Liminality and Low-Income Aging Families by Choice: Meanings of Family and Support*

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RÉSUMÉ

Le vieillissement, à travers la lentille de l'individualisation, démontre des changements, tant dans la composition de la famille et le sens de la famille et du soutien. Les familles à faible revenu qui – pour survivre – aussi choisissent parfois de nouvelles relations flexibles de soutien social, y compris les parents et non-parents : celles sont les familles vieillissantes par choix. En appliquant le concept de liminalité (états transitoires de l'être), créé par l'individualisation, nous avons exploré les expériences de liens étroits dans les familles à faible revenu constituées de parents et membres non-parents vieillissants. Des entretiens qualitatifs avec des répondants représant deux ou trois générations de familles vieillissantes par choix ont montré comment ces familles perçoivent les sens de la famille et du soutien social. Nous trouvons que la reciprocité est moins essentielle aux rapports entre les plus vieux et les plus jeunes dans les réseaux familiaux que l'on pourrait s'attendre. La liminalité façonne les sens et les échanges dans les familles vieillissantes à faible revenu par choix, de sorte que n'importe la façon dont les relations soient-elles ténues, elles procurent un sentiment d'appartenance et de la signification.

ABSTRACT

Through the lens of individualization, aging families demonstrate changes both in family composition and in meanings of family and support. So, also, do low-income families that – in order to survive – choose flexible, sometimes novel, social-support relations, including kin and non-kin: these are *aging families by choice*. Applying the concept of *liminality* (transitional states of being) created through individualization, we explored the experiences of close relations in low-income families consisting of aging kin and non-kin members. Qualitative interviews with respondents representing two or three generations of aging families of choice illustrated how these families perceive the meanings of family and social support. We find that reciprocity is less vital to relationships of older with younger members in familial networks than may be expected. Liminality contours meanings and exchanges in low-income aging families of choice such that no matter how tenuous relations may be, they provide a sense of belonging and meaning.

Canada's population is aging and becoming more diverse in multiple ways. People are living longer and healthier lives and increasingly together as multigenerational families. Nuclear family households are no longer the norm or ideal (Statistics Canada, 2011a; 2012), if they ever really were for many families. Intimate or close relations also differ in character with the aging process. Individualization or "institutionalized individualism" explains the innovative ways that people develop and sustain intimate relations across generations while maintaining cultural continuity and traditions associated with family lives in late modernity (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994; Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2001). Growing social and economic inequalities and

disproportionate poverty experienced by racialized and immigrant families (many of which include older members) (Statistics Canada, 2011b) also point to processes of individualization. With inequalities and poverty come choices, often compelled choices about how to survive which leads to greater diversity and individualization of family networks. Multigenerational families in Canada may be experiencing increasing diversity in terms of who are considered family and the meanings of support in families. As well, individualization and the juxtaposition of "new" with "old" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001) may create complex "borderland" *liminal spaces*: transitional spaces when new identities and subjectivities are constructed alongside older ones and shape – and are shaped by – close relations.

The focus on familial change and the changing meanings of close relations in much research has been on caregiving for older family members which, although important, is not the entire story. Limited attention has been given to how the meaning of family among people in mid-life and older is linked to growing income inequalities as well as to policy shifts in the context of individualization. Thus, a need exists for more knowledge on intergenerational exchanges of social support in low-income and diverse families, as well as on the changing meaning of familial networks that include older people. Our research focus was on specific aging families: younger and older people in close intergenerational networks who *see themselves* as family yet may or may not be family as traditionally defined or reflected in much policy (e.g., kinship or blood relations). We refer to these families as *aging families by choice*, a concept that emphasizes a family as including chosen blood relatives along with friends and other close relations (see Muraco, 2006; Stack, 1974; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). Our study relied on the concept of liminality, contextualized by individualization, as we explored changing meanings of close relations and social support in low-income aging families by choice. We sought to understand (1) how people in mid-life or older in low-income aging families by choice related and shared meanings and supports; and (2) how liminality contoured these close relations.

In this article, we begin by exploring the relationship between low income and age, acknowledging the importance of the concepts of generation and generationing, the process by which generations are created and recreated through social relations (see McDaniel, 1996). We then consider how the individualization thesis explains the transformation of close relations in late modernity. We further introduce the concept of liminality and explore how the creation of liminal spaces can be a process associated with individualization.

We then share our methods and findings. We observe how the meanings of family and support shared by members of aging families by choice, especially the lesser value attached to reciprocity in support relations, can be seen as contoured by liminality.

Low Income, Aging, and Generation

Income inequality continues to grow in Canada (Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development, 2011). The gap between families in the top 1 per cent or top 5 per cent and families in the middle of the income distribution has considerably widened (Yalnizyan, 2007; 2010). Picot and Myles (2005) observed that in the 1990s any gains associated with the economy benefitted higher income families, while the incomes of poorer families stagnated or worsened. Although overall poverty, measured as annual income below Statistics Canada's low-income cut-offs, has declined (Statistics Canada, 2013), the depth of poverty has increased for some groups and can be experienced for a longer time. According to *Campaign 2000* (2012), nearly one in seven children live in poverty. In lone-parent families, 23 per cent of children were poor in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2013). Aboriginal and racialized women, and especially lone mothers, are more likely than White women to have incomes below the low-income cut-off line (Morissette & Picot, 2005; National Council of Welfare, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2011b). Groups most likely to experience persistent low income[1] include lone parents, recent immigrants, people with disabilities, unattached persons aged 45 to 64, and Aboriginal peoples (Picot & Myles, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2013).

