

Gender, parent-child relations and normative obligations

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Abstract

This article reports the perspective, design and major findings of a large-scale study of the parent-child relationship across the life course, drawing on data from a probability sample of 1 390 residents in the Boston Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA), together with spin-off samples of parents and adult children of these respondents. Parent-child relations are analyzed with attention given to the gender of parent and child. The highest level of interaction, affection, shared values and help exchange is found between mothers and daughters, and the least between fathers and sons, with opposite-sex parent-child pairs falling between. Special attention is given to a unique method of studying normative obligations to a wide array of kin and non-kin – the factorial, or vignette technique. This method permits a comparison of the degree of obligation felt toward parents and children with numerous relatives, each specified in terms of gender and marital status, facing four types of crisis events and three types of celebratory events. Analysis shows a symmetry largely determined by degree of relatedness to the 74 kin and non-kin types, with the gender of both vignette person and respondent tipping the balance toward higher scores on the obligation scale for women than for men. Findings relating to gender differences are discussed in terms of their social policy implications.

In this article I describe and discuss some findings from a large-scale study of the parent-child relationship which I conducted in collaboration with my colleague and husband, Peter Rossi (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). First, I sketch the perspective from which we conceptualized the problem, and draw out the design implications for a study that aimed to chart the development and change of the parent-child relationship across the life course. Second, I describe what was perhaps the most unique aspect of the study: the analysis of normative obligations that characterize the parent-child relationship compared to a wide variety of other kin and non-kin types. Third, I discuss the political and policy implications of our findings.

Major foci of the kinship study

A central feature of the study was the focus on the gender of both parent and child across the long stretch of years from a child's birth to the parents' last years of life, which necessarily involves a major focus on the two variables that define the primary axes of any family system: age and sex. Age has of course been central to social science investigations of family

relationships but most such research has been handled by different disciplines. Most research has given a heavy emphasis to the two tails of the life span: childhood in one direction, old age in the other. When the focus was on children from birth to adolescence, it has been developmentalists who studied the child and family sociologists who concentrated on the parents, typically from their early twenties to their forties. At the other end of the life course, gerontologists concentrated on parents in their old age and their relationship with largely middle-aged children. This left a gap of several decades during which the parent generation is in middle or early old age and children are mature adults who have left the parental nest, typically rearing children of their own. One of the great gifts of increased longevity in contemporary societies is the fact that we can be partners to a parent-child relationship that lasts longer when both partners are adults than when the children are literally dependent young. Our special interest was in these long years when the parents are healthy and vital adults, just as their children are. These bridging years provide parents and adult children with an historically unique opportunity to renegotiate their relationship, i.e. from a vertical hierarchy of superordinate parent and subordinate child, to a more peer-like relationship as the children become adults. This transition phase may in fact ease any late-life inversion to parental dependency. A life-course perspective holds the further possibility of providing linkages across the disciplines, embracing psychologists' concern for child and adolescent development, sociologists' concern for the transition into parenthood, and gerontologists' concern for the elderly and their midlife children.

It is an index of a significant shift in intellectual perspective that we now speak of *gender* and the *life course*, rather than *sex* and *age*. By life course we project an image of dynamic change of two varieties: change that attends maturation and ageing, and change that reflects characteristic experiences that have left special marks on a cohort of parents or of children.¹ This heightened sensitivity to historical change and its impact on the people we study robs today's social scientists of any high degree of confidence that what we find in a time-bound sample of parents and children, would have been found 40 years ago or will be found 40 years from now. At the same time, however, it is devilishly difficult to build into our studies the appropriate measures that could demonstrate empirically *whether* and *how* historic events impacted on the lives of people we study. Most cohort and period effects have been *post-hoc* interpretations. Though sensitive to the problem, our own study was largely remiss in this regard as well.

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The shift from *sex* to *gender* in today's parlance also poses a new challenge to social scientists. This distinction was adopted to differentiate between those phenomena that directly reflect biological and reproductive differences between male and female, for which we now restrict the usage of "sex," and those social and cultural characteristics that differentiate men from women, for which we now restrict the usage of "gender" (Money & Ehrhardt, 1973). But when the area of inquiry is family life and parenting roles, the sex-gender distinction is murky at best: families, after all, are formed through sexual coupling, conception, giving birth, and nurturing the young, and these behaviours clearly draw on central reproductive aspects of sex dimorphism. On the other hand the intellectual dialectic in our time has swung from an assumption of a biological foundation to the differences between male and female, to a view that such differences are for all intents and purposes, largely social constructions (e.g. Stein, 1992). But this leaves us with the as yet unresolved issue of what the linkage is between sex and gender in these most fundamental human behaviours of mating and parenting.

