

close'. In the early and middle parts of this century there was a move away from this ideal with a 'steady increase in the proportion of a typical life spent ill or infirm'. There has recently been a considerable amount of debate about the value of regular exercise in maintaining physical health. This paper examines the relationship between physical exercise and quality of life in older people. Fries concludes that exercise in later life is associated with decreased cardiovascular disease, lower body weight and reduced blood pressure. However, it fails to mention the enormous amount of data which suggests that exercise improves not only physical but also mental health. This may manifest in different ways including increased energy, improved self-esteem and improved general 'well being'. It is exciting that the debate about exercise is now including older people. Elderly people should have the same opportunity to receive treatment for physical and mental illnesses as younger patients and this requires, in part, a change of attitude by the medical profession. Simple measures for promoting physical and mental health should also be encouraged including physical exercise.

Older Women

Sheila Peace

Hazel M. MacRae. 1995. Women and caring: constructing self through others. *Journal of Women & Aging*, 7(1/2), 145-167.

This article returns to the 'nature *versus* nurture' debate concerning women and caring. Whilst psychologists have argued that 'the female personality is rooted in caring' and emphasise emotions others have stressed the social construction of caring and turned our attention to the lack of choice for many women about their caring responsibilities. Their constrained position is reinforced by normative beliefs about the role of the family in care.

MacRae, whilst sympathising with the social constructionist viewpoint, reinforces the importance of the 'personal significance of caring' and the fact that it has a 'symbolic dimension that needs to be considered'. She adopts the symbolic interactionist's perspective, emphasising the role which humans play in constructing a meaningful sense of self through their experiences and interactions with others. Given that caring forms a central part of the lives of many women, she argues that caring is therefore a 'route to self-meaning' and an identification of the self. In considering research on the conceptualisation of identity, the author shows how position within the social system and social roles have been seen as central. She discusses the work

of Rosow (1976) and others, who have viewed later life as a time of role loss and hence of identity crisis. However, an alternative position has been to view the self as not just 'a bundle of roles' but rather as the link between the individual and society, and consequently, to focus on everyday experience discovering 'those dimensions of experience that are important to each individual's identity'. In this way the author argues that the focus of her research is 'felt identity' (self-meanings or perceptions) rather than 'social identity'.

The research, based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 142 older women (aged 65–98 years) in a small town in Nova Scotia, was designed to consider 'the nature of self-identity in later life and the ways in which it is maintained'. The older women lived in diverse settings: private homes and apartments, senior apartment complexes and a nursing home. Almost two-thirds were widowed and only 7 per cent had never married. A majority had at least one living child, while less than a quarter had worked outside the home in full-time employment. The interviews were wide-ranging with one section focusing on the concept of self-identity. The findings show that although the women gave a positive account of themselves and scored highly in terms of self-esteem, they had difficulty in describing themselves as persons. MacRae suggests this is because 'the self-identity of these women was built around relationships and experiences rather than statuses and formal roles'. When asked to respond to the question 'Who am I?', respondents were not accustomed to thinking or talking about themselves, sometimes finding it easier to respond with the words of others, *e.g.* 'they say...'. Having been socialised to care for and about others, the women put others before themselves, as people whose actions are more important than their words.

In summary, the women describe themselves in three ways: (a) what they referred to as 'doing for others' – more than a third of the sample stressed this area of their lives, encapsulated in terms such as helping, visiting, caring, looking after, and doing for. 'Others' referred to a range of people within and outside the family and across the life course. More than half responded that they belonged to organisations, many of which were service-oriented, thereby extending the caring role beyond the family; (b) personal attributes – more than half of the respondents referred to themselves in terms of personal attributes which reflected certain characteristics or interpersonal skills, *e.g.* helpful and kind. These qualities were also admired in others; and (c) familial roles – wife, mother, homemaker and grandmother were all central to the self-identities of a majority of the respondents. These roles continued to be qualified by a description of what they do or have done for others.

The author concludes with a discussion of the ways in which this group of women, who live in a particular cultural and historical context and who have had little opportunity to occupy other social positions throughout their lives, find self-meaning through their relationships with others. She discusses how this nurturing role, which many describe as being encouraged by their parents, may provide continuity throughout life and put older women at an advantage over older men whose self-identity may be built around formal roles and instrumental activities. Thus women have learned caring skills within a time and a place where such skills were recognised and put to good use. The paper does not, in the author's words, seek to 'idealise caring' or see it as the only 'route to self-meaning', or only important to women, but presents caring as one route to self-meaning and as a possible component of identity.

