Who Gets What and Why? Help Middle-Aged Adults Provide to Parents and Grown Children

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Objectives. Middle-aged adults engage in support exchanges with generations above and below. This study investigated (a) how support to one generation is associated with support to the other and (b) factors accounting for whether parents or offspring receive more support in a family.

Methods. Middle-aged adults aged 40–60 years ($N = 633$) completed telephone interviews regarding their relationships and support exchanges with each grown child and living parent.

Results. Multilevel models revealed that most participants provided more support to the average grown child than to the average parent. Yet, a proportion of the sample reversed this pattern, providing more support to parents. Mediation models revealed that middle-aged adults provided greater support to offspring because they viewed offspring as more important than parents and offspring had greater everyday needs (e.g., being a student, not married). Parental disability accounted for greater support to parents.

Discussion. Discussion integrates solidarity theory, developmental stake, and contingency theory. Most middle-aged adults provide more to grown offspring than to parents, consistent with their greater stake in their progeny. Middle-aged adults also respond to crises (i.e., parental disability) and everyday needs (i.e., offspring student status) in providing intergenerational support, in accordance with contingency theory.

Key Words: Family—Grown child—Intergenerational exchanges—Intergenerational support—Parent—Social support—Transition to adulthood.

FEW families fit the notion of a "sandwich generation," where adults simultaneously provide care for young children and elderly parents. More commonly, middle-aged adults with elderly parents have children who are grown (Grundy & Henretta, 2006; Spitze & Logan, 1990). Prior studies of intergenerational support tend to examine only two generations at a time, either middle-aged adults' exchanges with elderly parents (e.g., Davey, Janke, & Savla, 2005; Laditka & Laditka, 2001; Suitor, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2006) or their exchanges with young adult offspring (e.g., Aquilino, 2006; Eggebeen, 1992). Studies rarely compare the support middle-aged adults provide each generation and address the pivotal role that middle-aged adults may experience within families. By examining only two generations, researchers have precluded an understanding of intergenerational support in the context of multiple generations. Indeed, middle-aged adults may help members of both generations (Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2000; Grundy & Henretta; Soldo, 1996), but we know little about how support provided to members of one generation is associated with support to members of the other generation.

This study examined middle-aged adults' exchanges with each of their grown children and living parents. We assessed the flow of generational support to grown children versus parents. We were interested in why most families give greater support on average to a grown child than to an aging parent and asked whether affection and offspring's needs explain this flow of support. In cases where middle-aged people pro-vided more to their parents than to their children, we sought to understand whether parental needs explained this pattern.

GENERATIONAL FLOW OF SUPPORT IN A LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

The literature suggests that in Western countries, intergenerational support typically flows downstream. That is, support flows from parents down to the younger generation, rather than the reverse. According to a life course perspective, parents assist their children until very late in life, when declines in health reverse the normal flow and parents turn to their children for assistance (Fingerman & Birditt, 2009; Zarit & Eggebeen, 2002). Studies in the United States document financial gifts and loans (McGarry, 1999) and practical support (Suitor et al., 2006) parents provide to grown children. Similar findings are evident in Europe (Albertini, Kohli, & Vogel, 2007; Kohli, 2005). Nonetheless, these studies do not address three-generation families and the decisions middle-aged adults make when they have grown children and aging parents (for an exception, see Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2000). Furthermore, two additional issues remain to be addressed.

First, we do not know whether middle-aged adults provide support to each of their grown children or only to specific children who have particular needs or affectionate relationships with them. Prior studies have addressed total support

middle-aged adults provide to grown offspring (e.g., Albertini et al., 2007; Grundy & Henretta, 2006) or a randomly chosen offspring (Aquilino, 2005). Some studies have provided information regarding support to multiple grown children (e.g., Altonji, Fumio, & Kotlikoff, 1997; Suitor et al., 2006), but these studies typically involve elderly parents and middle-aged offspring, without considering the third generation. Thus, the first purpose of this study was to ascertain whether on average, each grown child within a given family receives more support than each living parent.

Second, the downstream pattern of support may be normative but may not describe all families. If most families give appreciably more support to offspring than to parents, but a small proportion of families give more support to parents, the average flow of support will be downstream. Families that provide greater support to parents will not be evident. Here, we examined variability in generational discrepancies in multigeneration families.

EXPLANATIONS FOR GENERATIONAL DISPARITIES IN SUPPORT

We know little about explanations for typical patterns of generational support. Why do middle-aged adults typically provide more support to grown offspring than to their parents in most families? In those families where parents receive more support than offspring, is parental disability the only explanation? We examined these questions.

The literature regarding intergenerational exchanges is rich in theoretical perspectives. Two of these perspectives in particular may provide explanations for the discrepancies in support to different generations. Solidarity theory suggests that family members proffer help out of love and affection (e.g., Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Silverstein, Parrott, & Bengtson, 1995). This theory pertains to groups and explains why one set of family members engages in rich exchanges of support, whereas another family manifests few transfers among members. Scholars also have applied intergenerational solidarity theory to intergenerational ties, testing whether individuals provide more support to family members for whom they feel greater affection (e.g., Rossi & Rossi; Silverstein, Gans, & Yang, 2006; Silverstein et al., 1995). The developmental stake hypothesis, derived from intergenerational solidarity theory, extends this argument. According to this hypothesis, parents have a stake in grown children as their future. Parents are emotionally invested in offspring and feel more positive regard for offspring than offspring feel for parents (Fingerman, 2001; Giarrusso, Stallings, & Bengtson, 1995; Shapiro, 2004). Middle-aged adults may provide more support to grown children than to aging parents due to their emotional bonds and stake in their progeny.