Older peoples' economic security improved with changes made in the 1990s and prior to Canada pensions, Old Age Security, and the Guaranteed Income Supplement. For instance, 18 per cent of people over age 65 were poor in 1980, while only 4 per cent lived in poverty in 1995. But older people continue to experience income insecurity. In 2008, 4 percent of men aged 65 and older reported low income while almost double the number of similarly aged women did (Statistics Canada, 2010). Moreover, unattached women over age 65 are among the most impoverished older people. According to Statistics Canada (2011b), 12.1 per cent of older men living alone were in low-income situations in 2008 compared to 17.1 per cent of older women.

The parallel trends of growing income inequality, persistent poverty among women of all ages, and population aging suggest a deeper exploration of generation is warranted. As sociologist Susan McDaniel (2001) put it, "[g]eneration *per se* has been an underconceptualized sociological construct as a structural dimension of stratification and as a lens through which to observe

and analyze the social and social change" (p. 196). Indeed, in our focus on how older and younger generations in low-income aging families by choice perceive family and supports, *generation* emerges as not just a category into which one falls. Like gender and class relations, generation is a social relation that shapes experiences of aging, low income, and intimacy when individuals consider family as a concept, and is interconnected with macro-societal changes (Higgs & Giellard, 2010) and individualization in late modernity.Late modernity, or liquid modernity, describes today's highly developed global societies as a continuation of modern change and development.

Individualization, Close Relations, and Support in Late Modernity

The structures and meanings of close relations over life courses in late modernity are qualitatively different from those in early industrial society. As life expectancies increase and family lives change, family networks develop that are both more diverse and geographically more distant. People in mid- or later life are more likely to live in married households than are younger cohorts (Statistics Canada, 2007a), and fewer are living in households that include heterosexual married couples with children. People of all ages are increasingly likely to be part of cohabiting unions or to be living alone (Statistics Canada, 2007b). From 2001 to 2006, one-person households in Canada grew by 11.8 per cent whereas households with couples and children grew by only 0.4 per cent (Statistics Canada, 2007a). Multigenerational households, most often including children, parents, and grandparents, are also increasing in numbers (Statistics Canada, 2012). Older immigrants, with women more likely than men to do so, live among relatives to a greater extent than non-immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2011b). This partially reflects the fact that many older female relatives are sponsored by their families in immigration to Canada.

Familial networks are becoming more distant geographically as global mobility increases. Although some family members or families have always moved to where opportunities were better, increased ease of transportation and communication has meant there are many more globally transnational families now. These familial networks maintain close and ongoing relations more than they could in the past. Growing income inequalities have meant that multigenerational familial networks are likely more diverse in socioeconomic status as well. Many multigenerational familial networks have some members that are economically challenged. This situation was found by McDaniel, Gazso, and Um (2013) whereby multiple generations in the Great Recession that began in 2008,

particularly in the United States, came together to share costs and provide for those members lacking financial resources.

Individualization theory, which holds that as a consequence of changes in late modernity individuals increasingly construct their own lives, offers insight into the character and meaning of families and support relations in late modernity. Close relations can be seen as textured by the disembedding and re-embedding of the industrial social order in our present modernity. Beck et al. (1994) referred to this as *reflexive modernization*, the process by which contemporary or second modernity opposes the previous modernity, just as earlier modernity opposed feudalism. Structures like class, gender, and the nuclear family are undercut by individualization and spaces are opened for change (Beck et al., 1994); the presumptions that close relations are nuclear families or that the division of labour is gendered are increasingly untenable (see Stacey, 2011, for example). Of course, whether families were indeed nuclear for long stretches of history may be immaterial to the theoretical reality that nuclear families, for the most part, fit better with the industrial social order than extended family networks.

Individualization specifically captures how, with the disembedding and re-embedding of the industrial social order, "the individual must produce, stage, and cobble together their biographies themselves" (Beck et al., 1994, p. 13). Individuals are central to reflexive modernization. The aforementioned demographic trends can be pointed to as aspects of individualization: that is, the process in which individuals reflexively pursue close relations that match their own desired biographies in modernity (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; 2001; Beck et al., 1994; Giddens, 1992). Beck-Gernsheim (2002) concluded that families are now more appropriately seen as "post-familial families". Individualization, however, does not mean the complete loss of institutions of the past. Indeed, the persistence of nuclear family households (but with fewer children) demonstrates the longevity of one such longstanding institution. Simultaneously, post-familial families bring together innovation in close relations with the maintenance of some traditions (e.g., cultural or religious) and thus experience tensions and contradictions in everyday family life (Lash, 2001).

Smart and Shipman (2004) took issue with how individualization theory could be deployed to deny the importance of normative institutional and structural influences like "the family" such as when emphasis is placed on agentic conditionality and choice in close relations. Contemporary research such as that conducted by Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards, and Gillies (2003) has found that relations of support and obligation among

ex-partners are often prioritized in stepfamilies, suggesting that family by marriage is less easily displaced, even post-divorce. Smart and Shipman's work with transnational families, which we might theorize as being on the cusp of new forms of intimate relations, reveals that these families do not necessarily share the agentic values of the individualization perspective. Religion and culture still matter to transnational families even though they may be practicing family in societies that seem to offer unbounded individual choices about family forms and relations.

