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Social Support to Parents-in-Law: The Interplay of Gender and Kin Hierarchies

Using data from a representative sample of middle-aged married persons, we compare men's and women's contact and assistance to older parents-in-law and parents. Women have more visits and phone contact with their parents than do men, and men talk on the phone more with their in-laws than do women. There are no gender differences in assistance patterns. Multivariate analysis shows that women contact and help parents more than in-laws, whereas for men there are no such differences. There is little direct evidence that the presence of one set of parents affects relations with the other. Our findings suggest that although women clearly give priority to relations with their own parents, men experience pulls in both directions.

Both parents and parents-in-law are central to married people's family networks for a significant portion of their adult lives. In recent years, however, there has been much more research and public attention devoted to children's support to older parents than to relations with their in-laws (Allen, Blieszner, & Roberto, 2000; Goetting, 1990; Logan & Spitze, 1996; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Waite & Harrison, 1992). A review of research on in-law relations concluded that, although the target of many jokes and stereotypes, these relations have been "underrepresented in sociology journals and family textbooks" (Goetting, p. 67). Rossi and Rossi showed how parents-in-law fit into the hierarchy of normative obligations, but lamented that they did not collect more information about contact and assistance patterns with in-laws (pp. 502–503). Ten years later, Walker (2000, p. 606) added that "we sometimes have very little to say worth noting on subjects of tremendous importance to the lived experience of family members . . . in-laws and in-law relationships, for example."

The purpose of this article is to investigate patterns of social support to older parents-in-law among middle-aged men and women. Building on what we know about family support to aging parents, we examine the factors that influence filial relations with parents-in-law. Two general questions guide our analysis. First, we ask how gender affects filial relations with in-laws. Gender differences in contact and helping behaviors have been widely investigated in the literature on intergenerational relations (Logan & Spitze, 1996; Rossi & Rossi, 1990), but it is not known how men's and women's support to parents-in-law compare and whether there are parallel differences to those for parents.

Second, we ask about potentially conflicting obligations to parents-in-law and parents. Waite and Harrison (1992) argued that family members compete for middle-aged women's limited time and resources. According to Rossi and Rossi's (1990) hierarchy of obligations, parents have

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higher claims on adult children's time and resources than do in-laws. How does this ranking of obligations play out in filial relations with both sets of parents? Do parents receive more support than parents-in-law? How does the presence of one set of parents affect married persons' relations with the other set, and does this operate similarly for men and women?

To pursue these goals, we analyze data for a representative sample of middle-aged married men and women who have parents, parents-in-law, or both. We attempt to determine what factors shape those filial relations, using as predictors characteristics of both the adult child respondent and the parent or parent-in-law. In the section that follows, we present what is known about relations with parents-in-law to place our research questions in context. We also describe other factors known to affect relations with parents as background for developing models for relations with parents-in-law.

Background and Research Questions

Our first research question concerns the role of gender in relations with parents-in-law. On one hand, there is a vast literature documenting women's centrality in kin networks (Allen et al., 2000; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Women often act as kinkeepers of families, organizing gatherings, making contacts, and taking care of the sick and old (Di Leonardo, 1987). Thus, the *woman as kinkeeper* perspective might suggest that this central role would extend to women's involvement with their husbands' families: Women may have closer ties than do men with both their own parents and their in-laws.

There are, however, reasons to speculate that there may be different patterns in filial relations with in-laws. Caregiving studies suggest that although some daughters-in-law may become caregivers to their elderly in-laws, children-in-law are more often in supporting roles (Goetting, 1990; Kivett, 1989; Merrill, 1993). A study using a representative sample of middle-aged women found their contact with parents-in-law to be less frequent than with their own children and parents (Waite & Harrison, 1992). In part because of the adjustment problems and conflicts that are the source of popular stereotypes (Fischer, 1983; Komarovsky, 1964; Lopata, 1999), it is possible that the boundaries of kinkeeping are limited to one's own children, siblings, and parents. If so, women's kinkeeping would not bring them closer to their in-laws but might instead draw their husbands toward the wife's parents during the course of marriage, in a sort of *gravitational pull.* Rossi and Rossi (1990, p. 194) hypothesized that "women's closer ties to their parents than men's has the effect after marriage of involving men in closer and more frequent relations with their parents-in-law than women experience with their husbands' parents." Their data on reported closeness to parents-in-law are consistent with this position (see also Serovich & Price, 1994).

