Relational Resources and
Older Adults

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Relational Resources and Older Adults

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Abstract

Relational/cultural theory, a well-known model of women's psychological development, provides a useful theoretical model for furthering our understanding of the social relations of women and men in mid-to-late life. This paper suggests areas in which this theory can inform more mainstream gerontological research. In particular, it highlights two of the theory's contributions: the differentiation between relational beliefs, relational skill, and relational practice; and the suggestion that it may not be relationships, per se, that are influential in successful aging, but relationships which display specific "growth fostering" characteristics. These contributions pave the way for a more integrated model of later-life social relations and for a more in-depth look at component pieces of such a model.

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Relational Resources and Older Adults

      The construct of social support has received a great deal of attention in the adult development and gerontological literatures and is widely recognized as a critical aspect of successful aging and well-being in mid-to-late life (Krause, 1987; Krause, 1997; Martire, Schultz, Mittlemark, & Newsom, 1999; Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Other key facets of later-life social relations have also been studied, such as older adults' social networks (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Carstensen, 1992), intergenerational relations (Bengtson, 2001), attachment (Magai, Cohen, Milburn, Thorpe, McPherson, & Peralta, 2001), and older adults' provision of support to others (Krause & Shaw, 2000). However, frequently these components are studied in isolation from one another, suggesting the need for a more integrated model of social relations in late adulthood.

      The purpose of this working paper is to apply a theoretical model of women's psychological development, relational/cultural theory, to the study of social relations among older adults of both genders. This paper does not provide an exhaustive discussion of relational/cultural theory (see instead Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Jordan, 1997), nor does it identify all the possible areas of overlap between this theory and other models of social relations in later life. Rather, it focuses on the perhaps more interesting areas of "underlap" – those places where relational/cultural theory is potentially valuable in developing

a more integrated understanding of later-life social relations. In particular, I will

highlight two of the theory's contributions: the differentiation between three

spheres of what I call "relational resources" (relational belief systems, relational

skill, and relational practice), and the identification of specific relationship

characteristics that may be influential in successful aging.

Relational/Cultural Theory

Relational/cultural theory, developed by theorists at the Stone Center at

Wellesley College, is a model of women's psychological development which

stresses that optimal growth and development occur in the context of relationships

and connections with others (Miller, 1976; Jordan et al., 1991; Jordan, 1997).

This central tenet of the theory -- that connections to and relationships with others

(in particular "ongoing, growth-fostering connections") are the "ultimate goal" of

psychological development -- stands in opposition to many traditional (and

contemporary) psychological theories positing the task of separation-

individuation from others as the "ultimate goal" of development. Interestingly,

though, this "growth-in-connection" model is more harmonious with certain areas

of gerontological inquiry underscoring the salience of relational issues – and the

increased importance of social relations -- as people of both genders age. This is

not to suggest that development "trumps" gender – that men and women are

differentiated earlier in adulthood and develop identically in later life. Rather,

this paper suggests that older women and men develop in ways both similar and

dissimilar, some of which are still largely unknown.

Another contribution of relational/cultural theory relevant to gerontology

is the identification of particular characteristics of relationships that foster growth

and optimal development (Jordan, 1997; Miller & Stiver, 1997). As defined by

Belle Liang and colleagues (Liang, Tracy, Taylor, Williams, Jordan, & Miller, in

press), these characteristics include: mutual engagement ("perceived mutual

involvement, commitment, and attunement to the relationship"), authenticity ("the

process of acquiring knowledge of self and the other and feeling free to be

genuine in the context of the relationship"), empowerment/zest ("the experience

of feeling personally strengthened, encouraged, and inspired to take action"), and

tolerance of difference and conflict ("the process of expressing, working through

and accepting differences in background, perspective, and feeling") (Liang et al.

in press).

Three Spheres of Relational Resources: Beliefs, Skill, and Practice

Relational/cultural theory sets the foundation for a more integrated model

of later-life social relations with its differentiation between relational belief

systems, relational skill, and relational practice. This three-sphere model of

relational resources was identified by Joyce Fletcher (1999) in an in-depth study of younger female professionals. Although the model specifies relational resources specific to the workplace and specific to younger adults, there are several features of the model that suggest its potential applicability to older adults in other settings.[1]

<u>Relational Belief Systems</u>

Joyce Fletcher's (1999) study of female design engineers identified several relational beliefs relevant to the workplace. Among these beliefs are the following: relationships are important to development; problems with relationships impede development; providing help to others benefits both the recipient and provider; needing help is natural and not a sign of weakness; putting tasks and projects ahead of oneself is a sign of strength; and people-focused outcomes are as important as other "more tangible" outcomes. This part of the paper examines how these beliefs might relate to later-life social relations, whether there are similar relational beliefs among older adults, and what we know about the relational belief systems of older adults. Three areas of gerontological inquiry are highlighted here: crossover in gender roles/relational motivation, generativity, and socioemotional selectivity theory.

