

Intergenerational family relationships of older women in central Minnesota

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies the family lifecourse perspective to the lives of rural older women in the Midwestern United States based on the findings of the Rural Older Women's Project, an ethnographic study of the daily lives and systems of support of 30 women. The focus is on the relationships with children, grandchildren, and parents if they are still living, of rural older women in central Minnesota. Three case studies are used to demonstrate the full range of circumstances. From those who are still actively providing support and assistance to their own parents, children, and grandchildren, to those who are primarily the recipients of care and support, to those who are unable to receive the necessary assistance from their family system. These variations are significant in terms of the ways in which each of them face the increasing needs which often come with ageing.

KEY WORDS – rural women, filial relationships, family lifecourse, USA.

Introduction

Each person's journey through life can be viewed as a road map, offering many alternative routes to many alternative destinations. The pathways that develop as we age are a result of accumulated decisions and the consequences of those decisions (Atchley 2000). The family lifecourse perspective offers great potential for understanding the complex set of pathways of a family system. This approach to the study of the family takes into account the contextual variations among families, the dynamics of the family with time, and accounts for the fact that families make choices within the constraints of their situation (Elder 1987). This paper applies the family lifecourse perspective to the lives of rural older women in the Midwestern United States.

The emphasis is on the intergenerational family relationships of rural older women in central Minnesota. While intergenerational relation-

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ships cross the boundaries of the various sectors of the social support system including family, friends, neighbours and service providers, the focus here is on their relationships with their children and grandchildren, as well as their parents, if they were still living. Three case studies are used to demonstrate the full range of circumstances uncovered through extensive analysis of the data, from those who are still actively providing support and assistance to their own parents, children, and grandchildren, to those who are primarily the recipients of care and support, to those who are unable to receive necessary assistance from their family system. These variations are significant in terms of the ways in which each of them faces the increasing needs, which often come with ageing.

Background and methodology

This paper is based on the findings of the Rural Older Women's Project, an ethnographic study of the daily lives and systems of support of 30 rural older women (see Shenk 1987, 1991, 1997, 1998). This multiphase project was completed from 1986–1987 in a rural four-county area in central Minnesota. To understand life in rural Minnesota, we must consider the weather, which natives describe as a dry, healthy cold. This region is the service area of the Central Minnesota Council on Aging. It includes St. Cloud, the urban centre for this largely agricultural region. The population of the region is largely derived from German and Scandinavian immigrants, as well as Scottish, Irish, and Polish. The economic changes that have affected rural communities in the United States in general have been felt throughout this region. There are fewer farms and those that remain are of increased size. There have been increasing political economic challenges during the time which my respondents have lived and they now face these challenges as they grow old in this environment. They have experienced declining population in changing small towns and have often watched their family and friends move away to find economic security.

The project was completed in several phases including the collection of life histories, social network, and questionnaire data, and the creation of photographs of the participants. A follow-up telephone survey was completed in 1990. The life histories were subject to text analysis by use of the Minnesota Contextual Content Analysis Program (McTavish and Pirro 1984). This programme provided systematic coding of the open-ended textual material, looking at both what the

respondents talked about and how they talked about it (see Shenk and Tavish 1988). An extensive network analysis profile was developed for each respondent through informal conversations. The technique used was adapted from Sokolovsky (1986). Each participant was asked to talk about each of the people who were important in her life including: (a) community kin, (b) community non-kin, (c) kin out of the area, and (d) other non-kin. Information was gathered about the kinds of assistance the older women gave and received within each relationship. Photographer Ron Schmid created visual images of each of the participants in a final phase of the research (see Shenk and Schmid 1993, 2001). Sample selection, a description of the sample, and further discussion of the methods used can be found in Shenk and McTavish (1988), Shenk and Schmid (1993) and Shenk (1997, 1998).

