрастающее беспокойство о том, чем структурные изменения в семье и ее возрастающая географическая мобильность могут угрожать ее способности осуществлять заботу. Во всех регионах и странах ведется серьезное исследование того, охвачены ли пожилые люди социальными сетями, от которых они при необходимости смогут получить помощь. Менее широко обсуждаемая тема о месте семьи в жизни пожилых людей позиционирует их, скорее, как активных, нежели пассивных потребителей. В массе литературы есть свидетельства о важной роли пожилых людей в укреплении семьи, связи между поколениями и заботе о младших членах семьи. Передача средств от старших младшим членам семьи — это важная особенность и для богатых, и для крайне бедных семей в разных регионах мира. Это иллюстрирует способ, которым пожилые люди обеспечивают стабильность своим семьям перед лицом быстрых социальных изменений. В данной статье представлен краткий обзор международной литературы по этим сложным вопросам, о месте семьи в жизни пожилых людей. Обсуждаются мифы о семье, национальные различия во взглядах на ее роль и обязательства, рассматриваются региональные различия.

Ключевые слова: стареющие семьи, отношения поколений, жилищные условия, глобальные семьи