<u>Relational Beliefs and Relational Motivation</u>

Jacquelyn James and her colleagues (James, Lewkowicz, Libhaber, & Lachman, 1995) examined, among three different age groups, three constructs

akin to relational beliefs: communion, motivation/need for affiliation and motivation/need for intimacy. Communion, half of the traditional dichotomy of agency vs. communion, is a basic orientation characterized by "participation of the individual in the collective" (Fournier & Moskowitz, 2000) and by attributes such as caring, empathy, and responsiveness. Need for affiliation is a motivation towards initiating and preserving relationships, whereas need for intimacy is a deeper-level motivation towards high-quality and meaningful relationships (McClelland, 1985). James et al.'s investigation was embedded in a larger examination of the gender role crossover hypothesis, the proposition that at mid-life and beyond, men and women reverse or achieve greater balance in their gender identities such that "men at this stage of life become 'kinder and gentler' and women develop a new kind of boldness" (p. 186).

With regard to communal orientation (assessed via self-report), James and colleagues found that women reported stronger communion than men, but they did not find differences by age group or by age-by-sex groups. Regarding need for affiliation (assessed via projective measures), the middle-aged men scored higher than older and younger men. In the need for intimacy (also projective), midlife adults scored higher than younger adults, and women scored higher than men. These findings are certainly consistent with the fundamental thesis in relational/cultural theory that relationships with others are of critical importance to women. More of interest here, the findings also indicate that relational

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motivation is stronger for midlife women and men than for their younger

counterparts, although there is a less clear picture about the place of social

relations in later life. James et al.'s findings are strongly suggestive that actual

relational belief systems, for example those identified by Joyce Fletcher (and

other beliefs yet to be identified), may also be stronger for both genders in

midlife.

Relational Beliefs and Generativity

Further support for development-linked changes in relational belief

systems comes from recent research on Erikson's classic developmental task of

generativity, a mid-life concern with the "next generation," which is thought to

derive from the larger orientations of agency and communion (McAdams & de St.

Aubin, 1992) and possibly to represent their "fusion" (Peterson & Stewart, 1996).

Dan McAdams and Ed de St. Aubin (1992) suggest that there are two "desires"

inherent in generativity: to achieve "symbolic immortality" and to be important to

other people. While generative concerns are said to exist at other stages of

adulthood (and relational concerns exist in other of Erikson's stages), there is

evidence that they are increasingly salient in mid-life and beyond (Stewart,

Ostrove, & Helson, 2001) and are more linked to well-being (Ackerman, Zuroff,

and Moskowitz, 2000) in midlife. This line of research provides compelling

evidence of the value in midlife of relationships in which one can be *important* to

others, yet a relational/cultural lens would provide a more in-depth investigation

of what importance to others might look like. In particular, relational/cultural

theory would suggest a less unidirectional sense of importance to others and

would suggest a more mutual flow of influence and import. Other of the theory's

characteristics of growth-fostering relationships might also be associated with

generativity, namely, authenticity among social partners, a sense of empowerment

and "zest," and an ability to deal effectively with conflict and difference (Jordan,

1997; Liang et al., in press).

Relational Beliefs and Socioemotional Selectivity

Laura Carstensen's socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1993;

Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999) addresses the phenomenon that older

people engage in less social interaction than younger adults and have fewer (yet

closer) social relationships. The theory identifies two categories of social goals

throughout development -- knowledge acquisition and emotional regulation – and

proposes that such goals are very much influenced by the perception of time.

Late adulthood presents adults with a "recognition of the finality of life," and

goals related to emotion become much more important than knowledge-related

goals. Thus, older people choose their social ties carefully and strongly prefer

social ties and interactions that are "emotionally meaningful" (Carstensen et al.,

1999).

Although socioemotional selectivity theory does not portray itself as a

theory of relational beliefs, per se, it does provide strong evidence of

development-related changes in relational beliefs. Particularly interesting is the proposition that it is not relationships in-and-of-themselves that matter, but relationships that are "emotionally meaningful." This proposition of course bears strong resemblance to the notion of "growth-fostering" relationships in relational/cultural theory as being important to optimal development. An interesting area to pursue would be to explore more fully the characteristics of relationships that older adults are more motivated to pursue. For example, might the "emotionally meaningful" relationships in Carstensen's theory also be those marked by mutuality and authenticity, empowerment/zest, and conflict tolerance (Liang et al., in press)? Other fruitful connections between Carstensen's theory and relational/cultural theory are discussed below.