The second theoretical perspective that may help explain patterns of generational support concerns the needs of each generation. Contingency theory in sociology (Eggebeen & Davey, 1998) and altruism theory in economics (Schoeni,

1997) posit that family members receive more help when they have greater needs (Eggebeen, 1992; McGarry & Schoeni, 1997; Silverstein et al., 2006). This perspective may explain why middle-aged adults may offer more help to members of one generation on average than to those of another generation, even in the absence of greater affection for specific family members.

Contingency theory applies to the typical downstream flow of support to grown offspring to meet their everyday needs. In the United States, prolonged education, career exploration, and transient romantic ties foster increased dependency on parents among well-off young adults, whereas underemployment, single parenthood, and uncertain work schedules elicit support from parents for less well-off young adults (Aquilino, 2006; Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009; Furstenberg, 2000). Support decisions often reflect everyday needs arising from statuses offspring occupy. For example, parents provide greater assistance to offspring who are students than nonstudents (Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2000; Fingerman et al., 2009). Unmarried offspring receive more support than married offspring (Fingerman, 2000; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Middle-aged adults also assist grown children with labor-intensive demands of young children (Casper & Bianchi, 2002). With regard to generational patterns, clearly, offspring are more likely to be students or to have young children than are elderly parents. Furthermore, although many elderly women are widowed, young adults still are more likely to be unmarried than older adults (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

Contingency theory also explains the life course reversal in support patterns that favor older parents when they are incapable of accomplishing daily tasks on their own (Eggebeen & Davey, 1998). The downstream flow of support may reverse when parents incur health declines and disability (Zarit & Eggebeen, 2002). Family members provide care for older adults who face prolonged health declines at the end of life. Middle-aged children are the most common caregivers, followed by spouses (Wolff & Kasper, 2006). Disability rates have decreased over the past three decades (Schoeni, Freedman, & Martin, 2008), however, and less than one fifth of families are involved in parental caregiving at any time in the United States (Grundy & Henretta, 2006). In families where a parent has incurred disabilities, however, we expected support to flow upstream to parents.

When middle-aged adults assist frail aging parents, they also may extend less help to each grown child. One study to examine this issue found that women who provided care for aging parents also did provide support to grown children (Grundy & Henretta, 2006). That study employed a dichotomous variable (whether any help is provided). Here, we asked how much help is provided to each offspring when parents require care. Based on contingency theory, we expected the average amount of help to a grown child to be less than the average amount of help to a parent when a parent suffers disabilities.

Contingency theory is less informative, however, with regard to the potpourri of other problems individuals experience. Prior research reveals that parents provide more support to offspring suffering crises (e.g., victim of a crime, drug addiction; Fingerman et al., 2009; Pillemer & Suitor, 2006; Suitor, Sechrist, & Pillemer, 2007a). If offspring suffer more problems than parents, we would expect the pattern of support to flow downstream. Yet, when parents suffer troubles, we would expect to see a generational flow of support that favors parents.

OTHER FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH INTERGENERATIONAL SUPPORT

We also controlled for other factors associated with intergenerational support. We considered gender of participant and family member because mothers and daughters typically exchange more help than fathers or sons (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). We included participants' marital status because married adults are more likely to support other generations than those who are divorced, remarried, or single (Aquilino, 2005; Shapiro, 2003). Participants' income, education, and health also were assessed because adults of higher socioeconomic status (SES) and in better health provide more family support (Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2000; Henretta, Grundy, & Harris, 2002).

Given that proximity constrains provision of certain types of help, we included geographic distance between parties (Suitor, Sechrist, & Pillemer, 2007b). People may provide support based on support they receive (e.g., Henretta, Hill, Li, Soldo, & Wolf, 1997). Thus, we controlled for amount of support each parent or offspring provides to the middle-aged adult.

Finally, we controlled for family size. Resource depletion theory suggests that children in larger sibships receive fewer resources from the parent (Blake, 1981; Davey et al., 2005; Grundy & Henretta, 2006). Two parents are not necessarily in competition for resources, but nonetheless, we controlled for number of parents.

In sum, we examined middle-aged adults' support to each parent and each grown child. Hypotheses were as follows:

Hypothesis 1: We expected most families to manifest a downstream flow of support and to report more help to the average grown child than to the average parent.
Hypothesis 2: In the majority of families where middle-aged adults provide more support to the average offspring than to the average parent, we expected affectional solidarity (i.e., greater affection and importance of offspring) to explain the generational flow of support. We also tested contingency theory and expected everyday needs arising from normative statuses offspring occupy (student, unmarried, and parent of young children) to mediate support favoring offspring.
Hypothesis 3: In families where middle-aged adults provide more to the average parent than to the average offspring, we expected parental disabilities or crises to explain the pattern.

METHODS

Sample

The sample included adults aged 40–60 ($M = 50.60$, $SD = 4.99$ years) who resided in the Philadelphia Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (including urban, suburban, and rural areas [Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2001]) from "The Family Exchanges Study" ($N = 633$; 302 men and 331 women). Each participant had at least one child over the age of 18 and at least one living parent. Recruitment occurred via telephone lists purchased from Genesys Corporation and random digit dialing in regional area codes. We oversampled neighborhoods with high density of ethnic minorities. As a result, 31% of the sample was identified as African American, 6% as multiracial, and 1% as White Hispanic. Data were collected from January through August 2008.

