



Family Relationships in an Aging Society

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The Aging Family

- Almost all of us will live our entire lives within the context of a family.
- The family provides important resources that sustain the well-being of its members at every stage of the life-course.
- Indeed, exchanges of support between family members is a life-time activity, as we nurture our young and care for our elders primarily within families.



The Aging Family

- For the elderly, the family takes on added importance as aging-related changes increase their need for assistance.
- Even so, families exist in a larger social context that shapes their capacity to function as sources of support to their more vulnerable older members.



Theories of Aging

- In order to understand the relationship between parents and their adult children, it is necessary to define the meaning of the term "generation".
- A generation is a position of ranked descent in a family lineage. The family roles of children, parent, and grandparent define the generational position within a family.



Theories of Aging

- Generation also denotes the potential number of intergenerational relationships (ie. grandparents who are also adult children have at least three types of intergenerational relations).
- The term "cohort", on the other hand, is a term used to designate a group of people born in the same time in history and "travel" through time together as part of the same age-group.



Theories of Aging

- Thus, both intercohort relationships and intergenerational relationships are ways of viewing how members in different age-groups are related to each other.
- However, an important distinction must be made.



Theories of Aging

- Whereas intergenerational relations are personal in nature and experienced within the context of families, intercohort relations are between groups of people at the societal level.
- Intergenerational relations involve the redistribution of societal resources from one age group to another, while intercohort relations involve direct transfers between generations.



Theories of Aging

- In spite of these differences, there is an important connection between the two types of relationships.
- Debates over public financing of entitlement programs for the elderly are essentially arguments over the appropriate responsibility of younger cohorts for elderly cohorts.



Theories of Aging

- Yet younger cohorts are also embedded within families with older members.
- Thus it is important to understand the balance between public (usually government) and private (usually family) support of the elderly, both of which are profoundly influenced by the "aging revolution" of the 20th century.

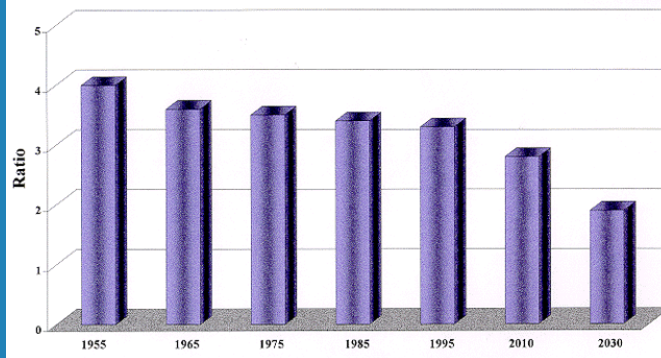


Consequences of Aging

- One consequence of population aging, is that there will be fewer adults in the working-age population relative to the retired older population
- This index gives us an idea of the total old-age support "burden" placed on the working-age population. This ratio is now 20 today, signifying that 100 workers are paying taxes to support 20 older retirees

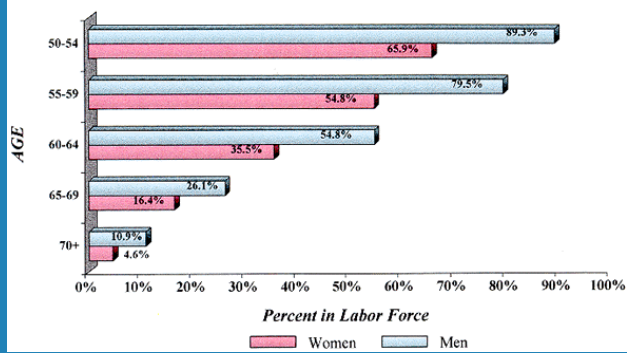
Consequences of Aging

Ratio of Total Labor Force to Persons *Not* in Labor Force:
55 years and over

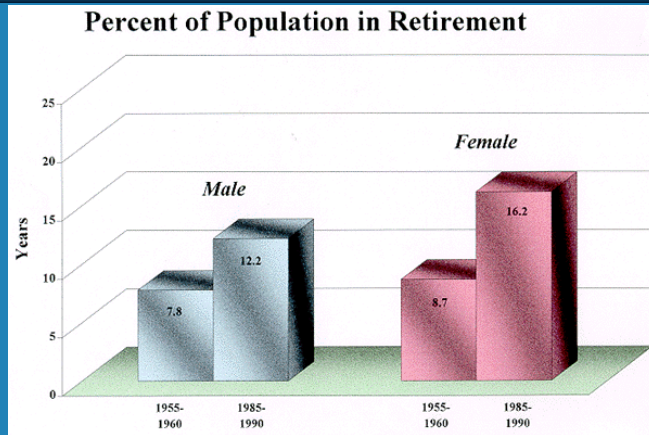


Consequences of Aging

Percent of Older Men & Women in the
Labor Force, By Age: 1989



Consequences of Aging



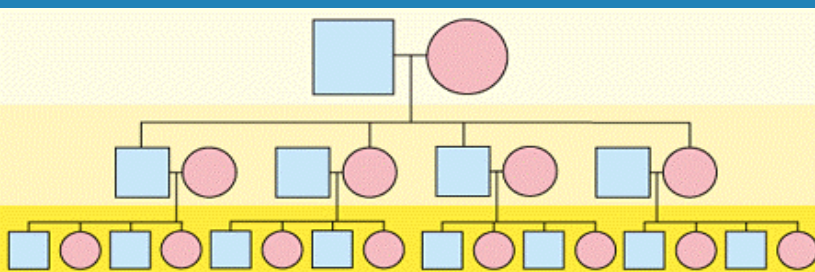
Consequences of Aging

- As a result of demographic changes in fertility and mortality today's and tomorrow's elderly Americans are growing older in families that are qualitatively and quantitatively different from those of their grandparents' generation.

