

Family Relations in Aging

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Abstract

Issues of integrating old people into the society, increasing their functionality and life quality have become significantly important that consideration of social value of aging has become a necessity. Particularly family support, confidence, endearment and interest are of crucial importance in assisting old individuals to take aging kindly, cope with its problems and see themselves as cared for by the society and to lead a healthy, happy and satisfying aging period. Therefore, while addressing the issue of aging, family structure is the first social institution to examine. Because aging and the term being old can best be evaluated within the familial structure.

Introduction

The term aging describes continuity of the late phase of human development and individual changes in human life. Aging is also a period when losses and breakdowns against life are experienced. At the same time, it is a process prepared by cultural, environmental and economic factors (Tufan, 2002). Every old individual has a biological past, undergoes inborn and familial effects, educational and professional experiences and an emotional life. Besides - though it may vary from one society to another or one era to another- aging is a process and struggle which includes developmental tasks to be performed (Emiroğlu, 1995). From health to social insurance, environmental issues to educational ones, to employment opportunities, socio-cultural activities and familial life it has various effects on every aspect of the society (DPT, 2007).

Throughout the struggle from birth to death, old individuals' ability to adapt and succeed is significantly affected by their physical health, personality, former life experiences, adequate financial opportunities, medical care, social role and their participation to social activities (Butler, 1974). Therefore, aging is not a solely biological but a social and cultural phenomenon at the same time (Emiroğlu, 1995). As humans get older, meaning of life, its features and forms change. Physical, psychological and social changes that people undergo throughout aging also bring about the ability to develop, apply and change certain strategies to cope with these changes. Changes which have an important place in individual lives of old people also have effects on their family and social lives (Onur, 2008).

Issues of integrating old people into the society, increasing their functionality and life quality have become significantly important that consideration of social value of aging has become a necessity. Particularly family support, confidence, endearment and interest are of crucial importance in assisting old individuals to take aging kindly, cope with its problems and see themselves as cared for by the society and to lead a healthy, happy and satisfying aging period (DPT, 2007).

Elderly and Family

Family life, with all the support and help it provides, is the only key to a well and long life. As we get older, home and family life become more and more central to our lives and completely surround our lives.

Whether they live with their families or separate, elders have a central place and role in the family as rings tying past to the present (Güven, 2006). For elders family is the major social and psychological support system.

Depending upon such facts one can say that aging is a phenomenon which develops hand in hand with relationships between couples, between children and parents and other members of a family (Baker, 1990) and while addressing the issue of aging, family structure is the first social institution to examine. Because aging and the term being old can best be evaluated within the familial structure (AAK & TUİK, 2006). Developments throughout the century have raised a totally new insight into the world of adults and elders (Schaie & Wills, 1996). Transformation from extended families to nuclear ones has had significant effects on families in rural areas and number of extended families which provide a great feeling of assurance to the elders has been diminishing due to the processes of social change, industrialization and urbanization. Families become smaller and their economic structures are changing. As a result new values have emerged. Most significant of these is economic freedom. Another one is that women began working outside her house. Such changes in the structure of family lead to weakening of familial relations and particularly the elders and their families who do not have an active economic role in the urban life began to have various problems (Gökçe, 2007).

- Intergenerational clashes intensify due to the effects of changing values which stem from rapid social changes
- Families do not perform their responsibilities for the elder members.
- Limited range of the social insurance system place economic burdens on shoulders of families in terms of nursing the elders. Moreover, social, economic, psychological and physical requirements of the elders change parallel to the aforementioned changes; their values, habits, roles and behaviors differentiate. Decline in incomes and social relations, deterioration in health, housing, transport, recreation facilities and nutrition have emerged as the most significant problems of the elders in this process. (Emiroğlu, 1995; Bilir, 1996)

However, the elders who live together with their family's rural areas are much more advantageous and supported more compared to the ones living in urban areas. They are more respected and they still have the opportunity to preserve their status as the authority within the family for long times. Extended families within the traditional structure are more convenient to meet their spiritual and physiological requirements. Unlike urban structure, within the traditional structure old age is the symbol of authority and prestige as an elder is respected and has the authority to say the final word in the family as well as representing the household in relations in the neighborhood. Families who live together with their elders think that they supported them adequately (Emiroğlu, 1985; Güven, 2002).

