

Capturing the Complexity of Intergenerational Relations: Exploring Ambivalence within Later-Life Families

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This article reports on a study that incorporates two dimensions of complexity in intergenerational relations. First, the article focuses on ambivalence: the simultaneous existence of positive and negative sentiments in the older parent–adult child relationship. Second, the research described here applies a within-family design

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to the study of ambivalence, using a data set that includes 566 older mothers' assessments of ambivalence toward all of their adult children. The findings provide general support for our conceptual approach to parental ambivalence that highlights conflict between norms regarding solidarity with children and expectations that adult children should become independent. Lower ambivalence was related to an adult child's being married. Children's problems were positively associated with ambivalence, as was the mother's perception that exchange in the relationship was inequitable in the child's favor. Mother's health status and her perception that she and the child shared the same values were negatively associated with ambivalence. Finally, Black mothers reported higher levels of ambivalence than did White mothers, but the multivariate models explaining ambivalence did not vary by race.

Parent-child relationships in families with young children has been a vigorous area of research for over half a century. More recently, both researchers and policy makers have turned their attention to relations between the generations after offspring reach adulthood. Most parents and adult children report that their relationships are meaningful and supportive; however, troubled relationships are also common and are a significant source of psychological distress for both parents and children (Pillemer, Suitor, Mueller-Johnson, Sechrist, & Heidorn, 2006). To investigate these complexities, scholars are moving beyond simple models of older parent-adult child relationships to orientations and approaches that recognize the often contradictory world of the family in later life (Connidis, 2001; Fingerman, 2001; Lye, 1996; Pillemer & Lüscher, 2004; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006).

In this article, we use an approach that incorporates two dimensions of complexity in intergenerational relations. First, rather than taking a unidirectional focus on relationship quality, we focus on ambivalence—that is, the simultaneous existence of both positive and negative sentiments. Second, instead of employing a between-family design, we investigate whether parents' relationships with individual children *within the same family* differ on levels of ambivalence. Using a unique data set that includes mothers' assessments of ambivalence toward all adult children, we conduct analyses of the extent and predictors of mothers' ambivalent feelings. Further, we explore whether parental ambivalence varies by race.

Ambivalence as an Approach to Understanding Intergenerational Complexity

We suggest that a useful organizing concept for studying mixed feelings, attitudes, and emotions within intergenerational relations is that of *ambivalence*. Pillemer and colleagues have proposed that the experience of intergenerational relations in adulthood is characteristically ambivalent (Pillemer & Lüscher, 2004;

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Pillemer & Suitor, 2002, 2005). That is, rather than operating exclusively on the basis of affection, assistance and solidarity, or under threat of conflict or dissolution, the dynamics of intergenerational relations among adults revolve around sociological and psychological *contradictions or dilemmas*. Indeed, a number of scholars now argue that to understand the quality of parent–child relations, studies must begin to incorporate both positive and negative elements in a single study (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002; Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998; Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003).

Despite the promise of this perspective, only recently have studies confirmed that ambivalence between older parents and adult children is a common phenomenon. Despite using somewhat different measures of ambivalence, both Fingerman, Hay, and Birditt, (2004) and Pillemer and Suitor, (2002) found that approximately 50% of the older parents in their samples reported some degree of ambivalence toward their adult children. In a study focusing on adult children, which used somewhat more restrictive criteria, Willson, Shuey, and Elder (2003) found that 28% of adult children experienced ambivalence toward elderly parents. Van Gaalen and Dykstra (2006) developed a typology of adult child–parent relationships using a large panel study; 29% of families were categorized as ambivalent. Recent qualitative studies have found some degree of intergenerational ambivalence to be present among most or all respondents (Peters, Hooker, & Zvonkovic, 2006; Rappoport & Lowenstein, 2007). Taken together, this set of studies provides strong support for extending the study of ambivalence in intergenerational relations.

Further Complexity: Accounting for Multiple Relationships within the Family

Thus far, we have focused on one component of complexity in older parent–adult child relations: the existence of positive and negative assessments of the relationship. A second level of complexity is the possibility that parents' relationships with individual children within the same family differ. Such within-family differences in families with young children and adolescents have been fairly widely examined. Research in developmental psychology in particular suggests that there are differences in parent–child relations within families that develop in the earlier years. Studies have shown that parents of young and adolescent children differentiate among their offspring in terms of both affection and disapproval (cf. Brody & Stoneman, 1994; Kowal, Krull, & Kramer, 2006; McHale, Crouter, McGuire, & Updegraff, 1995).

Despite this evidence from earlier stages of the life course, the designs of most studies of older parent–adult child relations do not permit an examination of all children in the same family. Most studies have asked parents about their adult children in the aggregate, rather than about each child separately, or have focused

on a single target child. In contrast, the within-family perspective calls for viewing each parent-child relationship as embedded in a network of other intrafamilial relationships. Specifically, we suggest that the relationship between a parent and any particular adult child is likely to be affected by the parent's relationships with other adult children in the family.

Recent research has provided support for this argument regarding the quality of relations between parents and adult children in the same family. Suito, Pillemer, and colleagues have found that parents favor some of their children over others in terms of closeness, confiding, preferences for support and provision of support from parent to child and vice versa (Pillemer & Suito, 2006; Suito & Pillemer, 2000, 2006; Suito, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2006). This set of findings is generally consistent with those from earlier small-scale studies of within-family differences in later life (Aldous, Klaus, & Klein, 1985; Baker & Daniels, 1990; Bedford, 1992; Brackbill, Kitch, & Noffsinger, 1988).