We see a risk in excluding family as institution and value in explorations of close relations through the individualization thesis. We agree with Roseneil and Budgeon (2004) who maintained that within the context of individualization, practices of intimacy and care can no longer be understood through a focus on kin alone. As Pahl and Spencer (2004) viewed it, people live their lives embedded in "personal communities", active and significant relationships that are important to people even if the persons in the communities are geographically distant. Personal communities can be more easily sustained at wide distances with global communications technologies.

We also observe that the norm of helping or supporting others who are regarded as family persists with individualization. Exchanges of social support, including instrumental (e.g., physical assistance, financial aid) and emotional support (e.g., guidance, affection) are the functional aspect of social relationships (Pernille, Holstein, Lund, Modvig, & Avlund, 1999). Families may differ in composition or meaning, but close relations are sustained through support exchanges. This is especially the case among low-income families who rely on kin and non-kin in their exchange of resources – such as transportation or child care and material goods like food and clothing – to help them cope (see, for example, Bezanson, 2006; Edin & Lein, 1997; Nelson, 2006; Stack, 1974). Often, these support exchanges are characterized by generalized reciprocity (a "give and take" of support) and trust, and can involve indirect exchanges with several people under unspecified conditions (Offer, 2012). From the individualization perspective, traditions still matter, and institutions like family and class do not disappear but become "zombie" categories, still present but in qualitatively different ways. Aging families by choice, the construct that informed our research, is premised on compromise; innovation in family relations co-exist with the continued importance of tradition (see also Gazso & McDaniel, 2014).

Liminality

If individualization opens up possibilities for experimentation and flexibility in close relations in late modernity, we see it as also creating "in between" spaces, where family and gender relations associated with the industrial social order are preserved and newer agentic relations pursued. In anthropology, liminality is conceptualized as a transitory state, a temporary and ambiguous place between multiple spaces of being (see, for example, Turner, 1969). The concept of liminality also enables the observation of transition, of individuals negotiating identities in "borderlands". Linking liminality as a process to individualization can enhance awareness of how borderland spaces are created at multiple analytical levels in aging families by choice.

At the macro-societal level, when families include older and younger generations, we can see the experience of family as textured by reflexive modernization and individualization, by population aging and growing income inequalities. All of this puts aging families in liminal borderlands. On another level, we can focus on the interactions, behaviours, and practices of families as liminal. Liminality for Yarnal (2006) is experienced through communitas or group solidarity which facilitates unconstrained spontaneous behaviour and fosters a perception of belonging. In our study, aging families that are a *choice* comprising kin and non-kin can be seen to be enacting communitas and liminality to shape and characterize their networks of close relations. When family is created and performed in the liminal spaces between "tradition" and "innovation", and results in close relations unique to that familial network, we call this liminal behaviour.

Our theoretical linking of liminality with individualization enables deeper exploration of the meanings and supports shared in aging families by choice. We know, for example, from studies of transitions to adulthood, that youth are often caught in liminal spaces between childhood and adulthood, spaces deeply contoured by class, ethnicity/racialization, and immigration status as well as rapidly shifting socioeconomic contexts and networks of opportunity. With respect to aging adults, we know less about these liminal spaces such as "mid-life" and how they may be similarly contoured. Stacey (1990), among others, has shown that it is often low-income families that are at the cusp of innovative social change in familial networks. They have been found to negotiate new identities suited to changing contexts, to create different kinds of families after union dissolution, and to develop new emotional geographies that at times resist norms. For these reasons, we see a focus on low-income aging families in the rapidly changing context of reduced state supports and increased reliance on others for help as an important contribution to knowledge about aging.

Methods

In this article, we explore the meaning of close relations and supports, textured by liminality, in aging families by choice where at least one member has low income. We draw on qualitative data collected as part of a larger research project on how diverse families manage poverty through networks of social support, including formal support programs, community supports, and informal intergenerational supports (e.g., friends and neighbours), where supports given and received are instrumental (e.g., physical or financial aid) and expressive (e.g., emotional advice and guidance).

We interviewed 70 people who represented 20 diverse families by choice in the Greater Toronto Area between August 2009 and April 2010. We met these family network members through purposive and snowball sampling at community organizations and/or through existing contacts. Our initial participant had to be over age 16, experiencing low income (e.g., on social assistance, unemployed, or having income below Statistics Canada's Low Income Cutoffs (LICOs)), residing in the Greater Toronto Area, and having at least one child. The latter requirement reflected our interest in how respondents' support relationships benefit themselves and their children as well as other family members. Because of our interest in families by choice, we encouraged respondents to refer us to those they thought of as family. People referred to us did not have to be in low-income circumstances because our focus was on how relationships of instrumental (e.g., financial aid or physical assistance) and expressive support (e.g., emotional guidance and advice), at multiple levels, affected the initial low-income participant's family by choice.