The Family lifecourse perspective

The family lifecourse model provides a useful tool with which to analyse and predict the effects of life events on the family as a unit. The understanding of the individual and collective transitions and trajectories of the family members serves to give a better sense of where that family stands in time. The position of the family within the family lifecourse will greatly affect the circumstances, resources, and coping strategies for dealing with changing life circumstances. Each family will have a unique lifecourse pathway, consisting of the individual, interdependent lifecourse pathways of its members. The understanding of this is essential when trying to determine their available emotional and physical resources. In addition to the normative transitions of family life (*e.g.* marriage, childbirth, the death of elderly family members), other events can cause change and discontinuity within the life of a family. Families will deal with these adverse events according to their unique resources. These circumstances will often require the family to change the manner in which it functions in order to adapt to the constraints provided by traumatic life events (Germain 1994).

This theoretical perspective can take all these factors into account by relating the family to changes within society, by highlighting the interlocking of the individual trajectories within the family, and by looking at the formation and dissolution of the family over time (Elder 1987). Events that occur in the lifecourse of one family member do not affect that one family member in isolation. Whether these events represent misfortune or opportunity, they become intergenerational as well as individual events (Elder 1985).

Informal social support

Each of us interacts with others throughout our lives, in the course of our informal relationships with family, friends and neighbors. Informal supports include those who exchange services on the basis of affection, duty or respect, where money is not the basis of exchange. Barbara Silverstone describes the informal support system as a 'rich fabric of informal relationships which envelops the majority of elders in our society along a number of dimensions. This fabric is bonded most strongly by marriage, and adjacent generational and peer relationships, and for racial minorities, by expanded kin as well'. (1985: 156)

The Rural Older Women's Project studied the full range of emotional and instrumental support and assistance that these women received and provided. *Instrumental support* refers to assistance with material tasks or meeting physical needs. *Emotional support* refers to love, companionship or understanding. Both, of course, are essential and are not necessarily derived from the same relationships.

These informal supports are provided within the framework of rural values of which independence is primary. The strong rural value of independence could better be termed *interdependence*, but independence is the word used consistently by the women themselves. This term points to the clear limits that abound in terms of how one interacts with others. There is need to rely on family, friends and neighbours because it is often difficult to survive in the harsh and changing environment of rural Minnesota. But there are clear boundaries that demarcate what one can reasonably expect of others. One is expected to strive to remain independent and self-reliant and not place undue demands on others. This is the way these women have lived all their lives and continue to live in their later years. Supporting others, helping out family, friends and neighbours as needed, but not expecting more of others than they are willing to offer and always offering to help in return.

Literature suggests that older rural residents are more highly integrated into social networks that provide informal social support compared with their urban counterparts (see Kivett 1985; Lee & Whitbeck 1987). Similarly, Dorfman and Mertens (1990) observed that rural women were well integrated into kinship networks.

Studies of the gender differences in the support systems of older adults consistently show that women have larger networks than men (Chatters *et al.* 1985; Taylor and Chatters 1986; Nelson 1993). Hatch (1991) found the exchange of help between older women and their network members to be important. She reported a significant relationship between help provided to a given category of helpers and

the help received from them in exchange. Most of these studies, however, focused on the quantity or frequency of interaction. They did not consider the quality or nature of the relationships or the meanings attached to those relationships.

Findings

Applying the family lifecourse perspective

Research has found that the support systems of older people are generally based on a core of family with peripheral friends and neighbours (Walker 1975). Each family works out the dynamics of family relationships over time, reacting to the specific circumstances with which they are faced, based on their personal, familial and societal values. For these ageing rural women, that means facing old age with the personal resources they have accrued throughout their lifetime. The gender-based guidelines that govern behaviour and expectations in rural society guide their lives. These guidelines about the appropriate roles of women determined the choices they perceived at various stages in their lives. Like many women of their generation, these women felt limited in their choice of careers and many of those who worked outside the home were teachers. The most common role for women was on the farm where there were clear divisions between 'women's work' and 'men's work'. Women's roles have tended to include maintenance of social relationships and support networks between the generations.

The focus in this paper is on the social relationships and support networks within the family system. Some of the women in the sample were still involved in providing instrumental assistance and emotional support to their children, grandchildren and parents. Others were both recipients and providers of care and support. Some were no longer able to provide instrumental support and were primarily recipients of care. This is not related simply to chronological age, but rather to the stage of the family lifecourse and to the specific dynamics of a particular case. These rural older women's life circumstances and lifestyles affect their individual system of social support and define the network of exchanges and assistance on which they depend. These variations are significant in terms of the ways in which each of them face the increasing needs which often come with ageing.