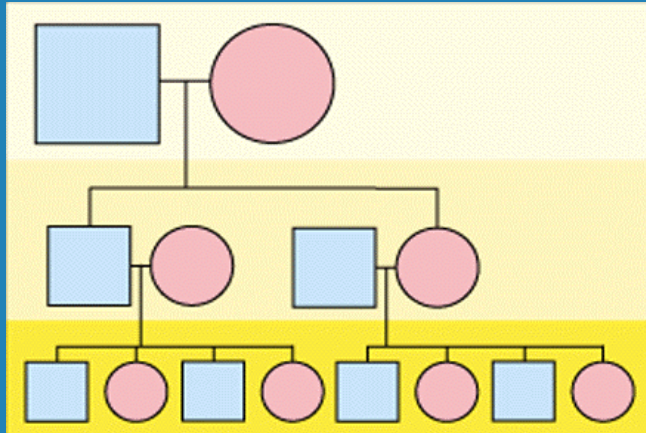
Consequences of Aging

- This can be seen in terms of both the structure and the duration of family roles and relationships
- Unlike the two- and three-generation family structure typical of their predecessors, with four or five siblings in each generation, the elderly today are more likely to be part of four- and five-generation families, with many fewer siblings per generation.

Pyramid Family Structure



Beanpole Family Structure



Intergenerational Relationships

- Social scientists who have studied the family have noted three basic dimensions on which intergenerational relationships can be evaluated.



Intergenerational Relationships

- Dimensions of Intergenerational Relationships:
 - (a) affinity (emotional closeness and perceived agreement of opinions between generations),
 - (b) opportunity structure (frequency of contact and residential proximity between generations), and
 - (c) functional exchange (flows of social support between generations)



Intergenerational Relationships

- From these three dimensions, intergenerational relations can be categorized into five underlying types: tight-knit, sociable, intimate-but-distant, obligatory, detached. These five types are described as follows:



Intergenerational Relationships

- **Tight-knit:** connected on all three dimensions of intergenerational solidarity
- **Sociable:** connected only by affinity and opportunity structure
- **Intimate-but-distant:** connected only by affinity
- **Obligatory:** connected on opportunity structure and function
- **Detached:** connected on none of the three dimensions of intergenerational solidarity



Intergenerational Relationships

- Not surprisingly, adult children are more likely to have a tight-knit relationship with their mothers than their fathers, and
- More likely to have a detached relationship with their fathers than with their mothers.
- Another pattern is that relationships with divorced parents (divorced fathers in particular) are more than three times more likely to be detached.



Intergenerational Relationships

- Older people often rely on family to either meet the demands of everyday life, or for help with a chronic illness or during a crisis
- Indeed, most of the assistance provided to frail and disabled elderly living in the community comes from family sources. Some scholars estimate that 70% of the total support received by the elderly derives from informal sources, the majority from spouses and children.



Intergenerational Relationships

- Social support from family can be represented by four basic types:
 - instrumental support (tangible forms of help such as housework, transportation, shopping and personal care);
 - emotional support (confiding, comforting, reassuring, listening to problems, "being there");
 - informational support (advice in seeking medical treatment, referrals to agencies, sharing family news), and
 - financial/housing support.



Theories of Social Support

- One theory proposes that there is a hierarchy in the preferences of older people choosing their source of support.
- Older people prefer to receive support from spouses; if they are widowed, they turn to children, followed by other relatives, friends, neighbors, and finally to professional services
- This method of selecting care providers is called the hierarchical compensatory model.



Theories of Social Support

- Another model proposes that different tasks require different sources of support.
- Responses that require proximity, such as those required in an emergency, are best left to neighbors;
- Social and leisure activities are most often done with age-peer friends;



Theories of Social Support

- Supportive services that require large investments of time and energy (such as those related to personal care) are done primarily by those who have had the longest and most intimate relationship with the older person (usually the spouse and/or children).
- When the frequency and intensity of personal care becomes overwhelming to the informal providers, then professional in-home services are summoned.



Theories of Social Support

- Institutionalization becomes the last resort.
- The basic principle of this model, called the task-specific model, is that support functions need to be shared across a portfolio of providers with each provider doing what it is best suited to do.



Intergenerational Support

- One of the most important dynamics within family relations is the strong sense of responsibility and commitment that adult children have toward their aging parents.
- In some cases, this commitment is maintained despite earlier estrangement, or even a history of childhood abuse or neglect.
- In social gerontology two theories have mainly been used to model intergenerational exchanges and reciprocity over the life-course: attachment theory and exchange theory.



Intergenerational Support

- Attachment theory proposes that early patterns of family interaction persist over time, yielding consistent family reactions to new situations
- Continuity in emotional attachment between parents and children over time serves to motivate (or discourage) the child to provide social support to their aging parents



Intergenerational Support

- An alternative paradigm for interpreting serial patterns of exchange over the life-course is the support bank theory
- A "support bank" is a repository of social equity wherein parents invest emotionally and financially in their younger dependent children early in the family life-course, and withdraw this social equity when their need for social support become more acute in later life.