
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**