Procedures

Participants reported on relationships with their grown offspring and parents. Computer-assisted telephone interview software permitted random order of administration of sections of the survey pertaining to parents and to offspring. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hr.

Participants provided the name, age, and gender of each living child and each living parent. For each child over the age of 18 ($n = 1,384$) and each parent ($n = 868$), participants then provided information regarding support, problems in the past 2 years, marital status, distance in miles, and so forth. To avoid fatigue, we obtained detailed information regarding relationship quality for each parent and a maximum of three grown children. We selected the child who received most, the child who received least, and a random other child in families that had more than three children. Because most participants ($n = 555$, 88%) had three or fewer children, we had complete data on most offspring ($n = 1,251$). We also considered the distribution of parents and offspring within families; 64% of families had more children over the age of 18 than parents, 32% had the same number of grown children and parents, and 14% had one more parent than grown child (i.e., these participants had two parents and only one child over the age of 18).

Table 1 presents background information regarding participants and participants' reports of their parents and grown children. Sixty-three percent of participants had one living parent, whereas the remaining had two living parents. On average, participants had two children over the age of 18 ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.24$). Furthermore, 40.4% of participants had children younger than age 18 in the home.

Dependent Measure: Support Exchanges

We developed the *Intergenerational Support Scale* to assess support to each parent and each grown child: emotionally,

Table 1. Background Information for Participants, Their Offspring, and Their Parents

	Participants (*N*= 633)		Offspring (*n*= 1,384)		Parents (*n* = 860)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age	50.60	(4.99)	25.19	(5.80)	77.05	(6.81)
Years of education	14.38	(4.02)	13.83	(3.15)	12.47	(5.19)
Rating of health[a]	3.48	(1.07)	4.26	(0.93)	2.78	(1.09)
Income[b]	4.40	(1.45)	—	—	—	—
Number of children	2.82	(1.46)	0.48	(1.01)	3.24	(2.45)
Miles lives from participant	—	—	188.66	(613.36)	235.77	(660.70)
	Proportions		Proportions		Proportions	
Women	0.52		0.48		0.63	
Married	0.70		0.18		0.49	
Employed full time	0.65		0.51		0.04	
Employed part time	0.11		0.18		0.07	
Homemaker	0.04		0.02		0.09	
Student	0.00		0.19		0.00	
Retired	0.04		0.00		0.72	
Other	0.16		0.10		0.08	

Notes: [a]1 = *poor*, 2 = *fair*, 3 = *good*, 4 = *very good*, and 5 = *excellent*.
[b]1 = *less than $10,000*, 2 = *$10,000–$25,000*, 3 = *$25,001–$40,000*, 4 = *$40,001–$75,000*, and 5 = *$75,001–$100,000*.

practically, and in terms of, socializing, advice, finances, and talking about daily events. Five items were from other measures of social support (Vaux, 1988; Vaux & Harrison, 1985), and the remaining item (listening to talk about daily events) was drawn from our prior work (Fingerman, 2000). Participants rated frequency of each type of support for each family member. In analyses, we reverse coded, so higher numbers indicate more frequent support: 1 (*less than once a year or not at all*), 2 (*once a year*), 3 (*a few times a year*), 4 (*monthly*), 5 (*a few times a month*), 6 (*weekly*), 7 (*a few times a week*), and 8 (*daily*). Consistent with prior studies, we combined the six items for each child and each parent, α = .87 (Fingerman et al., 2009; Silverstein et al., 2006; Vaux; Vaux & Harrison). We present the mean of the six items (which is mathematically equivalent to the sum) for ease in interpretation. The average score for provision of support to offspring was *M* = 4.67 (*SD* = 1.68), and that to parents was *M* = 4.15 (*SD* = 1.59).

We examined properties of the scale separately for support to parents and offspring. The coefficient alphas were the same (α = .87 for parents and α = .88 for offspring). Rank order of different types of support for parents and offspring was consistent. Listening to talk about daily life and emotional support occurred most frequently, and practical support and financial support occurred least frequently, respectively.

Explanatory Variables

Functional disability.—We assessed functional disability as potential moderator of the flow of support. We asked whether each parent was able to accomplish five tasks of daily living based on the Community Disability Scale

(Bassett & Folstein, 1991). Among middle-aged adults' relatives, 43% of mothers and 26% of fathers had at least one functional disability, but only 3% of grown children had a disability.

Crises and problems.—We developed the *Life Problems Scale* based on a similar list from a national study (Greenfield & Marks, 2006). Participants indicated whether any of their children or parents had experienced each of 10 problems in the past 2 years (e.g., victim of a crime, alcohol or drug problem, financial issues). When a participant indicated any child incurred that problem, we asked which child(ren) had experienced that problem. Likewise, when a participant indicated a parent had incurred a problem, we asked which one. We coded the occurrence of each problem for each family member dichotomously (0 = *did not experience problem* and 1 = *did experience problem*). As in other studies, we then used a sum of problems for each family member (Fingerman et al., 2009; Greenfield & Marks).