As a biosocial scientist, my working assumption is that gender roles in a family context are suffused with sexual, reproductive meanings: meanings linked to the fact that there is greater cross-cultural variation in who is socially defined as a child's father than a child's mother, and historically far greater social control of women's sexuality than of men's, for the reason that birthing links the newborn definitively to its biological mother but not to its biological father, because paternity rests only on circumstantial evidence. So too in the mating relationship: women's preference for husbands who are somewhat older, taller, heavier, and of equal or higher status than themselves is found in so many cultures that Kingsley Davis (1984) suggests hypergamy is one of the few universal human patterns.² The implication is that marriage patterns are not purely a matter of culturally determined engenderment but are rooted in the shorter fertile phase of the female life span than of the male. There is also the fact that the female has had to be very selective in choosing a mate because the consequences of pregnancy, birth and infant care have been largely hers to bear.

To espouse a bio-evolutionary perspective on family structure and family roles does not imply a rejection of powerful socialization pressures for differentiated gender role behaviour. In fact, this perspective would emphasize the necessity for socialization that teaches social control of aggressive impulses and erratic sexual acting out on the part of males. We can certainly point to numerous examples of the consequences of an impoverished weak socialization in the widespread socially deviant behaviour in adolescent and young adult males. In the eyes of some biologists, one of the evolutionary developments that assured the stable binding of men to a family as protectors and co-providers with women of their offspring was the expansion of sexual interest and accessibility of the female beyond the ovulatory phase of the female cycle.³ Hence we may speak about family structure and intergenerational relations in highly abstract conceptual language far removed from sex and reproduction; however the reality of family life rests in the highly physical nature of sexual attraction, intercourse, pregnancy, birthing, and the rearing of our young. We have a long way to go before we succeed in breaking the Western intellectual tradition of dichotomizing mind and body.

Another basic point of departure requires some comment, because it is very relevant to any analysis of the parent-child relationship. It has been an unfortunate turn of events that so many scholars in the social and behavioural sciences have either unwittingly or self-consciously adopted selfish-gene

theory from population genetics and its counterpart in economics: a rational choice model based on the calculus of self-interest, profit and loss, or reciprocal exchange. Both theories build on a model of human behaviour as fundamentally selfish, such that any behaviour that seems to be motivated by love or altruistic intentions is bound to hide an underlying selfish motivation. By this model, we give to others only on an expectation of getting something back in return. Many sociologists see self-interest underlying personal relationships in marriage and friendship. Indeed, when sociologist Michael Hannan (1982) reviewed Gary Becker's exchange theory on intimate relationships (Becker, 1981), he suggested that Becker's stark economic conception of actions cuts through the "romantic mist" that so often blinds social scientists. Daniel Goleman (1985) summarized a similar trend in psychology, to the effect that mainstream psychological research has looked at love "almost as if it were a business transaction, a matter of profit and loss." An economist who broke with this tradition, Robert Frank (1988), criticizes the neo-classical economic model on its own grounds, and suggests that researchers fear no greater humiliation than to call some action altruistic, only to find many of their colleagues defining the same action as self-serving.

Yet when Murstein, Cerreto and MacDonald (1977) tested an exchange model in a study of marital satisfaction, with a measure of the extent to which the couple was concerned with an equal contribution to the management of their households and leisure time use, they found to their surprise a *negative* correlation between indices of satisfaction with the marriage and adherence to an exchange orientation. I share the view that an exchange model undermines an intimate relationship, because an intimate relationship is one in which irrational love prompts an individual to want to do more for one's partner than the partner does for us.

This is nowhere clearer than in the experience that underlies all intergenerational relations – the birth of a child. Most new parents feel a totally *irrational* attraction and love for their newborn child. Yet here is this demanding, fragile, totally dependent six-to-eight-pound creature that disturbs our sleep, disrupts our plans, produces unpleasant odours, turns red in the face, and screams despite our care. Yet we submit to it, do without sleep, feed and clean it every few hours around the clock, and in a few weeks' time, have fallen totally in love with it, satisfied with as small a reward as a fleeting smile long before such a smile could be intentional. The transition to parenthood may be a trial to many but precisely because it evokes such intense feelings, it is also a powerful learning experience. As one woman put it, "children battle you into being more than you thought you were, into giving more than you thought you had it in you to give. Those middle of the nights, you learn a lot about yourself" (McGoldrick, 1989:211).

