Aging Families: Issues, Gaps and Data

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International Symposium on Aging Families

• In June 2013, the PCLC Thematic Committee on Families organized a two-day symposium on aging families
• The goal was to advance our knowledge about how population aging is reshaping and redefining families
• Participants came from Canada, the US, the UK, and China
• Included 21 presentations
• A selection of the papers were published in a special issue of the Canadian Journal of Aging on Aging Families in December 2014
Prevalent Themes in Aging Families

• The PCLC Thematic Committee on Families conducted a synthesis of the literature in aging families
• The synthesis is posted on the Cluster’s website
• Themes in Aging families
  • Structural Diversity
  • Family Relationships
  • Caregiving and Intergenerational Transfers
  • Living Arrangements
  • Partnerships in Later Life
Structural Diversity: Issues and Gaps

• The traditional model of the nuclear family no longer serves as the standard given the structural diversity of aging families.

• Our review suggests that interest in the structural diversity of aging families falls under four areas: 1) family composition, 2) step-families, 3) childlessness, and 4) number of children.

• We also noted some gaps in the literature. For example, we know little about:
  • Living arrangements among step-families.
  • The effects of parental status and partner loss on the wellbeing of the bereaved.
  • Childlessness in later life.
  • There is a lack of Canadian data on intergenerational transfers.
Family Relationships: Issues and Gaps

• Family relationships in later life are dynamic and comprise many facets

• Much research attention has been given to understanding the complexity of these relationships in later life

• Our review identified four themes in this area: 1) relationship typologies, 2) relationship quality, 3) relationships and well-being, and 4) grandparent-grandchild relationships

• We also noted several gaps in this literature
  • Need to account for complexity and diversity on family support
  • No typology of family relationships developed in Canada
  • Lack of longitudinal studies on parent-adult child ambivalence
Caregiving and Intergenerational Transfers: Issues and Gaps

• There is a large body of literature on caregiving and intergenerational transfers.

• Our review identified a number of themes in this area, including studies on 1) caregiving burden, 2) buffers of burden, 3) couple caregiving, 4) sibling caregiving, 5) spousal caregivers, 6) grandchildren caregivers, 7) married daughters as primary caregivers, and 8) filial responsibility.

• We also noted need for studies to:
  • To employ more specific care-giver outcome measures, e.g., objective health measures.
  • To assess the effects of caregiver burden on care-recipients.
  • To assess additional couple caregiver differences besides gender, such as ethnic differences and their intersections.
Living Arrangements: Research Gaps

• Living arrangements are linked to broader social changes, including changes in social norms related to marriage, childbearing, educational attainment, and women’s employment

• Recent studies in this area have focused on: 1) independent living and intergenerational co-residence, 2) non-marital cohabitation, and 3) living-apart-together (LAT)

• Our review also noted some research gaps. For example,
  • There is a paucity of studies on the effect of immigration on the living arrangements of aging families in Canada
  • There is little empirical research on non-marital relationships in late life
  • We know little about how these relationships begin, and virtually nothing about how they end
Partnerships in Later Life: Research Gaps

• Understanding the diversity and complexity of partnerships in later life has become an important area of research

• To date, studies on the theme of partnerships in later life have primarily focused on: 1) singlehood and dating, 2) repartnering, 3) marital happiness, 4) divorce, and 5) widowhood

• We noted two research gaps. Research is needed to assess
  • The effects of singlehood on the health and well-being of older adults
  • The impact of divorce among older adults on their health and well-being
Conclusion

• Our review of research on aging families identified five themes: structural diversity, family relationships, caregiving and intergenerational transfers, living arrangements, and partnerships.

• We have noted several gaps and directions for future research.

• One recurrent theme in the review is a lack of data on aging families.

• In Canada, there is no longitudinal data on family relationships, which is the most important gap in Canadian research on families.

• Without longitudinal data, it is impossible to fully understand the dynamics of family changes, and how these changes can influence the wellbeing of individuals living in families.
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