Our semi-structured interview guide was inspired by a life course perspective[2] which emphasizes transitions over time, and how agency, intimate relations and social networks, and social structures, including ideology and history, shape these transitions (Elder, 1994; McDaniel & Bernard, 2011; Schmeeckle, Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengtson, 2006). The life course perspective's emphasis on how lives unfold in historical and social contexts over time is congruent with our broader lens of individualization. We specifically engaged our respondents in face-to-face in-depth interviews focusing on how their relationships of support over time were, and are, defined, changed, and shaped by exchanges of emotional and instrumental support in family networks, in the community, and with the state. Interviews were conducted in English when respondents were comfortable in that language with translations provided when necessary. On average, interviews lasted one and a half hours. At the conclusion of the interview, we completed ecomaps of the familial networks of people, community services, and government programs on which the respondent relied and to which they contributed.

We interviewed anywhere from two to seven people, ranging in age from 16 to 83, in each family-by-choice network. The majority of the families in our study consisted of women (60 in total, with 30 lone mothers who were unemployed and receiving social assistance). This was not surprising since it is lone mothers who more often live on low income. Ten men in familial networks participated as partners, ex-partners, brothers, fathers, or friends. Our respondents were Aboriginal, Caucasian (born and raised in Canada or immigrants from Eastern and Northern Europe), of mixed race/ethnicity, or immigrants of East Asian, Caribbean, Latin American, and Middle Eastern racial/ethnic backgrounds. In total, 39 of our 70 respondents were immigrants. All but 11 of our respondents were receiving social assistance, disability support, or working for low pay. Our focal sample for this article was a sub-sample of aging familial networks by choice: 11 families made up of 43 respondents where at least one member was age 45 or older. In these 11 families, we focus primarily on the stories shared by the 20 racially or ethnically diverse respondents in mid-life or older who are connected by choice or kin. Of these 20 participants, 14 were experiencing low income.

Each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed and/or translated verbatim into English. We used QSR International's NVivo software to analyse major themes following the guidelines offered by Morse and Richards (2002). We first read all transcripts separately and assigned codes – what Morse and Richards (2002) defined as topic codes – to reflect the different ways respondents communicated about topics. We engaged in an iterative process where we moved back and forth between questions in the interview guide and what respondents were saying. For example, we referred to our interview guide to capture basic focal interests in codes such as "supports given" or "changes in relationship". We then coded independently beyond the interview guide to capture common words and meanings in responses such as "generational gap" or "supports not wanted." We then moved to a second step of analytic coding, which required grouping and reorganizing the topic codes, guided by theory, under broad themes common to all participants or to specific groups of participants. Analytic coding also entailed theoretically interpreting the coding schema.

We further analyzed the ecomaps we created for each respondent. Ecomaps are popular analytic instruments

in clinical research in social work and the health sciences. They allow for the pictorial illustration of an individual's social network, including social, familial, and individual supports. Ecomaps also illustrate the nature of bonds, affective or instrumental, between systems of support (Tang, Oatley, & Toner, 2007; Tastsoglu & Preston, 2005). By identifying supports or their absence, ecomaps are used by practitioners to identify problems and develop strategies to help. They can also be used to identify a support network for analytic purposes (Tastsoglu & Preston, 2005), as we did in our study. Ecomaps permit us to document the levels of support (family, community, and government), direction of supports (one-way or reciprocal), and the relative strength or importance of ties from the perspective of our initial respondent.

Our findings are presented thematically, and have been organized by meanings given to family and supports among people in mid-life or later who are part of low-income aging families by choice.[3] We examine how liminality shapes these perceptions. Pseudonyms are used for all respondents.

Meanings of Family

The theme "shared experiences are what count" captures how respondents' perceptions of the meanings of family and familial support were informed by the sharing of life experiences, including the exchange of instrumental and expressive support (see also Gazso & McDaniel, 2014). When families are created through sharing, family is found to comprise kin as well as non-kin, and age as a hierarchical relation may not matter. Younger people can take on parental roles for age peers or for older members of their networks.

One particularly significant life transition shaping the creation of families by choice is the immigration experience.[4] We interviewed Lin, Jun, and Yusheng as members of an aging family by choice. Lin (age 48), a lone mother of two children, was our initial study respondent. She worked for pay for a non-profit organization and received Child Tax Benefits, indicating that she was in a lower income bracket.[5] Lin shared that her close friend Yusheng (age 83): "Feel like family, yes. … She's 83 years old … when I arrived to Canada I did some business, yeah. She is helping me to build restaurant … ". Yusheng, who immigrated to Canada years before Lin did, was central to Lin's sense of belonging and settlement in Canada. When we interviewed Yusheng, it became clear that Lin was one of many non-kin that were like family to her. When Yusheng was widowed and had only limited contact with her children, she had close relations with other Chinese immigrants who were like family and with whom she shared history. For example, Yusheng rented

from a family she had known for several years. She even moved with them to a new location. She also volunteered her dim sum skills at a local restaurant for years because the owners, also immigrants, were her good friends, part of her family-by-choice network.

Lin's mother Jun (age 73) had lived with Lin and her children since 2003 when she immigrated to Canada. Jun told us about her very good friend, with whom she exchanged instrumental and emotional support. She explained: "I have a very close friend … All the way we help each other. When she has something to – need to help, [I help her]." For these three immigrant women, shared experiences of immigration informed their perceptions of the meaning of family and their identities as members of a family by choice.