Everyday needs.—We considered parents' or offspring's statuses that might evoke everyday help, including student status (1 = *student* and 0 = *other*), unemployment or retirement status (1= *retired or not working* and 0 = *working*), marital status (1 = *married* and 0 = *not married or widowed*), and presence of young children (1 = *has children* and 0 = *does not have children*).

Affection and importance of tie.—To assess affectional solidarity, we used a concise and widely used two-item measure of relationship quality (Birditt, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2010; Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008; Umberson, 1989, 1992). Participants indicated (a) how much each party (i.e., their father/mother/child) loves and cares for them and (b) how much the other party understands them from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

Participants also rated the importance of each parent or child compared with other social partners: 1 (*most important person in your life*), 2 (*among the 3 most important*), 3 (*among the 6 most important*), 4 (*among the 10 most important*), 5 (*among the 20 most important*), and 6 (*less important than that*). We reverse coded this item, so higher numbers indicated greater importance of relationship (Fingerman, 2000, 2001; Fingerman et al., 2008).

Potential Control Variables

Participant characteristics.—Participants provided their age and gender during telephone screening. In the interviews, participants reported education in years and marital status. They indicated their income in 2007 as 1 (<$10,000), 2 ($10,001–$25,000), 3 ($25,001–$40,000), 4 ($40,001–75,000), 5 ($75,001–$100,000), or 6 (>$100,000) and rated their health 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). Participant average

income was similar to mean income in the Philadelphia area, $M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.45$. As can be seen in Table 1, participants were well educated and rated their health from good to very good. We also considered participants' marital status as a potential control variable, 1 (*first marriage*) to 0 (*other*).

Parent and offspring characteristics.—Participants reported age and gender of their grown children (664 daughters and 720 sons) and living parents (543 mothers and 325 fathers). Adult offspring ranged in age from 18 to 46 years ($M = 25.19$, $SD = 5.80$), but most offspring (90%) were aged 18–33 years. Parents ranged in age from 60 to 96 years ($M = 77.09$, $SD = 6.75$). Parent and offspring ages were correlated with participant age ($r = .63$ for parents and $r = .53$ for offspring). Therefore, we included only participant's age in analyses.

As in prior studies (e.g., Suitor et al., 2007a), we controlled for distance between the middle-aged participant's household and those of parents and offspring. To address positive skew, we used a log-linear transformation of distance in miles in the analyses.

Reciprocal exchanges.—Participants also indicated how often they received each type of support from each family member. Again, we used the average of the six items, $\alpha = .82$. Scores for support that participants reported receiving were $M = 3.49$ ($SD = 1.49$) from offspring and $M = 3.43$ ($SD = 1.42$) from parents.

Analytic Strategy

Our analytic plan first focused on describing the overall flow of support for the sample. Then, we looked at possible mediators of downstream (greater support of offspring) and upstream (greater support of parents) within families.

Each participant reported on multiple family members, and the number of parents and offspring varied between participants. We estimated multilevel models to account for dependence in reports on multiple family members and variability in number of family members by participant. We used the default identity link function in SAS PROC Mixed and a compound symmetry covariance structure. Amount of support was the dependent variable, with generation (0 = *grown child* and 1 = *parent*) as an independent variable. Prior to analyses, we estimated bivariate associations between potential control variables and support because inclusion of control variables not associated with a dependent variable may generate spurious associations (Rovine, von Eye, & Wood, 1988). Based on significant correlations, we controlled the following for participant: age, gender, marital status (1 = *first marriage* and 0 = *other*), income, number of grown children, and number of parents but did not include participant race, work status, health, education, or children younger than age 18. Control variables pertaining to the parent or child included their gender, distance (transformed),

and support they provided to the participant. An example simplified equation is as follows:

Support to family member$_{ij}$ = a_0 + a_1 (generation$_{ij}$) + control variables + e_i + d_{ij}

Level i represents upper level participant variables and level j parents and offspring nested within participant. Support to family member$_{ij}$ is the amount of support from a participant to a family member (offspring$_j$ or parent$_j$), a_0 is the intercept (the amount of support when all predictors are 0), a_1 (generation$_{ij}$) is the association between generation and support (it is the slope), e_i is the error term between participants, and d_{ij} is the error term associated with each family member within participants.

We also considered possible explanations for the generational flow of support in different families. We expected different models to explain a downstream flow of support to offspring versus the upstream flow of support to parents, with opposite generational differences on the explanatory variables. For families that give more support to offspring, we anticipated greater needs among offspring. For families that give more to parents, we expected greater needs among the parents. For ease in presentation, we examined participants engaging in downstream support (i.e., greater support to the average offspring) and engaging in upstream support (i.e., greater support to the average parent) separately.

We followed the standard three steps for mediation (e.g., Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004; Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998). First, we divided the sample into families with greater support of average offspring (downstream families) and greater support of average parent (upstream families). These families each had a discrepancy on the independent variable, in different directions (i.e., more support to average children vs more support to parent). Next, for each family, we established that the independent variable (generation) and the dependent variable (frequency of support) were associated. Then, we tested associations between the independent variable (generation) and mediating variables (e.g., affective solidarity, normative statuses, needs) in each type of family. In the final step, we evaluated the association of the independent and dependent variables, adjusting for effects of mediators. Partial mediation is evident when the association is weaker between independent and dependent variables in the presence of the mediating variable. Sobel tests assessed significance of the mediation effect (McKinnon, Warsi, & Dwyer, 1995). Pseudo R^2 statistics were also computed to show the proportion of variance accounted for in each model (Singer & Willett, 2003).

