Contributions of Close Relationships to Health and Well Being in Later Life

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Families and Health: New Directions in Research and Theory
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Overview

- Contributions of CRs to physical & mental health
- Three cutting-edge research directions in family gerontology
- Unresolved questions, Needed data sources and methods
- Fruitful interactions between family gerontologists and health specialists
CRs and Physical Health

Positive psychosocial conditions -

- Aid in identifying and implementing coping strategies to alleviate stress
- Contribute to better biological regulation
- Facilitate regaining functional capacity
- May prevent the expression of genetic markers of disease
CRs and Psychological Well being

Positive psychosocial conditions -

- Aid in identifying and implementing coping strategies to alleviate stress
- Offer companionship, shared values & meaning
- Bolster feelings of self-worth
- Provide a focus for caring and nurturance
Three Cutting-edge Directions

- Include significant others beyond kin –
  - Friends, fictive kin
  - Neighbors, church members, “sitters”

- Conduct research at the family level of analysis –
  - Dyads, triads, family/friend networks
  - Be intentional in asking family-level questions

- Study family processes over time –
  - Impact of prior experiences
The Case for Relationships beyond “Family”

- Adult life is experienced in multiple social contexts
- Geographic dispersion of kin necessitates reliance on local relationships
- Families partner with formal service providers
- Friendship contributes more to well being than family ties do
Extended Network Research Examples

- Antonucci
  - Convoy Model of Social Relations

- Piercy
  - When It’s More Than a Job: Relationships between Home Health Workers and Their Older Clients

- Allen, Roberto, & Blieszner
  - Expanding Families: Older Adults and Fictive Kin
The Case for Family-level Research

- Most adults grow old in a family context
- Extent of CR influence on physical and mental health
- Multiple perspectives on particular events can increase understanding of interaction processes
- Possibility of more effective evidence-based interventions
Family-level Research Examples

- Fingerman
  - Family Exchanges Study

- Voorpostel & Blieszner
  - Intergenerational Solidarity and Support Between Adult Siblings

- Blieszner & Roberto
  - Care Partner Responses to the Onset of Mild Cognitive Impairment
The Case for Longitudinal Research

- **Short-term daily diary studies**
  - Connect biomarkers with self-reports; link individual responses to family events and situations

- **Long-term assessments**
  - Evaluate impact of life events and experiences in youth, young adulthood, or middle adulthood on later life health and well being
Longitudinal Research Examples

- Savla, Almeida, Davey, & Zarit
  - Routine Assistance to Parents: Effects on Daily Mood and Other Stressors

- Möller & Stattin
  - Are Close Relationships in Adolescence Linked with Partner Relationships in Midlife? A Longitudinal, Prospective Study

- Broese van Groenou & van Tilburg
  - Network Size and Support in Old Age: Differentials by Socio-economic Status in Childhood and Adulthood
Unresolved Questions, Needed Data Sources and Methods

- Increased cultural and racial ethnic diversity
- In-depth investigation of the meaning of various family structures
- Details on cognitive, affective, and behavioral interaction processes
- Longitudinal studies
What should health researchers learn about family gerontology?

- Intersections of social and psychological influences on health behaviors and outcomes
- Facts (as opposed to myths and stereotypes) about aging
- Value of treating the whole person
- Importance of incorporating family and fictive kin into health interventions
What should family gerontologists learn about health?

- Impact of relationships on health and well being
- Differential responses to acute stress vs. chronic strain
- Effective ways of teaming with health practitioners
- Probable trajectories of common late-life health problems