

Our Guest Editors

Talk about
couples in later life



ROSEMARY BLIESZNER

Intimate relationships in later life are full of challenges and can bring particular strength. This issue of *Generations* celebrates the resilience and the vast diversity to be found in older couples and offers the latest information and practical strategies for professionals working with them. We are fortunate to have as guest editors Rosemary Blieszner and Sara Honn Qualls. From their distinguished scholarship and practice, they have brought to the task a wealth of experience and keen insight for a state-of-the-art look at late-life partnerships today.

Rosemary Blieszner is professor of gerontology and family studies in the Department of Human Development and associate director of the Center for Gerontology at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg. She holds a Ph.D. in human development-family studies, with a concentration in older adult development and aging and a minor in sociology and social psychology. "I did not plan to focus on aging," Blieszner says, "but the small college where I taught before I got my doctorate invited older adults to sit in on classes. I had fabulous older students. I loved it. That experience made me more aware of the whole lifespan, and I've been learning from older people ever since."

Blieszner's extensive body of research over the years has focused on relationships, life events, and psychological well-being in adulthood and old age. Her publications on older adult friendship, including *Adult Friendship* and *Older Adult Friendship: Structure and Process* (both published by Sage), have proved to be pioneering works on this topic. She is the recipient of numerous hon-

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ors, including Virginia Tech's Alumni Award for Teaching Excellence, and is currently Alumni Distinguished Professor, a position held by ten faculty members at the university.

The state of the art regarding older couples today centers around important trends that have recently emerged, Blieszner says. First, there is much greater awareness that couples in later years have unique experiences and things to say. "It's fascinating to see the intersection of individual development with the development of a relationship over time," she says. "Both change. Whether you are in a long-term partnership or are entering a new one in later life, you are a very different person from when you were young. Stereotypes don't apply."

The second trend is the field's greater awareness of sociocultural diversity and its impact on individual experience. "This was not the focus earlier," Blieszner says. "Now, it's impossible not to acknowledge that, yes, we have couples 'living apart together,' we have gay and lesbian couples.

"Such increased awareness of the diversity across and within groups makes the field richer. It means we have practitioners who realize that their own lifestyle choice isn't going to work for everyone else. It means researchers who are more intentional in seeking out the variety—who are getting samples broad enough to capture the diversity that is out there—certainly including race/ethnicity but beyond that as

well—for a picture of real human variety. What we are trying to do is make research reflect lived experience so that it can have meaning for people. If researchers can help uncover what the issues are and how they arise, practitioners can have better resources to use when they go to help.”

Sara Qualls, a psychologist, is the Kraemer Family Professor of Aging Studies and director of the Gerontology Center at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. She led the development of the new doctoral program in geropsychology there and the establishment of the Colorado University Aging Center, which provides mental health and family support services for older adults in the region. Qualls says that her desire to work in the field of aging came from her academic experience in a gerontology workshop as an undergraduate, and also from her family life. “I was the mid-life child of an older family,” she says. “From the time I was young I was surrounded by aging and illness. By their interaction with our older relatives, my parents taught me not to be frightened. My experiences with older aunts that I loved made aging seem interesting rather than scary.”

Qualls’s research and writing focus on marital and family development in later life and clinical interventions for later-life couples and families. She has published a number of books, has produced a video of the caregiver family therapy that was developed at the CU Aging Center, and sponsors an annual international conference to train mental health professionals in the specific knowledge and skills needed to practice with older adults.

Qualls says she is particularly committed to using the fruits of research to give professionals the skills they need to help older couples and families address their problems and use their strengths to advantage. Her book *Caregiver Family Therapy: Empowering Families to Meet the*



SARA HONN QUALLS

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Challenges of Aging is due out in 2008 from APA Press, and she has a related book for mental health practitioners, *Aging Families and Caregiving: A Clinicians' Guide to Assessment and Intervention* (edited with Steve Zarit for Wiley & Sons), that will come out next year as well.

“I do a lot of training of professionals from a wide variety of backgrounds,” Qualls says. “Not just of mental health people, but also dietitians and social workers. The principles that have evolved from our work with families and couples are useful to all. A lot of families and partners first come to professionals because they are facing transitions with the aging of their family member or beloved partner. The service delivery system is not that navigable; we coach them through. Now available are a whole series of strategies to help families figure it out.

“I’m most struck by the phenomenal commitment to care that is in most couples. While it can be their greatest pain, it is an amazing resource. It must be honored, respected, and responded to.” ❧

—Mary Johnson