So the parent-child relationship is first established as irrational love, which sets the parameters within which the intergenerational relationship develops, and delights or pains us. We invest heavily in the rearing of our young, and in Western societies expect little or no work from our children. Despite the heavy investment that attends prolonged schooling of our children, Western parents expect no financial reciprocity in their old age, and certainly do not expect to share a household with adult children.⁴ We are satisfied if our children grow into happy and competent adults, and provide comfort and social contact in our old age. Biology may give women a headstart on the deep attachment to the child as a result of carrying the fetus through a pregnancy and giving birth. Culture then contributes to a greater retention of close ties between mothers and their children than is the case between fathers and their children, partially as a consequence of the imbalance in

childrearing that still characterizes adult male and female parenting, and the continuing role of women as socio-emotional monitors of intra-family social interactions. Furthermore, persistent socio-economic differences between men and women means that all the women in a family – mothers, sisters, daughters, grandmothers, aunts – will experience many times of need and crisis during which the latent matrix of family relations, as Matilda Riley (1983) describes them, will come into play and to which women respond by providing help or being helped in turn.

The combination of gender differentiation in biology, in socialization, and in socio-economic position underlaid our central expectation that gender of parent and child would be a major source of variation in emotional quality, social interaction, and help patterns between the generations. Hence the four dyads of mother-daughter, mother-son, father-daughter and father-son were to be highlighted and compared in almost all the analyses that our study was designed to explore.

Design and measurement in the Boston study

The specific design features that flowed from our approach to the question of gender differences in intergenerational ties between parents and children across the life course were as follows:

- (1) A life-course framework pressed for a random probability sample with a representative age distribution of adults. Our main sample consisted of 1 393 adults, 19 years of age or older, who reside within the Boston Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.
- (2) The focus on relationships suggested the desirability of obtaining data from *both* partners to the parent-child dyad. To accomplish this we obtained spin-off samples of a parent or an adult child of respondents to the main survey. As interviews came in from this survey, we developed pools of respondents willing for us to contact a parent or adult child of theirs. In selecting cases from this pool, a primary concern was to achieve as good a balance as possible between mothers and fathers, or sons and daughters. These spin-off samples consist of 142 daughters and 136 sons, 194 mothers and 129 fathers. Fielding schedules and research funds dictated the size of these spin-off samples. Identical questions on many aspects of their relationship were asked in all samples, which permitted us to explore the extent to which parents and children view their relationship to each other similarly or differently.⁵

Because most of our operationalized measures were new, and the application of the vignette technique to family relations unprecedented, we did not seek funds for a national sample but opted instead for an area probability sample of housing units in the Boston SMSA in Massachusetts.⁶ Hence all 1 393 respondents in our main survey reside in Boston City or its surrounding suburbs. This geographic restriction does not apply to the spin-off samples of parents and children, the only restriction to case selection being that they reside in the continental United States or Canada.

American cities share many things in common but also have some unique features. Hence a few points need to be noted about the Boston SMSA. It is the tenth largest SMSA in the United States, with a population of approximately two million. Hemmed in by a bay and rivers, however, the central city of Boston represents only 20% of the total SMSA population. This SMSA is also more ethnically than racially diverse, and reflects the historic fact that Boston was the point of entry for many generations of immigrants from Ireland, the British

Isles, West European countries, and the Mediterranean, especially Italy. The Irish ascendancy to higher status and political prominence is reflected in the distribution of the Irish in our main survey compared to other ethnic and racial groups: they are 18% of our main sample, represented just as well in the outer ring of suburban communities as in the central city. Italian-Americans are 13% of the main sample but less well represented in the suburban communities than in the central city.

Blacks, by contrast, are only 3,8% of the population of the commonwealth; in the Boston SMSA sample they are far better represented in the central city (18%) than in the inner suburban (2%) or outer suburban rings (1%) within the SMSA. In this respect they are like more recent in-migrants from Asian countries.

