Learning the Many Meanings of Family: Contemporary Perspectives for Elders

by Jacquelyn Browne & Jim Hibel

A woman laments, “I have two sons, and none of them will give me grandchildren.” The mother just celebrated her 80th birthday. One son, in his 40s, lives with his wife in an upscale community in Boston. The couple both work “all the time,” as the woman says, and have chosen not to have children. The other son lives in San Francisco with his male partner of 22 years. They, too, have involved and successful careers. They visit their parents in short segments as they pass through Florida on the way to cruise ships. “No grandchildren...” the woman adds. “What have I been placed on this earth for?”

An 87-year-old man’s wife died two years ago after 61 years of marriage. He is a strict Methodist from a small, predominantly white Southern town. His daughter’s marriage broke up six months ago, and she is temporarily living with him, along with her adopted 8-year-old Korean daughter, a grandchild he has had trouble accepting and relating to. The granddaughter has recently been diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome.

These are just two snapshots into the changing nature of families in North America. The word family elicits powerful psychological and sociological interpretations. What do we mean by family? What constitutes a family? As educators of older adults, we are affected by these seismic shifts in traditional family roles. Lifelong learning programs and other venues for older adult education are good settings in which to open up discussion of these issues.

Demographic Changes Bring Challenges

Because the average lifespan of people living in the United States continues to climb, along with the numbers of people moving into their ninth and tenth decades, it is becoming increasingly common for a family to span four or five generations.

Living within such a complex generational mix sets off an avalanche of changes and challenges: longer marriages, more late-life relationships, more open same-sex couples, more interracial couples, more interfaith couples, more stepfamilies, more caregivers, and more single men and women, all of which we as a society must learn to deal with. More and more adults are responding to larger societal changes by choosing nontraditional paths. In a reversal of expected roles, for instance, some adults are returning to live with their aging parents or are relying on the elder generation’s resources. There are “non-kin” caregivers as well as “fictive kin,” neighbors and friends who function as family.

What does it mean to become an elder who is a lifelong learner and transmitter of experience within these new family contexts? Families are the primary context in which humans learn about the world. From our families, we learn the roles we play now and throughout our lifespan.

As the family paradigm changes, elders are finding that they have fewer, if any, familial role models for their contemporary existence. In “Gendered Experiences in Midlife: Implications for Age Identity,” an article that appeared in the May 2005 issue of the Journal of Aging Studies, Anne E. Barrett describes the experience of aging itself -- feeling “younger” or “older” -- as being affected by the roles we play. “Roles influence perceptions of age largely through the patterning of individual day-to-day experiences,” she writes. Ideas about how well older adults’ lives fit with what they think is expected of them can determine the value they place on their lives and on their right to pass on something of themselves to others.
Roads With No Maps

The elders in the opening vignettes find themselves challenged by roads for which they have no maps. In the world in which these elders were raised, it may not have been acceptable to privilege a career over child rearing or to speak of gay or lesbian relationships. Divorce may have been a sign of failure, marrying or adopting outside one’s own “kind” unthinkable. People who were raised with clear answers to issues such as these find it easy to be overtaken by a feeling of personal failure when those they love embark on different paths. Some ask themselves: What did I do wrong?

Experts on psychosocial issues for families offer a straightforward, clear answer to this question: Nothing was done wrong, and there is no failure. This is one of the important messages that educators of older adults can pass along to the people they serve.

Family has come to encompass a stunning rainbow of diversity over the past 50 years, and today’s elders have both witnessed and participated in the growth of this diversity. For elders who are comfortable celebrating diversity, it is clear that there is no failure involved in following a different life path, either on the part of themselves or their children. For those who hold to a more traditional model of family, it is important to find answers that will enable them to connect with their children and grandchildren while continuing to hold close the values and beliefs that are precious to them.

Harnessing Lifelong Learning

Some older adults adapt to changing roles through self-development, others through conversations with family members who encourage the elders to see how new roles within the family signify possibility and strength. There is a third way to help older adults cope, and it is one that lifelong learning programs are particularly well suited to.

As described by Barbara Myerhoff in her work with elders, older adults may find meaning by developing communities in which groups of people share common experiences, sometimes of trauma, sometimes of everyday challenges. In these community meetings, individuals share stories of challenges they have confronted and discuss the skills they have subsequently developed. Often, they also share fiction, songs, pictures or poems that have been meaningful to them as they faced these challenges. The elders are also witnesses to one another in acknowledging their individual resources and group strengths.

The opportunities for education, discussion and community-building that older adult education programs offer make it possible for elders to use the knowledge of experts, the support of families, and especially the skills and resources of one another to begin to negotiate these new forms of family and the challenges and opportunities they provide.

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