Individual systems of social support

The women in the Rural Older Women's Project reported a total number of members of their social support network varying from a low

of 15 to a high of 51 individuals. While the smallest network was inadequate for providing emotional support for Ina Parker, another small social network was operating effectively to meet the increasing needs of Mary Rollins and her husband. Some of the women's networks were based primarily on relationships with family, while others were more balanced with strong support from a core group of friends.

Relationships with children and grandchildren

Rural women have clear expectations for close relationships with children and grandchildren. Twenty-two of the 30 women had children living nearby, although many children and grandchildren were living at a great distance¹. Although they often maintained close relationships in spite of geographic distance, they generally interacted on a regular instrumental basis primarily with the children living nearby. The relationships vary, of course, but most of the women exchange assistance and support with their children. One of the older women who had serious health problems explained:

They don't give me money and stuff like that, but if they see something, you know. My oldest son, he's the one that built the bedroom, the kitchen, and the utility and bathroom.

In general, the kinds of support received from daughters and sons were different. Daughters are more likely to provide emotional support and assistance with household tasks and housecleaning. Sons more often provide manual labour and support with physical tasks like mowing lawns and replacing and removing storm windows. Both geographical location and personal factors determine relationships with particular children.

Special relationships with particular children and grandchildren often provide an ongoing source of emotional support for these rural older women, although not generally direct care. While the nature of the relationship and the extent of support and assistance that is actually exchanged may have changed and may be minimal, the importance of the emotional support should not be underestimated.

Case studies

Using life history and social network data and applying a family life-course perspective, each rural older woman's life situation can be viewed in the context of a lifetime of choices and experiences and her web of family relationships. To demonstrate how a family works out its own dynamic relationships over time, three case studies from the Rural

Older Women's Project are considered. Mary Rollins², although chronologically rather young, was receiving significant support from her children. Elvira Smith was the primary caregiver for her mother. Ina Parker had a minimal informal support system, leaving her lonely in her later life, as she was throughout most of her life.

Case one

Mary Rollins, age 67, was married two days before her 17th birthday to a farmhand on her father's farm. She gave birth to their first child six months later; she confirmed these dates, showing me the family bible. She raised eight children, two boys and six girls. The children were raised in poverty both through and after the Depression and they were 'brought up strict, very strict.'

When we were finished eating, they were six or seven, he'd just look at them and they'd know they'd have to get up and clean the table. Every Saturday the wall was washed as high as the kids could reach. The chairs were washed the table and everything. They learned how to work; they learned how to cook. There was no sassing of our kids, the way the kids sass their parents now.

She had also been a caregiver to her husband for the past 34 years, since an accident left him unable to walk. While she continues to provide a high level of assistance to him in meeting his daily needs, her youngest daughter who lives nearby also provides a great deal of assistance to them both in their own home. She takes Mary shopping and in fact, drives them everywhere they need to go. Her daughter is devoted to meeting the increasing needs of her parents and has offered increasing support as her mother's health has failed. The same daughter is very close to Mary, providing emotional support as well. As Mary explained:

Our kids come home and help us a lot. And we intend to stay here as long as we possibly can get along without going to a nursing home. It really doesn't make any sense to move away from here and move into town. We'll still have to have somebody come and help, so we might as well stay here.

Besides her youngest daughter, one son is also very close and he used to do lots of work for them. 'Now that he has a gas station he is too busy and we don't see him often'. Her other daughters are waitresses, a babysitter and store clerks. One son is in prison. Although she doesn't dwell on her disappointment with her children, it was evident in her descriptions of their lives. Mary is resigned to the way her life has turned out. In many ways old age is not that different from the rest of her life that was always hard. In some ways, her life is actually easier now that she and her husband have retirement income. By the time of the follow-up interview in 1990, Mary and her husband had moved

into the home of their youngest daughter, her husband and four children.