COMMENT

Whilst this article reviews a familiar body of literature, it provides us with rare hearings of how particular groups of older women describe themselves, and elucidates how they have made connections between the societal values in which they have been raised and their own sense of self. Important qualifications are made about time and place, and the author is not suggesting that we generalise from this material, rather that we are more open to considerations of self-identity which look at the meanings attached to relationships alongside those attached to social status and roles.

Jeannette Dickerson-Putman and Judith K. Brown. 1992. Women's age hierarchies: an introductory overview. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 9, 2, 119–125.

The April 1994 *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* was devoted to a special issue on *Women's Age Hierarchies*. In these abstracts I have chosen to feature the introduction and one of the articles. The discussion of age and gender hierarchies outlined here are situated within the context of the varied stages of development found in the countries of study. In many cases the process of economic, political and social development has, or has begun to, devalue or ignore the skills and knowledge of older women. A direct connection, therefore, can be made between these articles and the paper discussed above.

In their introduction Dickerson-Putman and Brown remind us that 'women of different ages can experience development in different

ways', and that access to and control or power due to age and gender may be modified given increasing opportunities for education or employment amongst the young. Nevertheless, to date there is only modest cross-cultural evidence to show that as women age they experience greater freedom and opportunities to engage in roles outside of the domestic sphere.

The age hierarchies which form the basis of discussion in this volume include: between siblings, mother/daughter, mother-in-law/daughter-in-law and grandmother/granddaughter. The research comes from a range of settings including: central Sudan, rural Kenya, the Andes, and an Aboriginal community in Australia. Some of the major themes explored are: the way social structure and economic activity shape the interaction of female kin; the way cultural change and development may change the character of hierarchies amongst women over time, and whether there is a 'distinguishable female managerial style, when women's authority is traditional, recognised and unquestioned' (p. 122).

Maria G. Cattell. 1992. 'Nowadays it isn't easy to advise the young': grandmothers and granddaughters among the Abaluyia of Kenya. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 9, 2, 157-178.

This paper, based on an anthropological study of the Abaluyia in western Kenya, focuses on the relationship between grandmothers and granddaughters in a culture which has undergone rapid social change. The author shows that both western and African literature on grandparent has stressed the importance, particularly of grandmothers, in areas such as surrogate parenthood or in transmitting cultural history and local knowledge. In the latter, grandparents were and are seen as educators of their grandchildren, although the knowledge base may be changing and less valued than in previous times. Others have noted that the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren may be more relaxed and affectionate than those between, for example, children and parents or siblings. These different generational groups are also said to share 'structural equivalence', the one replacing the other, as well as 'liminal status', where both are seen as 'on the margins of society' (p. 159).

Some of these issues are examined in more detail using data from ethnographic fieldwork carried out since 1982; in particular, a survey of old people in Samia in 1985, written accounts of visits to grandmothers, and biographical narratives of older people. The author

sets the scene by describing the onset of delocalization in which patterns of residence, employment and education, along with family traditions, have all undergone immense change even though the society outside of the towns remains largely agrarian and kin-based.

Most older Samia women are grandmothers and multi-generational households are common. Grandmothers have held a traditional role in relation to the education of their granddaughters, being the person to offer advice and information about sexual and marital behaviour. However, whilst contact between the generations and acts of exchange and reciprocity remain important, the research indicates that over the past forty years such closeness has become more difficult to maintain. Cattell charts a number of changes in the life course patterns of women during this time from the perspective of grandmothers and granddaughters. Grandmothers also find it increasingly difficult to advise their granddaughters: 'Hardly any women over the age of 50 had any formal schooling; they cannot read or write, some do not even count in the modern style. Often older women do not know what younger women want to know. For instance, preventing pregnancy is a topic of great interest to most young people' (p. 170). And while their valued knowledge may be subject to change, they may also find themselves with other burdens, including the responsibility for caring for, and bringing up, the children of unmarried daughters as the number of premarital pregnancies increase. The relationship between these two generations of women is evolving, retaining both instrumental and expressive components while coping with new experiences which may change the nature of age/gender hierarchies.

COMMENT

Studies of this kind are important if we are to understand more about the impact on individual lives of changes in culture as a consequence of social, economic and political development. From a western perspective, they also offer fresh pairs of eyes from which to view our own societies and the relationships that exist within and between the generations and across the gender divide.

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