RESULTS

We first present findings regarding support to parents and offspring across the full sample. Then, we present mediation models explaining generational discrepancies in the

Table 2. Multilevel Model: Support Middle-Aged Adults Provide as a Function of Generation (grown offspring versus parents)

Variables	B	SE_B
Intercept	4.57***	0.37
Predictors		
Generation[a]	−0.63***	0.05
Participant control variables		
Age	−0.03***	0.01
Gender[b]	0.03	0.06
Marital status[c]	0.09	0.07
Income[d]	0.09***	0.02
Number of living children	−0.07***	0.02
Number of living parents	−0.17**	0.06
Parent or offspring controls		
Gender[b]	−0.33***	0.04
Distance[e]	−0.17***	0.01
Support provided to participant[f]	0.13***	0.00

Notes: Parameter estimates are fixed effects.

[a] 0 = *grown child* and 1 = *parent*.

[b] 0 = *female* and 1 = *male*.

[c] 0 = *not married to first spouse* and 1 = *first marriage*.

[d] 1 = *less than $10,000*, 2 = *$10,000–$25,000*, 3 = *$25,001–$40,000*, 4 = *$40,001–$75,000*, and 5 = *$75,001–$100,000*.

[e] Distance in miles using a log-linear transformation.

[f] Mean of six items rated 1 = *less than once a year or not at all*, 2 = *once a year*, 3 = *a few times a year*, 4 = *monthly*, 5 = *a few times a month*, 6 = *weekly*, 7 = *a few times a week*, and 8 = *daily*.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

different families (more support to children and more support to parents).

Patterns in the Generational Flow of Support

We expected a dominant pattern of middle-aged adults generally reporting greater assistance to the average grown child than to the average parent. This expectation was confirmed in the multilevel model comparing the amount of help provided to parents and offspring in Table 2. The multilevel model included generation as a predictor, the support index as the outcome, and appropriate participant level and parent/offspring level characteristics as control variables. As expected, most families gave more support to the average child than to the average parent.

To distinguish different types of families, we then examined the proportion of middle-aged adults who engage in each pattern of generational support. We estimated discrepancy scores in support to the average parent and average offspring in each family. The distribution of support was (a) families with downstream support favoring offspring by at least half a point (53% of participants), (b) families with upstream support favoring parents by at least half a point (28% of participants), and (c) families with average parent and offspring support scores within a half point of zero (21% of families). Thus, despite the overall finding that offspring receive more than parents, a sizable minority of families provided more support to the average parent than the average offspring, and a proportion of families provide comparable support to members of each generation on average.

In families that provide more support to offspring, the average support to a grown child was $M = 5.48$ ($SD = 1.15$, a few times a month to weekly) and to an aging parent $M = 3.42$ ($SD = 1.20$, a few times a year to monthly). In families that provided more to parents, means were similar but in the reverse pattern, average support to a grown child was $M = 3.66$ ($SD = 1.20$) and to an aging parent $M = 5.59$ ($SD = 1.23$).

Explanations for Greater Support to Offspring or to Parents

We then asked the following: (a) In families where middle-aged adults provide more support to offspring, why do offspring receive more support? (b) In families where middle-aged adults provide more support to parents, why do parents receive more support? We examined mediation models for the participants providing greater support to offspring and the participants providing greater support to parents. We did not consider such models for participants providing comparable support to each generation because there was no significant generational disparity to explain.

Families in which offspring received more support.— For families in which middle-aged adults provided more support to offspring, we asked whether three factors mediated the downstream flow of support: (a) everyday needs (e.g., student status, marital status, presence of young children), (b) crises in the past 2 years, and (c) affective solidarity or the generational stake (i.e., relationship quality and importance of other party). Because families were selected who gave more to offspring, Step 1 is provided simply for interpretation of mediation effects in Step 3. Table 3 shows the multilevel model for the first step, indicating that offspring received significantly more support than parents. The second step of generational disparities is not shown in the table 3. This step was significant for five possible mediators; offspring were more likely to be students, be unmarried, have young children, have higher quality relationships, and have ties deemed more important by middle-aged adults than ties to parents. Grown children were not more likely to suffer problems (e.g., financial problems, alcoholism) than were aging parents in these families.

We estimated the third step of the meditational models for each of the five potential explanatory variables separately. Sobel tests revealed that three variables (being a student, unmarried, and rated as more important) partially mediated the generational disparity of greater support to offspring: Sobel tests were −6.89, −5.39, and −5.11, $p < .001$, respectively. Positive relationship quality and having young children did not mediate the association between generation and support in these families' relationship. Table 3 also shows the pseudo R^2 for each mediation model

Table 3. Multilevel Models for Families Providing Greater Support to Offspring: Tests of Normative Statuses and Affectional Solidarity as Mediating Variables of the Generational Discrepancy