Thus, we know from past research that there are gender differences in relations with parents, but no clear evidence as to how these might play out in contact with parents-in-law. We test these differences by comparing mean levels of two types of contact and assistance given by men and women to parents-in-law.

Our second question concerns conditions under which parents and parents-in-law may compete for their adult children's time and attention. Men and women in the middle years face many potentially competing responsibilities, including marriage, employment, and the needs of dependent children living at home, adult children just launched, and older parents. Rossi and Rossi (1990, p. 503) described the demands of having two sets of parents: "Far more prevalent than coping simultaneously with help to elderly parents and children among middle-aged couples may be coping with crises in the lives of both sets of parents . . . or the widowed mothers of both the wife and the husband." How does the existence of living parents, or their presence in the local area, affect one's relations with parents-in-law? And how does the presence of living in-laws affect patterns of help and contact with one's own parents?

In a creative study of the structure of normative obligations, Rossi and Rossi (1990) found parents and children to be in an inner circle to whom the greatest obligations are felt, followed by those removed by one link, including parents-in-law. Married adult children must decide how to balance their contact with both sets of parents, taking into account any differences that may exist in needs for support. This would suggest that, given normal limitations on time and energy, the presence of one set of parents would decrease support given to the other. The *juggling hypothesis* suggests that, despite some degree of priority given to parents, there will be competition in both directions in these relations when both exist. Alternatively, because parents are higher in the kin hierarchy, it is possible that the presence of other

kin (including in-laws) will not detract from involvement with one's own parents. But there may be an effect in the other direction: Having one's parents living or nearby could reduce involvement with in-laws. Thus, the *kin hierarchy hypothesis* predicts an effect of having parents on support provided to in-laws but no inverse effect. These contrasting possibilities are investigated in our multivariate analysis. Next, we turn to a brief description of other factors to be included in our analysis.

Other Relevant Characteristics of Adult Children and Aging Parents

Other predictors reflect proximity, roles and resources of adult children, perceived needs of parents, and family structure. One of the most consistent determinants of parent–child contact and assistance is proximity (Logan & Spitze, 1996; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Silverstein & Litwak, 1993; Waite & Harrison, 1992). Thus, we include in our models measures of travel time to parents (and in-laws), as well as whether the other set of parents, if alive, lives in the local area or farther away. We also include measures of other roles that may influence availability of middle-aged men's and women's time, including paid work and parenting, whether of minor or adult children (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Stoller, 1983; Waite & Harrison, 1992). Men's and women's resources, captured by factors such as income, education, and health, may also influence their availability and willingness to spend time with parents.

Characteristics of older parents such as age, marital status, living arrangements, health, and gender may reflect their needs for support and thus influence contact and support provided by adult children (Silverstein & Litwak, 1993; Stoller, 1983). Family structure may also be relevant. Thus, older parents with more children may have less contact with any one child (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). In the same vein, if an older person shares a residence with sons or daughters, one might expect him or her to need less support from persons outside the household.

Method

Sample

Our data are taken from a personal interview survey conducted in the Albany–Schenectady–Troy, New York, metropolitan area between 1988 and 1989 (see Logan & Spitze, 1996). A probability sample of 1,200 persons aged 40 and older was interviewed, with an overall response rate of 67%. The sample includes 5.4% African Americans (slightly above 1980 Census figures) and only a handful of persons in other non-White categories.

For this analysis, we select women and men who are currently married and have surviving parents, surviving parents-in-law, or both. Of these 438 respondents, 327 have living parents and 324 have living parents-in-law. Because it is not possible to determine the frequency of contact and help given to parents coresiding with the respondent, those living in the same residence with in-laws or parents ($n = 28$) are not included. We also exclude data on divorced parents who therefore do not live with each other (14 cases with divorced parents, 13 with divorced in-laws, and 3 with both sets of parents divorced), because our models require married parents to be treated as a single unit in terms of contact and assistance. These exclusions result in valid data for 287 respondents with parents and 293 with in-laws, of whom a few additional cases are lost as a consequence of missing data on one or more variables (described later).