However, elder members also support their families regarding various duties including as follows:

- childcare,
- carrying out household duties within their physical strength,
- supporting the family to arrange its income,
- staying at home,
- participating in production activities,
- regulating human relations within the family,
- guiding the family in terms of religious and universal matters and being supportive in terms of moral affairs in addition to many others (Güven, 2002).

In modern societies where you can observe various types of intergenerational solidarity and social help, the elders are not only recipients but they are also giving. For example, the need for people to take care of children increased as the number of working women increased. Since not every family in the society has sufficient income to send their kids to kindergartens, some grandmothers support younger generations by taking care of their grandchildren. Moreover, it is a fact that some elders support younger generations financially. Particularly those who live with their children support them with their retirement pensions (Tufan, 2003). Studies conducted in the field show that today in many industrialized and newly industrializing societies, families are the main communities which take the responsibility to look after their elderly relatives and this basic role of families has been stressed openly for the last 30 years (Walker, 1991). It can be said that in our country familial ties are strong and this traditional understanding is also functional (Baran et al., 2005; AAK & TUİK, 2006; Subaşı ve Öztekin, 2004).

Whether they live together or separately; despite the fact that many of their problems stem from familial clashes, negligence and selfishness, relations between the household and the elder members are strong and stable as they were in the past (Hansson & Carpenter, 1994)

Because:

- The fact that elders live separately shouldn't mean that their familial ties drift away. This could be true in the past but today abundance of transport facilities has eliminated the reparative effect of physical distance on families. Children might live away from their parents but they still can maintain a compatible relationship with them through phone calls, writing letters and visiting them.
- On the other hand, living together does not always mean that a family is built on strong foundation. No matter how stable they look from an outsider's eyes, there is more tension in families with a single absolute authority. Living together has never been an important factor to establish a healthy communication between the elders and children. It does not mean they are bond strongly at heart.
- Today people get married at older ages and live longer and number of extended families gradually decreases. As a result, sometimes four generations live together and support one another. As the age gap between generations gets smaller parents might have similar interests with their children and they get closer or more bound in problem-solving processes and even physically.
- There is more mutual understanding and love among family members (Turgut, 1988).

Findings indicate that elders usually live together with one of their children in our country and the ones who live separate are in close relationships. Research findings show that 7 out of every 10 elders live in the same house, apartment block, on the same street or in the same neighborhood with their children. With no significant gender difference, elders mostly prefer to live with or close to their children. Such a choice could be interpreted as socially and economically quite advantageous for both elders and their children. (DPT, 2007) Though being few in number, there are elders who prefer to live separate and independent. These findings indicate that elders are more cared about in our country than they are in developed countries. They also find their place in a family more secure and meaningful as family is a protective and educative environment which assures social insurance and provides its members with social safety (Güven, 2002). Particularly within the intergenerational framework mutual approaches and interactions between parents and children, parents and grandparents and grandparents and grandchildren are significant supports which help the elders cling to life (Baker, 1990). Besides, the fact that household members benefit from knowledge and experiences of the elder members is of crucial importance for their future adaptation to the problems of old age and protection of familial unity.

Therefore, in order the elders and young people who have to live together due to health or economic problems to lead a compatible life together:

- Household duties and responsibilities should be clearly stated and distributed and each member of the family should be tolerant enough for the others.
- It should be kept in mind that every member of the family might make mistakes from time to time.
- There should be private places for everybody where they can trustfully keep their personal belongings and such personal rights should be respected.
- A settlement plan must be made in line with principals of confidentiality according to ages and personal conditions of household.
- Skills of family members should be recognized and they should be given opportunities to further develop them in addition to planning of recreation activities for them. Harmony among family members can be established and idle discussions, rumors and resentments among them can be minimized through planning of various recreation facilities such as card games, flower care, collections, puzzles, minor repairs, handicrafts and music.
- In case family members have clashes despite all the preventive measures taken, listening to all sides of the clash is the basic requirement of a proper decision-making process. It should not be forgotten that elders have different feelings than youngsters while understanding the problem and a fair decision should be made accordingly.
- Special effort should be spent in order to bring family members together and set a permanent, meaningful solidarity among family members.