The same can be said for Lan. We met Lan (age 85) through her daughter May (age 53), our first respondent in this family by choice. May was a lone mother who worked for low pay and received some support in Child Tax Benefits. We also interviewed May's 21-year-old niece and Lan's granddaughter, Lisa. In total, Lan and her husband had five children. They immigrated to Canada from China in 1997 through sponsorship by their daughter (not interviewed). Although we interviewed only kin relations as members of her family network because this was who Lan referred us to, it became clear through the course of the interview that for Lan, the meaning of family included more than her blood relatives. As well, her identity as a member of a family by "extension" (family by choice) was tied to a shared experience of immigration.

> "I am really close to one family, we are really close, and so they can be considered as an extension to my family. … I have known them and their parents for more than thirty years … we got to know each other in China. … We arrived in Canada before them … They were extremely happy, because they have friends in Canada, who they can rely on. We helped them a lot when they first got there … [they were] unfamiliar with the new environment, so I took them around with me and showed them the bank, the market place, the schools, etc." (Lan, age 83, married)

"It's tradition" is a theme that captures some respondents' perceptions of family as historically informed and culturally constructed, sometimes in ways that re-invent traditions. This construction of families by choice as invoking of tradition is also generationed, with older members passing family knowledge on to younger generations. Family, including families by choice, means preservation of traditions and inventing new traditions.

Liam (age 48) immigrated to Canada from Albania with his wife and two daughters, who were then both

under age 12. Liam's family represented the only nuclear family – husband, wife, and children – where we interviewed each member. According to Liam, and confirmed in our interviews with his daughters, his close relationships with them, now ages 18 and 20, largely reflected his belief in the meaning of family as close, a belief common to his country of origin.

> "Yeah, they are close to us, they're not like other, I've heard, teenagers [where] they come home and you don't see them anymore! … It's kind of a little bit the tradition in our country? Let's face it, in our country the family is very strong … People don't move out of the house like they do here until they get married. Even after they get married, they live with their parents! So that tradition kind of [of being close] … it's kind of getting to them as well." (Liam, age 48, married)

The meaning of family as tied to cultural traditions was also shared by two First Nations families by choice in our study. Since all of the four women in one of these families by choice were under age 30, we focus here on the second aging family by choice which included Robin (age 26), her cousin Kelly (age 36), and her mother Iris (age 50). Iris was a lone mother with four living children, including Robin. She provided care to her 12-year-old daughter, her 16-year-old son, and her 6-year-old grandson in her home. She relied on Ontario Works (social assistance) and Child Tax Benefits for her income. During our interview with her, Iris explained how she came to care for her grandson:

> "Yes, my eldest daughter Maria, they used to live in the west end and he was just a baby, just maybe 15 months old and there was a fire, apartment fire and she didn't make it… …we had to go to family court and yeah so it was ah, it was something that we worked out…" (Iris, age 50, lone mother)

In the following exchange, Iris revealed other events of her past:

> "I wasn't brought up by my mom and dad. Yeah. I would say that they were, ah, how would you say, like, at residential [schools]. Yeah, they, it's kind of hard to talk about, because I never really got to know them… So my sister and I were brought up by my grandparents and uncles and aunts, yeah. … That [parents' residential school experience] was a big implant on [me], because they were so secretive, so quiet about it, they wouldn't even want to tell us what happened… I go to, ah, ceremonies, like at the Native Center, and go to Native Women's, go to workshops. Yeah, cause there's always something for the youth and ah, and the native child. So, there's, yeah, I do participate … Actually she [Grandmother] had to learn English too, by reading the bible and it was amazing too because she really believed everything in that bible [laughs]. Yeah and it was so strict back then. Oh my. And now I can understand why she

> was like that too, yeah. Cause she really was converting from the traditional ways." (Iris, age 50, lone mother)

> Interviewer: How about yourself? Have you always maintained the focus on your traditional ways?

> Iris: "It wasn't until I was like ah in my 20s…because like my friends and my cousins they said 'oh hey, there's like a workshop.' So that's how it all started…I think it was like, for Robin, it was like when she became a teenager age. And yeah they just started doing the youth. And I was so happy that you know, finally, we can start, ah, learning about ourselves and our culture."

This lengthy quote from Iris's transcript illustrates how her grandmother's denial of Aboriginal traditions, coupled with her parents' past secrets, meant Iris's loss of culture. At a pivotal point in her life, Iris purposefully reclaimed her Aboriginality. Iris's parenting of her grandson is therefore understood to reflect her desire to live for the future and preserve traditions once lost (see also Anderson, 2001; Currie, Wild, Schopflocher, Laing, & Veugelers, 2013). Raising her grandson and partaking in cultural events with her children and grandson were part of what family meant and of her identity as an Aboriginal woman.

Meanings of Support

For some of our respondents in mid-life or older, the meaning of support was simple: it was either there or not there. The theme "If you've got it, don't question it" captures how the meaning of support is found in practices, processes, and simple existence (or not). In this way, support means security and safety to those in families by choice. Lan, who we introduced earlier, confirmed this when she spoke about the instrumental and emotional support she received from her children and grandchildren living in Canada.