Case two

Elvira Smith had retired at the age of 62, three years before she was interviewed and was still the primary caregiver for her 93-year-old mother who lived nearby. She did all her shopping, provided transportation and signed her up for the fuel assistance and surplus food programmes.

The only person my mother ever calls is me. She dials my number and says, “I need you, come over right now” and then she hangs up. She doesn’t tell me what she wants, so if it is shopping that I could do on the way, she doesn’t tell me. Sometimes she dials the wrong number and won’t wait for a response, because she expects that I’m on the other end. Then, she gets mad when I don’t come over, but I didn’t even know she wanted me.

Elvira often talked about her mother’s changing needs and her efforts to balance them with the needs of her husband and children. Her mother wanted to come live with Elvira and her newly retired husband.

It’s a small house but it’s all that we need. How do you say no to your mother? Mother wants to move in here. I don’t know. We have a big bedroom and the living room. I have a small room back there, but I have oodles and oodles of things stored in there. I just don’t know where I’d put it all. And she would be here all the time. Ken has just retired and we had looked forward to doing some travelling. We’ll have no freedom; there’s always mother I’m doing some research. We’ve been using the Share-a-Home programme. That’s been very good, but there have been people coming and going When they build these apartments back here, she thought she would like to move in there. Of course she would. She’d be right in my backyard. But I told her that wouldn’t help. Who would do the cleaning and help prepare meals. The laundry – I’ve done that for the last 10 years, so there’s no reason to stop now. Yes, since Dad was sick. Dad had cancer. We kept him at home until he died.

At the same time, Elvira and her husband’s lives were closely entwined with that of their only daughter who had recently married. Elvira’s husband: *‘retired two weeks ago. Bob works on our small farm. Our daughter lives out there on some land that we gave to her and her husband’*.

Elvira’s mother had moved to a nursing home when we completed the follow-up survey. Elvira had suffered a stroke and had other health problems, but was doing well again. She had returned to her active schedule with friends, and volunteering. The decision to place her mother in a nursing home had been difficult, but she felt she could no longer provide the care her mother needed. In the future, she hoped for

support from her daughter, but recognised that their needs might increase beyond their daughter's abilities to provide for their care.

We have had a will made for several years already. Since there's only one daughter, there isn't too much problem unless there was a marriage So we've had that done. I wouldn't want to be a burden to my daughter or to somebody, if something happened to Ken, and I were alone and I couldn't take care of myself. Then I'd just as soon go into a nursing home or whatever facilities are available at the time. I don't want to go in, like I said, make a burden on anyone I imagine our lives would go on the same until we are unable to care for ourselves.

Case three

Ina Parker is a 77 year-old woman who lives alone in the home in which she was born. Her grandparents were among the first families in the small town in which she lives, the name of which derives from the town in Germany from which her maternal grandparents emigrated. The house in which she was born, cared for her parents until they died, and still lives, was built by her grandfather. Driving up to Ina's home, one sees an isolated, old, dilapidated house in the centre of what was previously a thriving rural community. From the field-notes of an interviewer: 'She lives in the oldest house in town, badly in need of paint and partially boarded up'. Now the house stands alone at the crossroads of a dying Midwestern small town. These changes, in concert with her personality and life history, have left her feeling isolated and lonely in her later years.

Ina had one daughter out-of-wedlock who she raised alone. Her telling of her life story focuses on her parents, who supported her in raising her daughter, and on work. Her life story recounts constantly being rebuked and treated poorly by others. The theme of being taken advantage of by others pervades her descriptions of her work experiences:

And then I baby-sat too. At one time I had, took care of 11 babies. But what they would do, they would bunch them all at one house, and I'd get 50 cents you know, 50 cents an hour. But you know, those other people, they wouldn't pay me. This one lady, 'Well we brought 'em over to play with those kids. You're not actually taking care of 'em'. But I just got paid from that one lady. And at last I cut that out too, I wouldn't even do that either.

She lived her life quietly within her parents' home and has been alone since her father died 17 years before:

When you're all alone, you're looking for him, you know, looking to go over there where he was and he's not there. It took me quite a while to get over that.