Measurement

Dependent variables. Measures of contact include frequency of visits per month and of telephone contacts per month. We asked, "How often do you visit with [person] in your home or his/hers/theirs or somewhere else?" and "How often do you talk to [person] on the telephone?" with eight response categories ranging from *once a day or more* to *once a year or less,* to *never.* Both measures are recoded to times per month with a maximum of 30 (*once a day*).

Our measure of help was a follow-up to questions asking whether the respondent helped (parents/in-laws) during the previous year with various indoor and outdoor household tasks, errands, or personal/sick care. We then asked, for persons helped, "Taking all kinds of help together, in an average week, how many hours would you say you spend helping [person] in one way or another?" We use this measure of weekly hours helped for our analysis. It should be noted that although parents typically help adult children in various ways for much of their joint lives, the parents (and in-laws) represented here have reached an age (mid- to late 70s) at which they are providing little

TABLE 1. MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS[a] FOR INDEPENDENT VARIABLES IN ANALYSIS: RESPONDENTS WITH LIVING PARENTS, PARENTS-IN-LAW, OR BOTH

	Men		Women	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Key predictors				
Relationship (0 = *parents*, 1 = *in-laws*)	.52		.50	
Other parent set in area[b] (1 = *yes*)	.32		.38	
Other parent set lives away (1 = *yes*)	.34		.30	
Respondent characteristics				
Employed (1 = *yes*)	.86		.69	
Children <18 at home	.61		.48	
Adult child home or in area	.50		.56	
Education (years)	14.10	2.74	13.84	2.46
Income (in $1,000s)	46.42	19.18	43.53	19.27
Health (1 to 5, 5 = *excellent*)	4.31	.70	4.28	.67
Parent/in-law characteristics				
Distance (hours)	3.27	6.26	3.75	6.58
Number of adult children	3.59	1.86	3.47	1.94
Mother (in-law) only (1 = *yes*)	.51		.59	
Father (in-law) only[c] (1 = *yes*)	.12		.14	
Age (years)	74.69	8.44	76.96	8.00
Health[d]	3.59	1.01	3.33	1.02
Coreside with other adult child (1 = *yes*)	.16		.10	
Measures of contact and assistance				
Number of phone calls per month	7.03	9.55	7.73	10.23
Number of visits per month	4.25	7.28	5.05	8.25
Hours of help per week	1.40	4.51	1.49	3.72
N	255		280	

[a]For continuous variables. [b]Omitted category: other parents not alive. [c]Omitted category: both alive and living together. [d]If both are alive, age is oldest and health is poorest.

instrumental help. Thus, we focus on help in only one direction.

Independent variables. Respondent characteristics include employment (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*); children under 18 at home (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*); adult children in the home or living in the local area (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*); years of education; income in thousands of dollars; and subjective health (ranging from 1 = *very poor* to 5 = *excellent*).

We also include characteristics of the parent (in-law) or the parent (in-law) couple. We measure distance from parents as travel time "using your usual means of transportation" and recode it from minutes, hours, or days, to hours, for consistency. (We also recode this to a maximum of 1 day to avoid extreme values.) We include a set of dummy variables indicating whether the mother, father, or both are alive (the reference category). We include parent age (in years) and health (as described above), coded as oldest parent and worst health when both parents are alive. We include the parents' number of adult children (including the respondent or respondent's spouse), and a dummy

TABLE 2. MEAN CONTACT AND HELP BY GENDER OF RESPONDENT AND RELATIONSHIP

	Parents		In-Laws	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Number of phone calls per month	6.59[a]	10.61	7.43[a]	4.80
Number of visits per month	3.69[a]	5.86	4.75	4.22
Hours of help weekly	1.66	2.00	1.16	.97
N	121	141	134	139

[a]Gender difference significant at $p < .001$ (t test).