> "My daughters treat me really well and they are very supportive. They all like me. They also love me … I arrived first, so I helped them with everything, but after they have arrived for some time, our relationship reversed. They are always helping me now … I supported them financially and I also helped them with housing … I have been in Canada longer than my daughters, so I gave them advices on housing, schools, and where to shop. When they are busy, I cook for them and I also take care of the kids … If we, my husband and I, have any problem, my children and my grandchildren will be there for us. If I need to go to the dentist, or go shopping, either my children or my grandchildren will give me a ride. My children and my grandchildren take us out for a good time during their vacation or time off. I am really happy. If I have any problem, my grandson will always be there no matter what." (Lan, age 83, married)

The security Lan felt on receiving this support was particularly meaningful because of her husband's dependence on her for his well-being. Although she described their relationship as "lovers", she later explained how she must "help with everything", thereby suggesting how her identity as a lover had been replaced with the identity of caregiver.

> "[Laughter] *He is so old now and he needs help with everything. I have to feed him, dress him, and help him shower. It is a full-time job just to take care of him. He is over 90; he needs to be taken care of all the time … It is very tiring and there is a lot of pressure, but it has become a routine, so I don't mind it too much anymore …*". (Lan, age 83, married)

Both Lan's and her daughter May's ecomaps revealed that each named the other as a strong source of support. However, in her explanation of the support she gave and received from her parents, May had this to say:

> "*For example, I help my mom and dad by taking them to the dentist or the family doctor. I also take them shopping with me … When I go visit my parents, I help them mop the floor, wash the toilet, and clean the kitchen. Under normal circumstances, I go there once a week. However, if they need more help, I would go there more frequently and for a longer period of time … They are very old now; I think the only support they could possibly provide is emotional support.*" (May, age 53, lone mother)

> Interviewer: *And so do you find that you learn a lot from them? Do they have good advice?*
> May: "*They are very smart, however, they are very old now and very old-fashioned, therefore their advices are sometimes unrealistic and impractical … We always debate back-and-forth.*"

While she provided instrumental and expressive support to her aging parents, May did not perceive that she received a great deal of support from them in return. As well, Lan's granddaughter Lisa did not ascribe the same degree of strength to her relationship with her grandmother that Lan did. Significantly, we observed that throughout her interview, Lan did not question the reciprocity of her support relationships with others. This is because, for Lan, support was about security rather than reciprocity.

"Good enough support" refers to perceptions that the instrumental and emotional support exchanged with other family-by-choice members is good enough. Supports exchanged need not necessarily be plentiful or reciprocal. The meaning of support can be simply satisfaction with the way things are, with the quality of support received.

Marian was born and raised in Canada. She has been married to Joseph for over 20 years. At age 72, she was the oldest family member we interviewed in her family-by-choice network which also included seven other kin and non-kin members. She had eight children, four of her own with a previous partner and four with Joseph, her current partner. Her children lived in different parts of Canada, and she explained some of her relationships with them as follows:

> "*Ah, with Patrick… we rarely see him 'cause he rarely calls and we rarely call him because he works hours … seven days a week… but ah, when we do talk we have a really nice conversation and a really nice close, close conversation. Like we can say anything to each other so the relationship itself is good, it's just that we never make use of it… And then Denise, this is Jim's daughter and she's just like mine. From day one, she was just like mine… we have a really excellent relationship… I talk to her more than her dad talks to her…And then Sue, well Sue is like my best friend in the whole entire world and ah, and I do a lot of stuff for her that probably I don't need to do but ah, I do it cause I want to and ah, and ah she does the same for me and she insists that she's going to look after me when I get old and you know so we're very, very close, very close… Grant and I went through a lot of years where, of his young years, of where he was not a very nice little boy and we took him to a psychiatrist for years when he was like in kindergarten… how do I explain it now, I understand it, now I know it was, extended back to his mother leaving because he felt left out or, or, I don't know, now I know that…but I didn't understand it then and he used to fight me… ah, but now over the years, he was here this morning, we have become very close. As a matter of fact his common law wife says that I'm, that he'd rather talk to me than he would his dad.*" (Marian, age 72, married)

Later in the interview we asked Marian, "Do you think you receive, in general, enough support from your family?" She replied: "I manage. So I don't know how much more support I need, you know; I'm okay. I'm pretty level-headed most of the time so I think, yeah." In sharing about her different support relationships with some of her children, Marian implied that she was satisfied with the quality of these relationships and she associated this with her identity as a "level-headed" person.

Lilly (age 46), her mother Biyu (age 65), and 17-year-old grandson David are another family in which the meaning of support was about its being satisfactory. Lilly immigrated to Canada from China with her husband and David in 2001. She explained that the family experienced extreme financial hardship:

> "*Yes, so I asked him [her husband] why do you want to come here? But he said I want to higher, better … my youngest brother, he's older than me, he went to America … and he says it's very good, you have to go … but after we come here [we find] it's not true.*" (Lilly, age 46, married)

By 2010, their situation was better because Lilly's husband had re-accredited his foreign credentials according to Canadian standards and was working in his field of specialty. Lilly and her husband sponsored Biyu's immigration to Canada in 2009. Biyu helped in the household by providing child care to their youngest son (age 6) and other forms of emotional and instrumental support. Lilly explained:

> "When she first immigrated here, my [second] son was already three years old already and I didn't have much work during that time, so I could look after him. But now, I'm getting busier and I don't have time to look after him, so we send him to kindergarten. By having my mother-in-law here to pick my baby up is extremely helpful … because I have mother-in-law here so I don't have lots of people help me." (Lilly, age 46, married)

In analyzing our interviews with both Lilly and Biyu, it appeared that Biyu gave more support to the household than that which she received. But according to Biyu, she "made friends by attending various programs at community centers." Lilly additionally observed that Biyu received a good deal of support from friends in her community. Lilly noted: "Sometimes when I'm not home and she needs to go out to shop, her friends have to take her, because one, she cannot drive, and secondly, she cannot speak English. She gets help from her friends along these lines." Thus, in our interviews with each woman, the notion of reciprocity of support was not raised, nor did it overly concern Lilly or Biyu. Biyu had a home to live in and had a strong network of emotional support in the community – that was enough, and Biyu was satisfied.