The study design required different modes of administration. The vignette technique (described in more detail below) is best self-administered; in a general population survey it is helpful to have respondents fill it out in the presence of an interviewer. Hence the main sample was conducted via personal interviews; the vignette booklets were self-administered at the end of the interview with help from interviewers in a test vignette; and the spin-off sample data were obtained through telephone interviews with the parents or adult children of respondents.⁷

The constructs and measures developed on the parent-child *relationship* drew from the sociological tradition represented by the work of George Homans on the human group (Homans, 1950) and the more recent work of Vern Bengtson on generations in the family (Bengtson & Schrader, 1982). The four major dimensions of solidarity we measured were as follows: affectional solidarity as indexed by ratings on the degree of intimacy in the relationship; associational solidarity as indexed by frequency of telephoning or visiting; functional solidarity, as indexed by the extent of help given to and received from a parent or a child; and consensual solidarity, as indexed by how alike parent and child perceived themselves to be on some basic values – in religion, politics and general outlook on life. The normative obligations we explored with the vignette technique are a variant of functional solidarity, in that our focus was on the degree to which people feel a personal obligation to give help of some kind to specified kin or non-kin in specified circumstances (described in detail below).

On each of these dimensions of solidarity, the general findings were as follows when gender of parent and child is specified: the *highest* level of intimacy, interaction, shared values, and help exchange characterized the mother-daughter relationship, whereas the *lowest* level on all four dimensions of solidarity characterized the father-son relationship, with opposite sex pairs of parents and children falling between these two extremes.

We could think of no way to explore how obligations between parents and children differ from obligations with the wide array of other types of kin (grandparents, aunts, uncles, stepchildren, etc.) in a study that had so much other information to collect. This is precisely the dilemma that the factorial or vignette technique is designed to solve. The technique and our major findings are presented in the section to follow.

Analysis of normative obligations

Social norms do not exist in a vacuum: they are embedded in highly specific ways in social life, with only a loose fit between actual behaviour and the normative order. Much of the work of our legal system lies precisely in making discriminations about how legal norms apply to specific instances of behaviour. The general principles are embodied in the

statutes, but attorneys, juries and judges have to fit specific instances of behaviour into the meaning of those principles. This implies that we would expect much greater consensus in a society when norms are stated in general terms and less consensus over how norms apply in specific behavioural contexts.

The implication of these assumptions is that an understanding of the role of norms in affecting concrete kin relationships requires understanding how such general rules are interpreted in *specific* settings with *specific* kinpersons. Since there are so many potential applications to kin, the issue became how best to "sample" from among the many possible settings and the many different categories of kin to which the general norm may be applicable. This also implies that our goal was to *infer* the general structure of obligations through the patterning of reactions to specific instances involving various kinpersons. Most people report higher obligations to a sibling than to a cousin, but we do not expect people to be able to articulate any general *principle* for why they feel this way.

The essence of the factorial method is to present respondents with a set of vignettes, each containing a short description of a specific kinperson in common situations that might evoke a sense of obligation to make an appropriate gesture toward that person. We sampled social situations with four crisis occasions (unemployment, major surgery, a household fire, and a serious personal problem) and three celebratory occasions (going to have a birthday, winning an award, and moving into a new place). We sampled types of people with different degrees of relatedness to the respondent, i.e. 74 relationships to kin and non-kin such as neighbours and good friends, so structured as to distinguish between male and female, and between a married state and an unmarried or widowed state. Gender was specified because we predicted that women kin would evoke greater obligation ratings than men and unattached kin more than married kin. A third dimension of the "crisis" events was an indication of whether the crisis would last for a long or short period of time. Each respondent rated 32 vignettes, each set a separately and independently drawn probability-based sample of all possible vignettes, of which there were about 1 600. Each vignette was rated by an 11-point 0 to 10 scale from "no obligation at all" to "very strong obligation." In the case of crisis situations, the rating scale tapped either expressive help by providing "comfort and emotional support," or instrumental aid by offering "some financial help." In the celebratory situations, the rating scale tapped either a gift, by "giving something appropriate to the occasion," or a "visit" to the person described in the vignette. Some 1 200 respondents completed the vignette booklets, thus producing some 36 000 vignettes for analysis. Two examples of actual vignettes are shown in Figure 1; the segments of the vignette texts in italics represent portions of the text that are rotated randomly and separately for the composition of each vignette used. A vignette is followed with the rating scale shown in Figure 1; respondents encircle the number that best represents their felt degree of obligation.

Results of normative data analysis

The most important result of the aggregate level of analysis was the beautiful symmetry of the normative structure we found. Normative obligations to kin are highly structured and only modestly affected by variation in the situational stimuli. It mattered little whether the triggering circumstance was an impending birthday, major surgery, a household fire, or winning an award, nor whether the obligation was expressed in terms of emotional comfort or giving financial aid or a gift, though people are more generous to a wider circle of kin in

Figure 1
Examples of vignettes and the rating scale

• **An illustrative crisis event vignette**

Your unmarried sister has undergone major surgery and will be bedridden for a few weeks.