She is not close to her sister or her own daughter and reports that she had serious disagreements with both of them. These disagreements were about their inheritance of property from her father, their lifestyle and use of alcohol.

The only family members with whom she has supportive (or positive) relationships are one great-niece and a grandson. She cleans house and does laundry for her grandson, who lives nearby, once a week. He does not pay Ina for her work, but occasionally gives her some food or other payment. In fact, though, at the time of one interview, she reported that she hadn't seen him for over a month because he had a girlfriend living with him. Ina disapproved of her grandson's 'lifestyle' and apparently resented the girlfriend and criticised her housekeeping. Her closest relationship is with a great-niece who lives 30 miles away in the city. She telephones every day, although she only comes to see Ina about four times a year. Her great-niece is the only person besides her pastor who she reports talking with openly and with whom she shares intimate thoughts. She has no close friends to supplement her family system.

Discussion

Each of these cases represents a particular rural woman's experience in later life within her web of intergenerational family relationships. These family relationships are determined by myriad factors including personalities, and the family lifecourse. A range of variables determines the available resources and chosen approaches within each family system as these rural women live out their later years.

Mary Rollins and her husband are cared for by their daughter without the support of formal support services. This is the choice this family has made, which Mary presents as a reflection of the upbringing they provided for their children. While their youngest daughter is committed to providing care for the increasing needs of her mother and father, one cannot help but wonder about the cost to the daughter and her own husband and children.

Elvira Smith was the primary caregiver for her 93-year-old mother and was adjusting to the recent retirement of her husband. Their only daughter lived nearby on some land they had given her and her husband adjoining their small farm. Thinking about her future, Elvira used a phrase common to many older Americans, who share a fear of 'being a burden' to their families and others when they are in need of care. This is an unfortunate effect of the increased life expectancy and

changing roles within our society. As more people live longer, the question of who is responsible for their care remains unanswered. Most of the needed care and support are actually provided by families and this is the hope of these independent rural women, who are used to taking care of themselves and doing things for other people. They fear becoming a burden, however, and question the limits of what they can expect of their own children.

Ina Parker is a lonely woman who provides assistance to and support for only two younger relatives and receives emotional support from only one of them. She has an inadequate social support system that is apparently the result of lifestyle choices throughout her life. Ina will be forced to turn to the formal service delivery system when she is unable to care for herself and already uses formal service providers to support her emotional needs. Her web of family relationships will not be able to support increasing needs for care and support.

Conclusions

Using a family lifecourse perspective, the situation of each rural older adult can be viewed within his/her family system. Each family makes choices and responds to specific situations based upon the circumstances, their values, resources, and coping strategies for dealing with changing life circumstances. Viewing the life situation of rural older adults within the web of intergenerational family relationships offers a useful approach for understanding the individual's situation and choices within the context of her social support system.

Rural older women live out their later years within a web of intergenerational family relationships that are derived from a lifetime of choices and decisions. As they face an uncertain future, the extent to which they can count on their children for assistance as their needs increase is another unknown. Many of these women cared for parents or parents-in-law and believe that children should care for their ageing parents. They tend to believe what gerontologists call the myth of 'the good old days', an ideal time in the past when older adults were held in uniformly high esteem and children lovingly cared for their ageing parents. Many children still provide care for their ageing parents, but the situation has become much more complicated (see Shenk 1998).

These rural women typically view parental care as the children's responsibility, but set clear limits on what they would expect their children to do for them. This is a typical conflict in our rapidly changing society, reflected through the lens of rural America. While

many of these women cared for their parents and others in the past, they know that they cannot necessarily expect the same from their children. There are additional demands on the younger generations, many more elders to care for, and there are options for care that were not available in the past.

They do not want to be a burden on their children, yet the family is still the preferred provider of significant care and support. These are highly emotive issues, because they relate to how these women will live out the final years of their lives.

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NOTES

- 1 Of the eight women without children living nearby, five had no children including three who had never married.
- 2 Fictitious names are used to protect the anonymity of the women who shared their lives openly with the assurance that confidentiality would be maintained.

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