TABLE 3. UNSTANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS FOR VISITING, PHONING, AND WEEKLY HOURS OF HELP TO PARENTS AND PARENTS-IN-LAW FOR MEN AND WOMEN (STANDARD ERRORS IN PARENTHESES)

	Visiting		Phoning	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Key predictors				
Relationship (0 = *parents*, 1 = *in-laws*)	1.14[a] (.92)	−1.79* (.84)	−.14[b] (1.10)	−6.30* (1.11)
Other parent set in area	.63 (1.14)	1.12 (1.14)	−3.90*[b] (1.44)	1.84 (1.40)
Other parent set lives away	.70 (1.27)	1.05 (1.20)	−3.78*[b] (1.54)	.98 (1.58)
Respondent characteristics				
Employment	−.79 (1.47)	−.50 (1.13)	−2.57 (1.83)	.75 (1.33)
Children <18 at home	.54 (1.03)	.54 (.91)	−1.29 (1.33)	.21 (1.23)
Adult children at home or in area	.57 (.93)	.06 (1.08)	−.94 (1.15)	−.25 (1.21)
Education	−.19 (.22)	−.32 (.23)	−.03 (.22)	−.33 (.27)
Income (in $1,000s)	−.29 (.30)	−.36 (.32)	−.63† (.35)	.04 (.32)
Health	.77 (.62)	−.96 (.81)	.77 (.91)	−.66 (.87)
Parent/in-law characteristics				
Distance	−.32* (.04)	−.30* (.04)	−.34* (.06)	−.40* (.06)
Number of adult children	−.25 (.22)	−.71* (.22)	−.79* (.29)	−1.17* (.28)
Mother (in-law) only	1.21 (1.04)	1.82† (1.00)	.65 (1.22)	.35 (1.32)
Father (in-law) only	.01 (1.46)	−.89 (1.28)	−3.75* (1.26)	−.92 (1.69)
Age	.05 (.05)	.05 (.07)	.001 (.07)	.02 (.08)
Health	−.02 (.50)	−.12 (.51)	.37 (.53)	1.02† (.59)
Coreside with other adult child	−1.92* (.96)	−1.73 (1.37)	2.75† (1.55)	3.17 (2.09)
Constant	8.42 (5.77)	14.50 (7.01)	15.22 (7.39)	17.20 (8.81)
N	255	280	255	280
Pseudo R^2[d]	.08	.17	.13	.19

[a]Difference between men and women significant at $p = .02$. [b]Difference between men and women significant at $p < .01$. [c]Difference between men and women significant at $p = .06$. [d]Based on squared correlation between observed and predicted values following generalized estimating equation.

†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$.

variable for whether the parent(s) coreside with another adult child. Finally, we include a set of dummy variables indicating whether the *other* set of parents lives in the area, or lives away from the area, with other set of parents not alive as the reference category. This will allow us to determine whether there is any sign of competition or hierarchy in contacts with one's parents compared to one's parents-in-law.

Analysis

To test for differences in relationships with parents and parents-in-law, we create a combined file ($n = 535$ after exclusion of cases with missing data) that includes one case for each parent (couple) and for each parent-in-law (couple) that a respondent has surviving (subject to the exclusions mentioned earlier). Thus, 262 cases represent relations with parents, and 273 represent relations with parents-in-law. Because 166 of the respondents have full data for both parents and in-laws and thus contribute two cases to the combined file, there is a potential problem of dependency across cases. Generalized estimating equations (GEEs) provide a computationally simple approach for estimating parameters in such data. Liang and Zeger (1986) introduced GEEs as a method for dealing with correlated data within the framework of the generalized linear model. More recently with the GEE approach, rather than using estimates based on treating within-cluster responses as independent, one can specify a likely correlation structure (a *working correlation structure*), but the standard errors are adjusted to reflect what actually occurs for the sample data. As a consequence, when correlations are modest, all working correlation structures generally lead to similar GEE estimates and standard errors because the empirical dependence has a large effect on adjustment of the naïve standard errors (Agresti & Liu, 2001; Spitze, Logan, Deane, & Zerger, 1994). We used the SAS PROC GENMOD to implement the GEE method using only the empirical dependence for the sample data (Liang and Zeger's original derivation of GEE) to adjust the standard errors.

by women with healthier parents and less by higher income men and those whose parents coreside with another child.