The theme "It just makes sense" refers to how the meaning of support for some respondents is its higher purpose – for example, support "for the greater good". Helping others may not have anything to do with what one may receive in return. We interviewed Lien (age 52), her daughter Huan (age 35), and Huan's friend Alyssa (age 22) as members of a family, but the relationships between Lien and Huan especially illustrate this particular meaning of support.

> "He [Lien's husband] will be retiring at end of this year. I am going to stay here for a little while to support my daughter's [Huan's] work/career. She works, so her child needs to be taken care of. It is not very convenient for a working mother to take care of her child on an on-going basis. I will retire when I hit 60; right now, I am using my vacation days to come over and help my daughter. I am in the process of being sponsored … In regards to my daughter's family, I support them all. I do all the chores around the house, such as cleaning, cooking, washing, etc. I also support my daughter financially … My husband and I are very well-off in China, so we bought a house for her. We also sent

> her money for groceries and some cash for our grandson. Just recently, she sold the house and moved in an apartment. Even though I don't have money with me at the moment, but in a way, I am still supporting her; because she sold the house we bought her and kept the money … They are really busy. They don't really support me, but rather I am supporting them … I don't – or rather I can't – really support him [her husband] right now, I only can give emotional support. He is supporting himself right now and I am supporting my daughter and my grandson. My husband is happy that I am here to help our daughter to go through a rather tough stage of her life." (Lien, age 52, married)

As indicated, Lien was in the process of moving to Canada when we interviewed her, in order to support Huan and her child in a difficult financial time. Lien shared that she mainly came to Canada because of her daughter's emotional needs and because it just made sense to her. In her interview, Lien also implied that her choice to help her daughter provided her with a sense of purpose and thus, as we interpret it, a perception of self as altruistic. Our ecomaps for both Lien and Huan confirmed that each was an integral source of support for the other.

Amy (age 30), her partner Isaac (age 32), Isaac's mother Isabel (age 61), friends Jennifer (age 36), Andrew (39), and Elijah (age 40), and Amy's brother Max (age 21) all made up a family by choice in our study. Amy and Isaac had an infant son named Jaden, but Isabel had custody of Jaden because Amy and Isaac were recovering drug addicts and were deemed unfit to parent by local child services. Isabel explained:

> Isabel: I offered to, ah, take him so he wouldn't be at [child service agency].

> Interviewer: And why? What would be your kind of main reason for doing that?

> Isabel: Well, it was my son, okay. They are apparently, Amy and Isaac are, apparently trying to get their life on the right track and that's my grandson, so…

> Interviewer: And are there any challenges associated with looking after Jaden?

> Isabel: Well sure. I'm 61 [laughs] … Well, at first it was sort of, you don't really remember everything from before, you know. Like I need a refresher course here, yeah. And the lack of sleep at first but you get used to it again, you know. But all in all it's not that bad. (Isabel, age 61, single/guardian)

Isabel's primary guardianship of Jaden was explained by her in a way that implied that she equated her support or parenting with her identity as a mother or grandmother, but also for a "greater good". As further revealed in the transcript, Isabel took on caregiving for

Jaden at a moment in her life when she had been laid off and was relying on employment insurance to make ends meet. Caring for Jaden and receiving financial support from the child service agency can be understood as giving her life purpose and order in what could have been a troubling time for her.

Social Support Behaviour in Liminal Spaces

Aging families by choice assign meaning to family and support in ways that are contextualized by the disembedding of past ways of family life but not their complete loss, and by the opening up of possibilities of practicing family in newer ways. Specifically, we see our interview findings, collected through a life-course-oriented interview, as suggesting that several "in between" spaces – where "new" and "old" mix – shape the meanings and supports shared in aging families by choice.

Aging families by choice and their supports materialize in the liminal space *between tradition and innovation*. Norms and values associated with family life in industrial society do not disappear in late modernity but, when passed through and among generations, tend to soften or blur. Low-income aging families by choice illustrate this. When shared experiences and mutual support define perceptions of family, what we find among low-income people is that familial networks are choices, inclusive of kin and non-kin. The same can be said for assigning meaning to family in light of reinvented cultural traditions (re: our theme "it's tradition"). Meanings given to family reclaim traditional norms, values, and behaviours, but strategically reframe them in innovative ways to fit the times and situation. This liminal space textured by individualization is experienced by both new immigrants and migrants from rural reserves. In both situations, life course disruption opens spaces for new geographies of connectedness with others, spaces that often mesh old and new family ways.