How much of an obligation would you feel to offer her some financial help?

• **An illustrative celebratory event vignette**

Your widowed father is going to have a birthday.

How much of an obligation would you feel to give him something appropriate to the occasion?

No obligation at all			Mild obligation		Strong obligation		Very strong obligation			
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

providing comfort than in giving money, which moves in a narrower circle in the kindred. What mattered most was the *degree of relatedness between ego and the kinperson in question*. Parents and children head the list with an average of 8,3 on the 0-10 scale. Secondary kin such as grandparents, grandchildren or siblings evoked an average of 6,4 on the scale. More distant kin such as an aunt or an uncle, a niece or a nephew evoked lower obligation levels in the 4 to 5-point range, and cousins show an average of 3. Friends evoked an obligation level similar to aunts and uncles, with neighbours being on a par with cousins; the type that evoked the lowest level of obligation was an ex-spouse, particularly if he or she had remarried, with an average score of merely 2.

A second major finding is that the primary relationship to both parents and children is relatively impervious to distinctions that matter in other kin relationships, with only a minor tendency to feel more obligation toward widowed mothers and unmarried daughters than to parents or children of either sex who are married. In all other relationships, gender plays a significant role: women kin evoke more obligation than men kin. Gender of respondents plays a similar role: men and women agree in holding the same high level of obligation to parents and children but women show higher obligations to secondary and distant kin than men do.

Third, women are also important as connecting links, with significant increments to obligation level if the connecting link is a woman, especially a woman's mother who is the connecting link to a maternal grandmother and a maternal aunt. When we asked, in another part of the interview, about which of the grandparents and which of the aunts or uncles had been particularly salient in their childhood (as persons whom they loved and admired in some special way), it was these same figures – the maternal aunt and the maternal grandmother – who were most frequently cited. Thus the asymmetrical tilt to the maternal side of the family is found in all dimensions of the intergenerational relationship, whether affective closeness, frequency of social interaction, helping patterns, or normative obligations. When gender of both the respondent and the vignette kinperson is considered jointly, the female-female bond predominates in being associated with elevated obligation levels.

The most significant finding was precisely the symmetrical ordering of obligations by the *number of connecting links* between respondents and the people they rated in the

vignettes: obligation ratings are more responsive to the number of *connecting links* than they are to the *type of relative* within a link category. Thus we find the same average rating for parents as for children – 8.3. With *one* connecting link, we find roughly the same level of obligation to grandparents, siblings and grandchildren (an average hovering around 6); those connected by *two* links – nieces, nephews, aunts and uncles – show a mean around 4 on the scale; and for cousins, connected by *three* links, an average of 3 on the 11-point scale. Nor does it matter if respondents actually have a kinperson in their personal life to match the kin type in a vignette: the same rating level is given of obligation to, say, an unmarried brother whether you in fact have a brother or not.⁸

We were particularly interested in the question of whether race or ethnicity of respondents were related to different levels of obligation to the kinpersons specified in the vignettes. Broad categories of religious affiliation did not make any difference at all, but among Catholics, the Irish stood out with higher levels of obligation to all kin, at all levels of relatedness. By contrast, blacks showed a very special profile, with significantly lower levels of obligation to primary kin (parents and children) and higher levels to more distant kin, perhaps reflecting the harsh realities of life circumstances among urban black Americans, in particular the poor economic resources available to black men, which makes marriage less viable a choice by black women.

Overall, our findings pose the interesting question of how normative obligations are learned. Clearly one would not expect people to articulate a rule of obligation in terms of number of connecting links to explain why they feel the same obligation to a grandfather as to a granddaughter. It seems likely that such norms are learned in much the way children learn to use language correctly, years before they have any knowledge of the rules of grammar. The first words many children learn is some term for mother and for father; so too the person they first come to love and distinguish from all others is the parent. The child also quickly learns to distinguish between people to be trusted inside the family and strangers outside the family. Perhaps, like language itself, it will never be possible to fully unravel exactly how children acquire an understanding of the rules of kinship. They acquire them through exposure to countless “examples” of kin types and appropriate behaviour in social interaction with them, much as they accumulate vocabulary, and are able eventually to make synaptic leaps that produce grammatically correct whole phrases and sentences without learning the rules of grammar they have followed until fifth grade. So too, they may intuit from hundreds of discrete instances that more is owed to parents than to aunts, more to nieces than to cousins. In this respect, the normative structure of kinship is not different from other kinds of structures, such as the prestige level of many different occupations, or the seriousness level of a wide array of different crimes, knowledge that is acquired without ever being formally taught. Nor should this surprise us: in a complex world, human rationality is bounded. We do not need to know just what the biochemical effects of cholesterol is on the body before we change our dietary habits. So too we do not need to know the rules of grammar to speak correctly, or the rules of kinship to behave correctly in relations with people in our kindred.