Relational Skill/Practice

While a focus on the relational belief systems of older adults is a worthwhile enterprise, it is clear that a more integrated model of later-life social relations would also need to encompass areas of relational competence and actual relational behaviors. As Neal Krause and Benjamin Shaw recently suggested (2000), older people may never realize the purported benefits of social relations if they lack the social skills necessary to achieve them. Joyce Fletcher's (1999) identification of distinct areas of relational skill and practice (albeit generated from a younger sample) provides a foundation for such an expanded focus.

The relational skill areas identified by Fletcher include "empathetic competence," which involves understanding the experiences and perspectives of others, and "emotional competence" which encompasses skill in reading and responding to emotional cues. "Authenticity" entails knowing and expressing one's thoughts and feelings, and "embedding outcomes" refers to skill in empowering others and being involved in their development. "Fluid expertise" involves the ability to switch between expert and non-expert roles, to learn from others, and to acknowledge the receipt of help, while "vulnerability" involves comfort with "not knowing" and with asking for assistance.

This part of the paper examines how the skills outlined by Joyce Fletcher might apply to later-life social relations, whether similar relational skill areas have been identified among older adults, and what other areas of relational skill are worthy of additional consideration. Three areas of the gerontological literature are discussed briefly here: relational competence, socioemotional selectivity theory, and the relational skills and practices associated with social support.

Relational Skill/Practice and Relational Competence

There is a fair amount of overlap between the relational skills identified by Joyce Fletcher and the relational competence literature in gerontology (e.g., Hansson & Carpenter, 1994; Hogg & Keller, 1991). For example, skill in empathy, perspective taking, self-knowledge, and sensitivity to the emotions and experiences of others appear both in Fletcher's model and in the gerontological

models, (as well as in more general models of relational intelligence (e.g., Goleman, 1995)). Moreover, John Hogg and Kenneth Keller's (1991) investigation of relational competence among community-dwelling older adults found that empathy, assertiveness, and perspective-taking were necessary skills for friendship development. In one study of relational competence among older workers, Robert Hansson and Bruce Carpenter (1994) found that successful older workers were high in sociability, respectful and courteous towards others, in control emotionally, and attracted mentors and followers. Yet, again, it is the areas of "underlap" that are most compelling. In particular, do older adults exhibit more skill in embedding outcomes, fluid expertise, and vulnerability? These particular skill areas (defined above) would appear especially relevant to successful aging.

Relational Skill/Practice and Socioemotional Selectivity

There also exist interesting connections between Fletcher's take on relational skill and practice and Laura Carstensen's socioemotional selectivity theory (described above). For example, Carstensen's theory suggests that perceptions of limited time or an impending ending may result in higher levels of self-acceptance, which is conceptually akin to what Fletcher calls the relational skill of authenticity/self-knowledge. Further, there are undoubtedly several relational skills and practices associated with what Carstensen and colleagues (1999) have called a "proactive pruning process" in social relations – the move

towards more meaningful relationships. These skills and practices have yet to be explored and named, and they present an interesting area for future research.

<u>Relational Skill/Practice and Social Support</u>

This working paper begins with a statement about the attention that social support has enjoyed in the adult development and gerontological literatures, most of which has focused on the amount of support (tangible and emotional) received by older adults and their self-reported satisfaction with it. There has been some exploration of the relational skills associated with social support, such as John Hogg and Kenneth Keller's (1991) finding that empathy, assertiveness, and perspective-taking are necessary for the development of friendships in later life. However, there has been much less focus on what actual behaviors and practices might be exhibited in the area of social support. A recent exception to this is Neal Krause and Benjamin Shaw's investigation of older persons as providers – not recipients – of emotional support (2000) in which they inquired about relational practices such as showing physical affection, listening, expressing concern, and being physically present for others. Perhaps more compelling, the authors found links between these practices and self-esteem, but found that over time the relationship was evident only among upper-SES respondents. This study raises fascinating questions about what other areas of relational practice exists among older adults, how these relate to other areas of personality, and how these relationships may be moderated by demographic or structural factors.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested ways in which relational/cultural theory provides a useful lens through which to deepen our understanding of the social relations of women and men in mid-to-late life. Two of the theory's contributions -- the differentiation between relational beliefs, relational skill, and relational practice; and the delineation of specific "growth-fostering characteristics of relationships – are particularly valuable. While the gerontological literature has certainly attended to older adults' relational motivations, social competence, and resources such as social support and social networks, these aspects of social relations are frequently studied in isolation of one another, and they sometimes receive a too-cursory focus. Relational/cultural theory paves the way for a more integrated model of later-life social relations, and also for a more in-depth look at component pieces of such a model. This paper is only a first step in examining the ways in which relational/cultural theory can inform more mainstream gerontology. Future work should continue this exploration and might also address how the theoretical and empirical contributions of gerontology can influence relational/cultural theory, in particular how aspects of this "growth-in-connection" model unfold, change or remain stable over the course of later-life development for females and males.

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1 The author is currently investigating this model in a pilot study of older workers, aged 55+, in the Boston area.