Variables	Step 1: Offspring receives more support		Step 3: Normative status student		Step 3: Normative status married		Step 3: Developmental stake Importance of tie	
	B	SE_B	B	SE_B	B	SE_B	B	SE_B
Intercept	5.91***	0.51	5.73***	0.50	5.47***	0.51	5.02***	0.53
Predictor								
Generation[a]	−1.34***	0.05	−1.21***	0.06	−1.14***	0.06	−1.28***	0.05
Mediators								
Student status[b]	—		0.50***	0.08	—		—	
Married[c]	—		—		−0.49***	0.07	—	
Importance of tie[d]	—		—		—		0.19***	0.03
Participant controls								
Age	−0.04***	0.01	−0.04***	0.01	−0.04***	0.01	−0.04***	0.01
Gender[e]	0.01	0.08	−0.00	0.08	−0.01	0.08	−0.02	0.08
Marital status[f]	0.08	0.09	0.07	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.13	0.09
Income[g]	0.09*	0.03	0.07*	0.03	0.09*	0.03	0.09*	0.03
Number of living parents	−0.11	0.08	−0.11	0.08	0.01	0.08	−0.09	0.08
Number of grown children	−0.12***	0.03	−0.11***	0.03	−0.12***	0.03	−0.08*	0.03
Parent or offspring controls								
Gender	−0.25***	0.05	0−.26***	0.05	−0.22***	0.05	−0.21***	0.05
Distance[h]	−0.14***	0.01	−0.15***	0.01	−0.13***	0.01	−0.14***	0.01
Support provided[i]	0.12***	0.00	0.12***	0.00	0.12***	0.00	0.11***	0.00
Pseudo R^2			0.03		0.06		0.04	

Notes: Parameter estimates are fixed effects. Step 2 of the mediation models (not presented here) was significant for models presented.

[a]0 = *grown child* and 1 = *parent*.

[b]0 = *not a student* and 1 = *student*.

[c]0 = *not married/widowed/single* and 1 = *married*.

[d]1 = *less important than 20 most important*, 2 = *among 20 most important*, 3 = *among 10 most important*, 4 = *among 6 most important*, 5 = *among 3 most important*, and 6 = *most important person in life*.

[e]0 = *female* and 1 = *male*.

[f]0 = *not married to first spouse* and 1 = *first marriage*.

[g]1 = *less than $10,000*, 2 = *$10,000–$25,000*, 3 = *$25,001–$40,000*, 4 = *$40,001–$75,000*, and 5 = *$75,001–$100,000*.

[h]Distance in miles using a log-linear transformation.

[i]Mean of six items rated 1 = *less than once a year or not at all*, 2 = *once a year*, 3 = *a few times a year*, 4 = *monthly*, 5 = *a few times a month*, 6 = *weekly*, 7 = *a few times a week*, and 8 = *daily*.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

in comparison with the Step 1 model. In sum, explanatory variables in these equations accounted for only a small proportion of the variance in support in comparison with the initial model.

Families in which parents received more support.— Among families in which middle-aged adults provided more support to parents than to offspring, possible mediators for this generational disparity included (a) everyday needs (widowhood or being unmarried and retirement or not working), (b) functional disability and crises, and (c) affectional solidarity (relationship quality and importance of tie). As can be seen in Table 4, the Step 1 model confirmed greater support to parents than to offspring. Step 2 is not shown. This step was significant for five possible mediators; parents in these families were more likely than offspring to be retired or not working, have more functional disabilities, have a great number of crises, have higher quality relationships, and be deemed more important than offspring. Parents were not more

likely to be unmarried than grown offspring in these families.

For Step 3, two variables partially mediated the association between generation and support, functional disability, and number of problems. Sobel tests were 4.79 and 3.36, $p < .001$, respectively. As can be seen in Table 4, the slope for generation was .59 at Step 1 and .34 for parental disability and .47 for parental crises or problems. Table 4 shows pseudo R^2 for these mediation models in comparison with the initial model.

Post Hoc Tests

Stability of findings.—To ensure stability of findings in the flow of support, we reestimated models separately for different sociodemographic groups. The pattern of findings regarding overall flow of support did not differ for men or women or for Black families and White families. Low-income participants (<$40,000 per year) reported comparable support of the average parent or offspring; but at all other

Table 4. Multilevel Models for Families That Provide Greater Support to Parents: Functional Disabilities and Crises as Mediating Variables

Variables	Step 1: Parents receive more support		Step 3: Functional disability		Step 3: Crises	
	B	SE_B	B	SE_B	B	SE_B
Intercept	3.62***	0.70	3.55***	0.69	3.33***	0.71
Predictor						
Generation[a]	0.66***	0.11	0.37**	0.12	0.53***	0.11
Mediators						
Disability[b]	—		0.62***	0.13	—	
Problems or crises[c]	—		—		0.13**	0.04
Participant controls						
Age	−0.01	0.01	−0.02	0.01	−0.01	0.01
Gender[d]	0.07	0.12	0.09	0.12	0.07	0.13
Marital status[e]	0.04	0.14	0.02	0.14	0.06	0.14
Income[f]	0.11*	0.05	0.12*	0.04	0.12*	0.05
Number of living parents	−0.48**	0.15	−0.45**	0.15	−0.44**	0.15
Number of grown children	−0.03	0.04	−0.01	0.04	−0.04	0.04
Parent or offspring controls						
Gender	−0.40***	0.10	−0.38***	0.09	−0.39***	0.09
Distance[g]	−0.15***	0.02	−0.14***	0.02	−0.15***	0.02
Support provided[h]	0.12***	0.01	0.13***	0.01	0.12***	0.01
Pseudo R^2			0.04		0.03	

Notes: Parameter estimates are fixed effects. Step 2 of the mediation models (not presented here) was significant for models presented.