- There will be more solidarity if housework and other household activities are planned through participation of every member and responsibilities are distributed in realistic and rightful way parallel to everybody's strength and willingness.
- A positive attitude which puts amusing and useful aspects of living together at the forefront should be taken. In this way, people of all age and interest groups can live in harmony altogether (Bilen, 2009)

Elders who live separated from their children have a tendency to stay in close contact with them. Researches show that elders support their children and grandchildren and receive support from them in return. Support received by elders includes household works and repairs, health care during sickness, shopping and various kinds of presents. In return they support their children financially, buy them presents and help with childcare (Öztop, 2000). Briefly, studies show that the elders are not isolated by their family members and that there is good communication between them. In order to establish a compatible and regular communication with their children elders who live separate are in expectation of certain behavior patterns from their children:

- Children should live close to their families after marriage.
- If they live near children should visit their parents at least once a week.
- Children who live away from their families should send letters to their parents at least once a week.
- Children should behave responsible to their families (Barow, 1989).

Elders feel obliged to have good relationships with neighbors and close relatives. Doubtlessly one cannot expect people of different values to have smooth relationships with each other. Success in relationships is mainly based on accepting differences with tolerance and concentrate on common grounds shared by sides. Since being together depends on willingness rather than being an obligation, working and having fun altogether will serve the success of family life. Maintenance of such close relationships is important because this way close relatives who live separated can keep informed about each other and youngsters can have the opportunity to observe their elder relatives' conditions and problems so that they can take measures to help them (Şener, et al., 2007).

Besides, many elders might be obliged to live together with their families due to old age, sickness and financial reasons. It is quite hard to be dependant on somebody else due to old age and sickness after a long adult life independent of others. Under such circumstances what they prefer is to get help from their homes, relatives and acquaintances. Similar studies indicate similar results. As people get older they live together with or close to their children and keep in touch more often with them. (Walker, 1991). In addition, they get more support from their children while they support them less. Along with increasing age and decreasing strength they fall into a dependant position from their former independent position and they are now the visited ones in need care instead of being the visiting ones (Hansson & Carpenter, 1994).

Therefore supporting and protecting elders constitutes a significant place (Gottlieb, 1991). However, there are risks for those who receive and provide protection and care. In our society, the widely accepted opinion is that such duties should be undertaken by women in the family. Women, naturally play a central role in duties like protection and care. They are considered as inherently self-sacrificing; problems they might have under tough living conditions are not taken into account. It should be the main purpose to remove dependency of the elders while eliminating hard conditions of those who take care of them at the same time (Walker, 1991). Therefore, it is necessary to consider family system as a whole in order to handle negative aspects of homecare and take measures to support family members with their requirements. This could be provided by establishing a proper homecare system (Mims, 1998).

Homecare is a part of daily life for many people all over the world. Homecare duties vary from nursing babies, kindergarten children, chronic patients, the physically handicapped and elders and minor household duties to specialized homecare services. In this regard, sharing burden of family through making their elder members feel more comfortable, offering rehabilitation services for families that cannot provide them and providing day care services for working mothers aim at ensuring integrity of the families. Such homecare services are essential to provide emotional satisfaction, personal development and ensuring close relationships within a family (Gottlieb, 1991; Mims, 1998).

It can be said that the concept of care for elders at home is quite common in Turkey due to the socio-cultural structure. Taking operation of social processes of modernization and urbanization into consideration, it is confirmed that despite the increase in number of institutions which take care of elders, care at home is still a view commonly adopted by elders and their adult children. Results of the study indicate that elders consider living in a nursing home as exclusion from their families and adult children feel responsible and are afraid "to be blamed by the social neighborhood for a shameful act". Such factors consolidate the idea of homecare by family members (Kut, 1989; Baran et al., 2005).

Conclusion

Due to all aforementioned reasons there are responsibilities to be taken in order to have a positive and harmonious relationship between elders and other family members in a society. Following are some of them:

- Although there are prevalent regulations and applications about elders in our society, they should be extended to all over the society and provided continuity and their effectiveness should be increased.
- Authorized bodies and institutions should provide homecare services and organize and supervise other similar services when necessary.
- New organizations should be started in order to functionalize activities of existing elders' association centers more effectively.
- Revision of existing policies should be supported in terms of developing intergenerational social unity and solidarity.
- Also, consciousness of family members and elders should be raised about importance of transition to aging and problems of old age.
- Researches should be conducted about positive and negative aspects of living separate and living together with family. Studies to be held on these issues will be very useful in terms of minimizing problems of the elders.

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