There are also several important findings on the *individual level of analysis*, where we explored the determinants of *variation* in the extent to which people feel obligated to others. There was considerable room for such an analysis, since the standard deviation around the mean on the obligation ratings ranged between 2 and 4 points on the 11-point scale. Of special interest to developmental psychologists and

gerontologists, perhaps, is our finding that adult obligations to kin have their roots in early childhood experiences. Using adjusted obligation indices (which measure how much respondents expressed a stronger or weaker sense of obligation to kin than is average for the kin type rated), we found higher obligations to kin among those who grew up in intact families than those whose families were broken by death or divorce, and in families in which high levels of parental affection and accessibility were reported more than in families rated low in such parental affection and availability, findings that are *independent* of a wide array of current characteristics such as age, gender, education, income, marital status or ethnicity. Those whose parents had separated or divorced felt less obligation not only to parents but to children and other kin as well, underlining the important modelling the parent-child relationship represents, with ripple-out effects on obligations felt toward others in a kindred, and indeed even to current neighbours and friends. Parental absence in a child's experience, typically the absence of a father, may project the notion to a child that men have lower commitments to their children, a powerful lesson that may lower the child's sense of obligation to primary kin and other significant relatives as well. This line of explanation is particularly pertinent to understanding the lower levels of obligation to primary kin reported by black respondents in the study.

Divorce has the effect for adults that broken homes have for children: both depress overall strength of obligations to others. Again it is divorced men (compared to married men) who show significantly weaker obligations to children, while divorced women do not differ from married women in this regard.

Once again, early socialization that communicates making distinctions among kin may provide a deep structure of learning that is highly durable, providing standards of behaviour when new kin roles are occupied later in life. Having been a nephew, one knows something of what is expected of an uncle. Having been a child, one knows something of what is expected of a parent. By the same token, when early socialization is impaired, by a father's leaving home or a mother's inattention and distraction, it may have residual effects years later, indeed decades later, as we noted in the impact of parental divorce in childhood upon expressed levels of obligation in adulthood.

Normative obligations are of intrinsic interest in their own right but the story does not end there. We also find them to be significant predictors of interaction frequency and the level of help exchanged between the generations. Many current existential circumstances contribute to the intergenerational help pattern of course, like geographic proximity, health, and financial circumstances of a parent or child, multiple family and work responsibilities, and the quality of early family relationships in the past. Multivariate regression analyses that controlled for all such existential variables still showed significant independent contributions of normative obligations to the extent of help exchanged between parents and children.

In light of the extensive discussion in the gerontological literature about the “sandwich” generation of middle-aged women, caught between obligations to children and elderly parents, and now complicated by the additional likelihood of job responsibilities carried by women in midlife, we gave special attention to the impact of employment and family responsibilities upon the frequency of interaction and the extent of help exchanged between the generations. For this analysis, we narrowed attention to women respondents who lived reasonably close to their parents or a widowed mother, and examined the impact of having children and employment status upon interaction and help flows between the gener-

ations. Employment on the part of either the elderly mother or the daughter *reduced* both contact and help between them but *increased* the frequency with which the daughters had contact with their fathers. A moment's reflection suggests the reason: if either mother or daughter is employed, getting together during weekday mornings or afternoons is precluded, pushing visits and telephoning to evening and weekends when fathers are at home as well as the mothers.

All told, our data give no support to the widespread view in both the media and in research on the elderly, that the average middle-aged woman will spend more time caring for aged parents than dependent children. This impression gained uncritical acceptance but was based on small convenience samples of frail elderly women (e.g. Brody, 1985). A study by Spitze and Logan (1990) provides a useful corrective to the common assumptions. In this sample of 1 200 residents over 40 years of age in the Albany-Troy-Schenectady metropolitan area in New York State, they report the majority of married women by the age of 45 had *no* living parent-in-law; by 55, the majority had no living parent. Secondly, the average amount of help given to an older parent was only three hours a week, with no significant difference as a function of the daughter's being employed or not. As in our own study, more extensive help was given by these middle-aged women to their *children* than to their elderly *parents*, but the children in question were not youngsters requiring daily supervision; they were adults living on their own.