[a] 0 = *grown child* and 1 = *parent*.

[b] 0 = *no disability* and 1 = *disability*.

[c] Sum of problems in the past 2 years.

[d] 0 = *female* and 1 = *male*.

[e] 0 = *not married to first spouse* and 1= *first marriage*.

[f] 1 = *less than $10,000*, 2 = *$10,000–$25,000*, 3 = *$25,001–$40,000*, 4 = *$40,001–$75,000*, and 5 = *$75,001–$100,000*.

[g] Distance in miles using a log-linear transformation.

[h] Mean of six items rated 1 = *less than once a year or not at all*, 2 = *once a year*, 3 = *a few times a year*, 4 = *monthly*, 5 = *a few times a month*, 6 = *weekly*, 7 = *a few times a week*, and 8 = *daily*.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Table 5. Multilevel Model: Predicting Discrepancy From the Family Mean From Generation and Explanatory Variables

Variables	B	SE_B
Intercept	−3.91***	0.31
Predictors		
Generation[a]	−0.54***	0.05
Explanatory variables		
Student[b]	0.42***	0.07
Married[c]	−0.39***	0.05
Functional disability[d]	0.36***	0.06
Number of problems[e]	0.04*	0.02
Importance of tie[f]	0.17***	0.03
Relationship quality[g]	0.09**	0.03
Participant control variables		
Age	0.02***	0.00
Gender[h]	0.15**	0.05
Marital status[c]	−0.11*	0.05
Income[i]	0.08***	0.02
Number of living children	0.07***	0.02
Number of living parents	0.44***	0.05
Parent or offspring controls		
Gender[h]	−0.30***	0.04
Distance[j]	−0.13***	0.01
Support provided to participant[k]	0.07***	0.00

Notes: Parameter estimates are fixed effects.

[a] 0 = *grown child* and 1 = *parent*.

[b] 0 = *not a student* and 1 = *student*.

[c] 0 = *unmarried* and 1 = *married*.

[d] 0 = *no disability* and 1 = *disability*.

[e] Sum of problems in the past 2 years.

[f] 1 = *less important than 20 most important*, 2 = *among 20 most important*, 3 = *among 10 most important*, 4 = *among 6 most important*, 5 = *among 3 most important*, and 6 = *most important person in life*.

[g] 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *a little*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *quite a bit*, and 5 = *a great deal*.

[h] 0 = *female* and 1 = *male*.

[i] 1 = *less than $10,000*, 2 = *$10,000–$25,000*, 3 = *$25,001–$40,000*, 4 = *$40,001–$75,000*, and 5 = *$75,001–$100,000*.

[j] Distance in miles using a log-linear transformation.

[k] Mean of six items rated 1 = *less than once a year or not at all*, 2 = *once a year*, 3 = *a few times a year*, 4 = *monthly*, 5 = *a few times a month*, 6 = *weekly*, 7 = *a few times a week*, and 8 = *daily*.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

income levels, average offspring received more than average parent.

Discrepancies in support within families.—Finally, to ensure that findings regarding explanatory variables were stable, we estimated models for the entire sample, examining disparities in support within families. For each parent and offspring, we generated a discrepancy score in comparison with other family members. First, we estimated a mean support score, representing the average support to all members in each family. Then, we subtracted that within-family mean support score from each parent or offspring's support score. A positive discrepancy score indicates that an individual receives more support than the average for his or her family. We used each family member's discrepancy score as an outcome variable and entered generation, the explanatory variables, and control variables in a multilevel model. Table 5 shows findings that confirm prior models for generation and the explanatory variables. Offspring were more likely than parents to receive above average support within a given family. An individual in the family (parent or offspring) received more support than average when he or she was a student, unmarried, had a disability, suffered more problems, or was viewed as more important and had a better quality relationship with the middle-aged adult.

DISCUSSION

This unique examination of support provided to multiple generations within families revealed that middle-aged adults typically provided more support to grown children than to aging parents but not in all families. In situations where parents suffered disability or incurred other crises, middle-aged adults provided parents with more help than they provided to offspring. The typical pattern of helping behavior

to offspring seemed to reflect offspring's needs and the importance of the relationship. Middle-aged adults responded to their grown chidren's everyday needs, emergencies, and crises, as well as the importance of the relationship. Findings from this study support the affective solidarity and contingency theories of support exchange, suggesting that middle-aged adults provide help due to their emotional investments and family member needs and crises.

Variability in the Flow of Support to Offspring and Parents

Because previous studies have focused primarily on two generations (e.g., Eggebeen, 1992; Suitor et al., 2007a), prior research has not addressed how support to any given parent or offspring fits into a larger family context. In this study, we examined support to both generations.

Consistent with life course perspectives regarding linked lives (e.g., Greenfield & Marks, 2006), events in one generation influenced experiences of another generation. In general, middle-aged adults provided more support to grown children than to parents. Even in families where parents suffered functional disabilities, parents received only slightly more help than offspring did from the middle-aged adults; the average offspring still received considerable support. These findings support a premise of "resource expansion" (Grundy & Henretta, 2006). Middle-aged adults may attempt to expand resources offered to family members when multiple family members experience needs, particularly when young adult offspring are in need of support.

