

FOUND FAMILY & AGEING

"Our relationship is not about a sense of obligation, but rather something we do out of love and as a choice," (Found Family, personal communication, March 3, 2022).

SOCIAL WORK 356



FOUND FAMILY

Found or chosen family refers to the formation of familial or kinship bonds outside of biological and legal understandings.

Found family is a familial structure often discussed in the context of Queer politics. The term implies a formation that subverts or rejects bio-legal classifications of kinship that are idealized under Western paradigms.

Analyzing the notion of family with a critical lens requires us to engage with the ways in which the family's traditional organization has held authority across the social landscape.

CULTURE & TRADITION

Found family creates an environment in which kinship groups can both honour cultural traditions that they have inherited, as well as co-create new traditions through relationship.

Within my own found family, which encompasses individuals of European, Cree, and Metis descent, we have created traditions that reflect both our ancestral worldviews and current values. These perspectives allow us to define our relationships with one another, as well as help each other navigate the larger social world.

NUCLEAR FAMILY

The 'nuclear family' or bio-legal model refers to the organization of families around monogamous marriage between one man and one woman, their biological children, and a single-family household.

The nuclear family has, through dominant discourse, been constructed as the only 'valid' or 'correct' family structure. This assumption, however, is intertwined with cultural imperialism, Western gender roles, and gendered divisions of labour.

MUTUAL AID & 'LEANING ON EACH OTHER'

In spaces where individuals negotiate kinship networks under varying degrees of adversity, they tend to form counter hegemonic cultures of care. Found families tend to be organized in ways that allow provision of care or support without the obligation that may stem from bio-legal ties.

Mutual Aid refers to ethically charged acts of sharing and exchanging material resources, and is a dominant theme research concerning found families. Mutual aid in the context of found families may refer to co-habitation, transportation, and the sharing of costs, skills, and time.

WEBS OF CARE

While most people may associate chosen or found family with replacing bio-legal family when connections are severed, this is not always the case. Chosen family has also been shown to complement bio-legal family and expand one's network of care.

In the case of my own found family, each of us has been able to forge new connections and reimagine webs of support that extend beyond the traditional formation of the nuclear family.

MY CHOSEN FAMILY

My found or chosen family encompasses a group of people with which I share common history, values, identities, experiences, and passions. Many of us maintain connections with our bio-legal families, but through the kinship connections we have built with one another we co-create spaces to reimagine what family means to us.

"We're all around the same age, we're peers... Our interactions are different because there's room for expressions of self you may not be able to have with your bio family," (Found Family, personal communication, March 3, 2022).

"When people think 'family,' or exist in larger functioning families, they get many of their emotional or physical needs met. Having strained relationships with your bio family may mean that you don't get those needs met," (Found Family, personal communication, March 3, 2022).

In my own chosen family, seeing as many of us live with complex medical needs, we structure our relationships around reciprocal provisions of care and support that we do not receive from our bio-legal families.

Mutual aid is one way in which found families 'lean on' one another, or provide informal reciprocal care. In doing so, found families disrupt the primacy of the nuclear bio-legal family as the primary source of social support.



ELDERS, FOUND FAMILY, & AGEISM

*"In Indigenous cultures everyone has knowledge to give. It's not a matter of being above, but rather a recognition of experience,"
(Found Family, personal communication, March 3, 2022).*

Ageing is a way of understanding development throughout the lifespan, with reference to physical, social, and cultural shifts.

My chosen family has a shared experience of fear and stigma around ageing, in part because of family histories of hereditary illness. Additionally, we are all in the same stages of life development, and as a result may lack strong ties to Elders. However, we share with one another our cultural understandings of ageing and Elders, and in doing so we learn to challenge ageist stigma as we learn and grow together.

Central to the foundation of found family is the knowledge that everyone has their own respective knowledges based on lived experiences. This parallels the notion of wisdom or experience in relation to the process of ageing in bio-legal families and broader communities.

Because those of us who rely on chosen families may lack strong ties to Elders, we can turn to each other if we need expertise - and may simultaneously build informal ties with community members who can share their knowledges with us.

From the diversity of backgrounds that we share with one another, a primary value that arises in my own chosen family is *reciprocity* - with both Elders and one another. This arises out of the principles we have inherited from our own cultures, as well as the principles we are committed to in our own journeys to disrupt familial trauma.

In my chosen family we prioritize reciprocity because of the lessons learned from the Indigenous members of our web of care, who have taught us the importance of honouring one's Elders and co-creating relationships of dignity and respect.

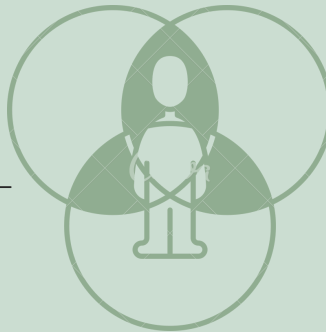
Ageism refers to prejudice or discrimination against a particular age group, particularly older adults. This form of ageism is particularly prevalent in Western societies, and impacts both personal beliefs and professional decisions.

Because ageing is a descriptor of development through socially constructed ideas of position or status, experiences of ageism are influenced by marginalization on multiple fronts. As a result, we must utilize an intersectional lens in our analysis of ageing and ageism.

GENDER

Notions of ageing, the family, and gender are inextricable from one another. Gendered divisions of power are connected to the roles that one occupies in the community, as well as one's presumed authority and knowledge. As a result, Western patriarchal family structures shape experiences of ageing through the lifespan, and influence experiences of ageism along gendered dimensions.

AGEING & INTERSECTIONALITY



ABLEISM

Ableism and ageism are intertwined. Many harmful assumptions regarding Elders in our communities parallel ableist discourses, which are rooted in capitalist logic, to envision labour productivity as the primary measure of how valuable an individual is to their community.

RACISM

Racism shapes key events over the life course and therefore holds influence in later life experiences. Assumptions about racialized peoples shape both the study of ageing and the treatment of Elders in our communities.

COLONIALISM

Elders in Indigenous societies are seen to possess a great deal of authority and prestige. Colonialism, however, separates individuals and communities from collective power and identity - and in doing so disrupts the respect and responsibilities owed to Elders in Indigenous communities. As a result, colonial logic obscures the value of Elders to naturalize Eurocentric worldviews of families and ageing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Social workers have a tremendous amount of power over the discourses that circulate about those they work with. Through processes of labeling, medicalization, and individualization, social workers can produce and reinforce potentially harmful biases. As the field of social work shifts its focus to the future of Anti-Oppressive Practice (AOP), we have a responsibility to call into question how we are honouring relationships in our work. With regards to ageism, elders, and family, we must ask ourselves which assumptions are foundational to the way we provide services.

Dominant discourses have particular definitions of what proper ageing or familial structures look like, often to the detriment of already marginalized peoples. To truly practice relational accountability and reciprocity in our practice, we need to open our eyes and ears to the diversity of human experience.

Social workers have been an assimilationist force throughout the history of the colonial project, and we have a responsibility to disrupt the harmful impacts of ageism and normative bio-legal understandings of family. Practitioners, through practice rooted in colonial logic, devalue both the innate value of Elders to their communities and the web of kinship-based relationships that sustain Indigenous communities, cultures, and traditions.

My own found family has helped me understand the value of communities whose relationships and familial structures do not reflect Eurocentric norms. Through my own experiences of co-creating community with individuals from a diversity of backgrounds, I have interrogated my own values and assumptions about family, ageing, and social justice. This is where I practice, on a small scale, the principle of reciprocity that I hope to bring with me in practice.

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