One of the great merits of a life-course perspective on the parent-child relationship is the fact that one is forced to realize how small a proportion of the life course involves any inversion of the parent-child relationship to parental dependence on children. In Western societies today, children are dependents for 18 to 20 or more years, but this is followed by several decades during which adult children and parents interact and help each other in a reciprocal or complementary fashion. Only a minority of elderly parents ever become dependents on their children, and if they do so it is for a very short period of time. Nor do children resent providing some degree of help in these last years of their parents' lives. Far from being an onerous burden, such help is typically given with love and a generous spirit.

A concluding note on gender and intergenerational relations

I shall conclude by sharing my concerns for the social and policy significance of our findings on gender. That women are the "ministers of the interior" as Gunhild Hagestad (1986) put it (because they carry much of the responsibility for family life), has been a point of wide and controversial debate, particularly since the majority of women now remain in the workforce except for very short periods of withdrawal surrounding a birth. Many women advocates claim that this is "unfair": a burden on women that should be shared equitably by men. Others see this as yet another illustration of patriarchal sexism and encourage women to be skeptical of the desirability of marriage or childbearing or running a household. Indeed, even demographers have joined the bandwagon in projecting a continuation of low marriage and fertility rates, often in terms of economists' human capital model which argues that women's time is now too valuable to expend in household and child care, and hence best used in labour with a monetary return. Thus Norman Ryder (1990: 448) argued that fertility will remain low because "parenthood is becoming a less rewarding enterprise. The ties between parent and child have weakened. It matters less to the child's future what the parent does, and less to the parent's future what the child does."

In my judgment, this projection does not square with my understanding of the parent-child relationship, nor do I assume low fertility is here to stay. I base this on two considerations. For one, I think the Kingsley Davis' thesis (1984) that contemporary adults in Western societies are becoming "adverse to long-term commitments" may apply far more to men and to the marital relationship than it does to women and the parent-child relationship. It is not predominantly women but men who abandon their children (either literally or financially), and it is men who predominate in all socially deviant behaviour at higher rates than women. Unattached men are far more of a threat to a cohesive social fabric than women have ever been. In fact, the importance of family ties in serving a socially integrative function should not be undervalued or underestimated. I think the family system is more important in tying men into responsible social roles than it is a source of patriarchal entrapment for women. Separated, divorced, single, or widowed women remain more closely tied to their families than unattached men do, and it has been women who have played a major role in running voluntary associations in the community.

There are also important political implications to the fact that women live longer than men. In the United States, the female surplus in the American population will increase from 6 to 9 million in the coming decade. This is important for the reason that the gender gap in political values that began in the 1950s continues to show women are significantly more supportive than men of environmental protection, aid to schools, and provisions for children, the poor and the elderly; and more women than men are opposed to military expansion, capital punishment, racial discrimination and government corruption (Baxter & Lansing, 1980; Goot & Reid, 1975).

Underlying such political views, and consistent with the greater role that women play in our analysis of intergenerational relations in the Boston study, are qualities of affiliative caring and generative concern for all living things that are more characteristic of women than of men. Whether you consider these differences rooted in biology, in culture, or some combination of the two, a social agenda appropriate to a global community with dwindling natural resources and a high risk that pollution may make ours the most "endangered species," ought to give primacy to precisely these qualities and to encourage their development in children and adults of both sexes.

Let me end with a final bit of analysis that draws on recent work by Richard Easterlin and his colleagues (1990). Easterlin has compared the economic wellbeing of the baby-boom cohort in the United States, now entering midlife, with preceding cohorts, and shows that despite a worsening labour market, the economic wellbeing of the baby-boomers has improved over that of their predecessors, due to the demographic adaptations which they have made, such as a larger proportion of never-married, more childless, fewer children, more spouse employment, and residential doubling up of unrelated adults. My argument with Easterlin is not to challenge his evidence, which is brilliantly marshalled, but to suggest that these demographic adaptations may be taking a much harsher toll of women than they do of men. This should be on our future research agenda, guided by the question of the potential social and psychological costs of such demographic adaptations for women and for children reared under these circumstances. It cannot be in a society's interest, or an individual's interest for women to fully participate in workplaces structured for male employees with wives at home, at the expense of personal gratification in home and family, by either not having children, limiting families to one child, or postponing childbearing to an age that entails risks of infer-

tility or foetal defect. Nor is it in the interest of the nation, or the wellbeing of individual men and women to diminish the time and energy invested in parenting, or to crowd out of their lives the time available to enjoy marital intimacy, quiet self-reflection, and meaningful interaction between the generations in the family.