The caregiving literature documents costs that middle-aged adults incur in providing care to elderly parents (e.g., Aneshensel, Pearlin, Mullan, Zarit, & Whitlatch, 1995). These burdens may also reflect displacement of support that otherwise might have gone to grown offspring. In this study, we do not know whether middle-aged adults reach a point when they will reallocate resources away from offspring or if strain on resources contributes to an eventual decision to move a parent to a supervised care setting. Future research should examine this issue.

Explanations for Generational Disparities

This study also sheds light on possible explanations for within-family generational disparities in provision of support. Overall, some theories apply across ties and other theories explain behaviors in specific ties. Contingency theory helps explain decisions that middle-aged adults make regarding allocation of resources to offspring and parents. At the same time, solidarity theory plays a specific role; middle-aged adults provided support to partners they deemed more important in their social networks. Consistent with the developmental stake, the majority of middle-aged adults in this study provided more support to offspring than to parents because they viewed their offspring as more important than their parents.

We also note structural variables associated with support. Consistent with prior research, offspring in larger families received less support on average than offspring in smaller families (Davey et al., 2005; Fingerman et al., 2009). Likewise, number of living parents was associated with average support to parent in these studies. These findings are consistent with a premise that support resources are finite and are distributed within families. Most families give more to the average offspring than to a parent, but when a parent incurs a crisis, the average support to a grown child is less. Likewise, when a greater number of family members require support, average support to any given family member is less.

Downstream flow of support to offspring.—In the majority of families where support flowed downstream to offspring, middle-aged adults responded to normative needs associated with role statuses in young adulthood, such as being a student. The period of young adulthood involves prolonged transitions, and parents support progeny as they gain a foothold in adulthood (Aquilino, 2005; Furstenberg, 2000). The lack of association between having children of one's own and support was surprising and may reflect the fact that most offspring who had young children were married. Elsewhere, researchers have found that unmarried offspring receive many forms of support (e.g., advice, money, practical) from their parents (McGarry & Schoeni, 1997), as was the case in this study.

Greater support to the average offspring also was consistent with the developmental stake hypothesis. In the majority of families that provide greater support to offspring, middle-aged adults deemed ties to progeny more important than ties to parents. This greater importance partially mediated generational disparities in support. Support of grown offspring also may reflect a pattern of support of children that begins in childhood. Even after children reach adulthood, middle-aged parents derive rewards from continuing to serve as their parents (Levitzki, 2009).

Interestingly, offspring did not incur a greater number of crises than parents in these families. Prior studies have found that parents differentiate among their offspring by providing greater support to a sibling who incurs a crisis (Fingerman et al., 2009; Suitor et al., 2007a), but offspring's crises did not explain the generational favoritism observed here. Rather, more pedestrian needs and affection appeared to be at the heart of offspring support.

Upstream support of parents.—Upstream support of parents was evident when parental functional deficits necessitated hands-on care or when parents incurred crises or problems (e.g., financial problems, crime). Data from other studies also document increasing support to parents as they accrue health problems during the transition to old age (Eggebeen & Davey, 1998; Fingerman, Hay, Kamp Dush, Cichy, & Hosterman, 2007; Silverstein, Conroy, Wang, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 2002). Thus, middle-aged adults

may respond to two types of needs: everyday needs and emergency or crisis needs. The pattern of downstream support to offspring in the majority of families was mediated by everyday needs associated with normative statuses. When a crisis occurs, middle-aged adults provide greater support to parents with urgent needs.

Statuses associated with everyday needs are not as evident in late life as are events that precipitate crises. Widowhood was not associated with greater support to parents than to offspring, although widowed parents receive more filial support than married parents (Ha, 2008; Morgan, 1989). Nor did retirement explain support of parents. Data were collected immediately prior to the economic downturn in 2008. Thus, at the time of data collection, most retired parents had accumulated savings or social security, which may not be the case today.

Limitations and Future Directions

We note several limitations in this study. The study assessed a composite of tangible and nontangible support. Future studies might seek to ascertain whether certain types of help are offered to parents and other types to offspring in different families. We note that the support scale showed the same rank order and high alphas for parents and offspring, suggesting that generational disparities are consistent across types of support.

The study also relied on self-reports of support from only one member of the family. Dyadic research suggests that adults may overreport what they provide in comparison with what family members report receiving (Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2000). Here, we examined disparities of support to members of different generations, however, and there is no reason to expect participants' reporting biases to vary by generation.

Moreover, we did not consider the societal context of support to generations. The United States has relatively few government support programs to assist young people aged 18 years and older (Cook & Furstenberg, 2002; Grundy & Henretta, 2006). Although scholars lament the lack of support for aging adults, older adults typically have social security and Medicare, programs unavailable to healthy young adults. As such, support of grown offspring may partially reflect middle-aged parents' compensation for lack of societal support.

In sum, middle-aged adults provided support to generations above and below in response to their needs and the importance of the relationship. In most families, support flowed downstream, with middle-aged adults providing more support to grown children than to aging parents. The normative pattern of downstream support reflected transitions of young adulthood, which involve dependency (e.g., student) or being unconnected (e.g., single). Likewise, the importance that middle-aged adults placed on a relationship partner contributed to support the partner received. When an elderly parent was disabled or suffered problems, middle-aged adults provided more support to aging parents than to offspring, however. Indeed, it seems that much everyday assistance occurs in everyday contexts. As such, a majority of middle-aged adults in the early 21st century engage in a downstream flow of support to each of their progeny, but they may divert from this pattern when elderly parents' needs are pressing or urgent.

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