Assistance Patterns

Turning to patterns of helping (Table 3, columns 9–12), we find, again, a significant difference for women between hours of help to parents and to in-laws. In contrast, there is no such difference for men (although the difference between these coefficients is not significant). We find no evidence that parents and parents-in-law compete for their adult children's help. The presence of parents (in-laws) in the area, or elsewhere, has no effect on help given to the other set of parents.

As with contact, we find similar effects of distance for men and women (although only marginally significant for men). We also find a negative effect of sibling size for women, parallel to those found for contact. Men provide more help to parents in worse health and when a mother (in-law) is the lone survivor, both men and women help more hours per week.

Discussion

Previous research has demonstrated that adult children often provide crucial social support to aging parents. We have extended the analysis to filial relations with in-laws by presenting data on two forms of contact and on weekly hours of assistance to parents-in-law. We asked whether there are gender differences in patterns of intergenerational support to parents and to parents-in-law. When we compare mean levels of contact, we find that women have more contact (both visiting and phone) with their own parents than men have with theirs. The only significant difference for in-laws is in the other direction, however: Men have more phone contact with in-laws than do women. Thus, we would conclude that women's kinkeeping role does not extend to relations with their in-laws and that women's more central role in intergenerational relations is restricted to their own original kin.

Our second question concerned competition between parents and in-laws for married adult children's attention. There are two kinds of evidence for men of this kind of competition. First, the fact that men have equal amounts of contact with parents and parents-in-law suggests that the pull toward the wife's parents is counterbalancing the norms that might give higher priority to their own parents. Second, there is direct evidence of competition between parents and in-laws for men's telephone contact; having one set of parents alive (whether local or not) decreases phone contact with the other. Thus, this is further support that their own parents do not have the same kind of priority that women's do in their kin relations. The fact that this effect is specific to phoning may also reflect men's general limitations on willingness to spend time on the phone (Fischer, 1992).

These patterns suggest that for women, the relationship with their own parents is paramount, close to the top of the *hierarchy of obligations*, whereas for men this hierarchy is more tenuous. Our data do not tell us through what process this pattern occurs, but they are consistent with Rossi and Rossi's (1990) expectation that men get drawn into contact with their in-laws through their wives' influence. Women may arrange gatherings to which their husbands accompany them and may initiate telephone calls in which they involve their husbands. Future work on kinkeeping might more specifically address whether there are situations in which daughters-in-law are more involved in such activities, such as in a family with no daughters. It would also be useful to examine these gender differences in longitudinal context to determine how these intergenerational relationships are transformed with the transition to marriage.

One important limitation of our study involves racial and ethnic diversity. Although representative of the local area in which it was conducted, there are too few African American respondents for separate analysis and even fewer in other groups. Studies focusing on the relative involvement with own and spouse's kin among members of different ethnic groups would be a useful contribution to the family literature. Furthermore, it would be interesting to know how Rossi and Rossi's (1990) hierarchies of obligations are experienced by members of various subgroups in U.S. society.

Finally, these patterns underscore some more general questions regarding the process through which they occur. Researchers tend to view contact between older parents and their adult children as support from the child to the parent. Although the help we have analyzed certainly could be viewed in that manner, contact may be supportive or not, and may be initiated by either party. It may also be arranged by one family member but involve the entire family. Furthermore, parents may have a variety of ways to communicate their expectations to adult children regarding contact or help and thus may influence even the help they

receive. Our data do not tell us about the context in which these contacts occur, nor their meaning for the people involved. Thus, we hope that future researchers on these relationships will gather such information through both more detailed survey questions and in-depth interviews about the process through which family members become involved in various forms of intergenerational contact and assistance. It would be useful to know how women experience their role of kinkeeper and to learn how men experience the tugs and pulls that are only hinted at by the kind of analysis we describe here.

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