In the past, economic insecurity was a social class issue, and the welfare state developed to narrow the *vertical* economic gap between rich and poor. In recent years, as Ozawa (1989) points out, the demographic changes that impact negatively on women create *horizontal* economic issues for which the solutions are necessarily different: improving women's pay and job security, increasing the flexibility of working hours and family leave, equalizing the economic circumstance of couples with children and those without children, providing for child and health care, developing new institutional devices to assure that men support the children they father, and empowering girls and women to take charge of their lives and to value themselves for the qualities they have as women, whether or not they also take on the qualities associated with men.

DeTocqueville (1969) long ago speculated that when the links between generations, and ties between blood and soil were finally broken, a certain carelessness about the future would appear. As he put it:

Not only does democracy make men forget their ancestors, but it also clouds their view of their descendants and isolates them from their contemporaries. Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is a danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart (1969: 508).

I suggest we should take deTocqueville literally, that it is *men* he is speaking of. The tie between blood and soil has indeed been broken for most of us in Western societies, and increasingly in the developing world as well, and there may well be greater isolation of adults from their contemporaries. However from the evidence we have on the parent-child relationship across the life course, the tie between the generations has not been broken; women have played and continue to play a critical role in assuring that it is not broken.

There may be wishful thinking involved here but wishing can have real consequences if we put our minds and political energies to work. There is a half-forgotten language of generosity and community, as Glendon (1987: 141-42) puts it, that gives rise to the hope that "we might still have the will, the charity, the vocabulary and the vision to imagine a better way to live." Glendon speaks here as a comparative legal scholar, with no reference to the fact that hers is a "female voice." Mine is also a female voice, and one that departs as Mary Ann Glendon does from the language of exchange and rational self-interest in preference for one of caring and altruism.

Notes

1. A classic example of infusing data from longitudinal studies with a sociological eye on the impact of historical events is Glen Elder's analysis of the impact of the Great Depression of the 1930s on parents and young children (Elder, 1974). Over the years since, Elder has traced the long-lasting effects of such early experiences when the parents were in late old age (e.g. Elder, Caspi & Downey, 1986; Elder, Liker & Jaworski, 1984). For an excellent retrospective and prospective view of life-course research, cf. Sherrod and Brim (1984).
2. For a review of the research literature on physical and sexual attraction in relation to gender differences in mating and family formation, cf. Rossi (1994).
3. There are many complex factors involved in current biosocial theory concerning the roles of men and women in reproduction and family roles.

See Lancaster (1994) for an excellent review of contemporary bio-evolutionary theories on sex and reproduction.

4. In fact, our own study shows that even between parents and adult children in their 20s and 30s, financial assistance flows down the generations from parents to children, and significant proportions of the elderly hope to leave property or money as an inheritance to their children upon their death.
5. Very high correlations are obtained between parents and adult children on such simple matters as reporting the frequency of telephoning or visiting each other; on ratings of intimacy of the relationship, parents show moderate correlations with but higher scores than their children, reflecting the greater investment in the relationship by parents. Parents also report lower levels of receiving financial help from children from what children claim they give.
6. A national sample would have cost between four to five times as much as a similarly sized sample of an SMSA.
7. Our original intention was to create three-generation lineages consisting of a respondent's parent and one of the respondent's children. This was not possible however, in large measure because we miscalculated the prevalence of three-generation lineages in the American population, particularly when the youngest generation must be an adult over 18 years of age. Most respondents in the main sample who had at least one living parent had children under 18; few respondents with adult children had a living parent. Hence there were insufficient cases for a three-generation lineage analysis with independent data from a member of all three generations. The primary focus in our study was therefore on two-generation dyads consisting of respondents and their parents, or respondents and their adult children. This point applies only to analyses drawing upon independent data from members of proximate generations. We of course had a good deal of information from main sample respondents reporting about *both* their parents and each of their children.
8. Even in a vignette study, there are limits to the variety of kin types we could explore. Alternative family types were limited to stepparents and stepchildren; it is interesting to note that such kin are one additional link removed from ego than a biological parent or child. Hence even such kin types conform to the symmetry noted in the text. We did not explore other possibilities, such as out-of-wedlock children, or gay and lesbian parents.

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