Especially for the older people in our study, perceptions of supports, particularly their quality, were textured by the liminal space connecting their experiences of actual or potentially challenging economic situations. The receipt of some support, however minimal, opens doors for older persons' feelings of belonging and, even more, of having human connections of value. Our emergent themes, "if you've got it, don't question it" and "good enough support", illustrate these new liminal spaces, *of something versus nothing,* that are experienced by low-income older persons. These perceptions of support, rather than their actual impacts, suggest that aging familial networks by choice can help elders manage their own or others' low income.

Key here is that meanings of support given or received as security, satisfactory, or for the greater good are not necessarily about reciprocity but simply about relating.

We learned from older members in aging families by choice in our study that the search for reciprocity in support networks (primarily because reciprocity is seen as a basic means by which support relations are maintained) can obscure our capacity to see pure relationality as the benefit and objective. Thus, giving and receiving support in aging families may be more about enjoyment of relations and security in familial networks than about reciprocity. Indeed, for older members of aging-families-by-choice networks, exchanging support can be simply about living, practicing, and being family, however they define it, through the life course in ways that contribute to feelings of personal security, satisfaction, and altruism. The concern may not be so much about "give and take" as one ages but about carrying close relations forward to the end of one's life course rather than risk aging alone. This counters the often presumed script of aging which suggests that although reciprocity among generations may vary across life courses, older generations come eventually to depend on supports from middle generations. We found this not to be so in our study.

The life courses of those in low-income aging families by choice are not all experienced in the same liminal spaces. Immigrant families by choice including younger and older members showed us that the immigration experience contextualized by individualization can create a liminal space that is transnational – in between *there and here* – that is less often shared by non-immigrant families except by Aboriginal people. For older immigrants, doing family in a new country/culture requires not just blending tradition, adapting (also as per individualization), and exchanging supports there and here, but additionally blending cultures and not necessarily fully assimilating. Aging Aboriginal families by choice similarly give meanings to family and support as they experience them but in the additional liminal space of *then and now,* one that is textured by colonialism. The meaning of families and support networks in mid-life and beyond for Aboriginal people can be seeking what can be done now as well as moving forward for children because of the harmful colonial practices of "back then".

The concept of generationing also offers some explanation for the ways that low-income aging families by choice relate to and give meaning to support. In our study, generationing filters through interactions and experiences in liminal spaces created via individualization just as race, class, and gender do. Aging families by choice daily enact generation by flexibly adapting or changing generation to suit needs. That is, the meanings

that mid-life and older people give to family and support are textured by generationing. Older people in some ways experience a specific liminal space created by individualization processes, of *my generation and your generation.* This liminal space requires learning how to balance and negotiate their older or "modern" attitudes, identities, and experiences of family with newer or "late modern" attitudes, identities, and experiences of family. Thus, older peoples' practices of close and supportive relations with younger relatives in ways that invoke tradition is also a way of enacting past generational relations and continuity. And older peoples' helping others out with little expectation of reciprocity can also reflect not just purpose in the sense of a commitment to the greater good but specifically the giving of purpose and meaning to aging.

Of course, we examined these familial networks at one point in time across generations. Reciprocity may wax and wane over life courses among generations. That said, it is significant that we found no clear sense of the importance of reciprocity among our respondents. It may suggest that taken-for-granted normative ideas of shifting reciprocity among generations over the life course may need to be questioned. Age or cohort divisions may begin to wane in importance as do normative expectations of older and younger generations. Generational relations as practiced in aging families by choice can be stretched to mean something different from our conventional senses of their meanings.

Conclusion

In this study, we were concerned with exploring how people in mid-life or later in low-income aging families by choice relate and share supports and meanings of family. Our second interest was in understanding how liminality textured by individualization contours these close relations in familial networks. We relied on data collected for a larger project that explored how younger and older persons give and receive support in chosen familial networks in ways that impact their income security. Our theoretical lens of individualization allowed us to understand the meaning of close and support relations depicted in our respondents' life course interviews as contextualized by liminality and generationing.

In summary, we find that the meaning of family and support for mid-life and older people in aging families by choice is shaped by several liminal spaces: population aging and growing income inequalities, tradition and innovation, support versus nothing, there and here, then and now, and my generation/your generation. Reciprocity is less vital to the close relationships of older with younger close members of familial networks than might be expected. But relations in low-income

aging families by choice, no matter how liminal, are about relationality centred on shared experiences, the reclaiming of traditions, and providing older people with a sense of security, satisfaction, and purpose, and essentially, a feeling of belonging and meaning.

Notes

1   Persistent low income is defined as low income, based on Statistics Canada's Low Income Cutoffs (LICOs), over a five-year period.

2   Although our study was cross-sectional in design, we perceive the life course perspective to be suitable for such projects. Like Scott and Alwin (1998) and Cooke and Gazso (2009), we see that whereas a cross-sectional study may capture only a current state of being, this state can be viewed as the culmination of experience, with the main difference being that the pathways to that experience are left unobserved (Scott & Alwin, 1998).

3   Although we report findings from a select sample of mid-life or older people here, these themes also apply to younger people in our study.

4   Six of our twenty families included people who emigrated from China.

5   Child Tax Benefits, the Canada Child Tax Benefit, and National Child Benefit are means-tested. Parents with incomes above a net income threshold will not qualify for benefits.

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