Taken together, we believe that these lines of research call for approaches that more closely mirror the complex reality of families in later life. This emphasis on complexity moves social science research nearer to the lived experience of intergenerational relations. Most individuals experience some degree of mixed emotions toward their older parents or adult children. Similarly, both parents and children are often keenly aware of the fact that individual parent-child dyads in the same family differ in terms relationship quality (Suito & Pillemer, 2006). The scientific challenge is to address empirically these characteristics of older parent-adult child relations. As we note in the conclusion to this chapter, acknowledging this family complexity also has implications for public policy.

Conceptual Framework for Studying Intergenerational Ambivalence

Given the importance of studying ambivalence in parent-adult child relations, the question arises: What are likely sources of such ambivalence? We propose that parental ambivalence results when incompatible normative expectations for relationships with children produce contradictory feelings or behaviors (Pillemer & Suito, 2002, 2005). From a sociological perspective, Smelser (1998) articulated this point of view, positing that individuals in society are confronted by dichotomies that are fundamentally insoluble; for example, autonomy versus dependence. Because the poles in a particular dichotomy cannot be realized in an absolute sense, and because neither is truly a separate state, individuals find themselves in a position of striving for both poles simultaneously (Smelser, 1998). Similarly, Merton's classic work on sociological ambivalence calls for a focus on "incompatible normative expectations of attitudes, beliefs, and behavior" (Merton & Barber, 1963, pp. 94-95). Contradictory normative structures are endemic to intergenerational relations (Cohler, 1983; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998), likely serving as a major predictor of intergenerational ambivalence (Pillemer & Suito, 2005).

Taken together, the available theory and research from several fields lead us to propose that ambivalence is built into the structure of parent–child relationships, and that social norms and cultural values frequently require contradictory courses of action. Our conceptual framework identifies four characteristics of intergenerational relations that are affected by conflicting norms and may therefore generate ambivalence: children’s status attainment, children’s dependency, problems in the lives of children, and similarity between parent and offspring.

Children’s Status Attainment

A key dilemma producing intergenerational ambivalence is conflict between the norm of solidarity with children and the normative expectation that children develop independent lives (Pillemer & Suitor, 2002, 2005). Parents are likely to experience mixed emotions when children fail to attain or maintain normative adult statuses, as evidenced by higher levels of maternal ambivalence when children do not marry or meet parental educational expectations (Pillemer & Suitor, 2002). We therefore anticipate heightened ambivalence toward adult children in the family who have not attained (or maintained) adult statuses, relative to those of their siblings.

Dependency of Children

Normative conflict is also likely to arise regarding dependency of children. Specifically, we propose that a general underlying cause of parental ambivalence lies in the conflict between the norm of intergenerational solidarity mandating help for adult children in need, and normative expectations that children should be successfully launched in adulthood (see also Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998). The literature on exchange in later-life families suggests that relationship quality is negatively affected when parents continue to provide their adult children with high and unreciprocated levels of care and support (Pillemer, Suitor, Mueller-Johnson, Sechrist, & Heidorn, 2006). There is further evidence that a conflict between these two norms—pressure to help adult children but a desire for freedom from their demands—specifically produces ambivalence, rather than simply conflict or tension (Pillemer, 2004; Pillemer & Suitor, 2002; Teo, Graham, Yeoh, & Levy, 2003; Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003). Thus, we anticipate that mothers will report greater ambivalence toward those children who are more dependent, relative to their siblings.

Children’s Problems

Problems in the child’s life are hypothesized to contribute to parental ambivalence. Such problems have been shown to have detrimental effects on the parent–child relationship. For example, parent–child relations tend to become strained

when adult children develop problems, such as substance abuse (Pillemer & Suito, 1991) or experience nonnormative transitions, such as job loss (Newman, 1999) and divorce (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Umberson, 1992). Adult children's problems have the potential to create ambivalence in parent-child relationships because they increase children's demands, violate parents' expectations regarding normative adult status attainment, and are frequently perceived by parents as a sign of flawed development (Pillemer & Suito, 1991, 2005; Suito & Pillemer, 2000). Therefore, we hypothesize that children with greater problems than those of their siblings will be viewed more ambivalently.

Similarity

Similarity has been shown to be important in understanding the development and maintenance of close relationships throughout the life course. The literature on intergenerational relations reveals the same general pattern: parents tend to have closer, less conflicted, and more supportive relationships with adult children who share their social structural positions (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Pillemer & Suito, 2002; Umberson, 1992) and values (Pillemer & Suito, 2002; Suito & Pillemer, 2006; Welsh & Stewart, 1995). Although this question has not been investigated, it seems likely that similarity reduces ambivalent assessments of the relationship. Two related dimensions of similarity appear to be especially salient to understanding parent-adult child relations in general, and may affect ambivalence: value similarity (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Suito & Pillemer, 2006; Teo, Graham, Yeoh, & Levy, 2003) and gender similarity (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Suito & Pillemer, 2006).

Exploring Racial Variations in Ambivalence

The role of race in ambivalence has not yet received attention; nevertheless, we believe that the issue is a potentially important one. On the one hand, the literature does not provide a clear basis for anticipating particular race differences in the models explaining ambivalence. In fact, recent evidence suggests that Blacks and Whites are more similar than different in their aspirations regarding their children's development and achievements (Barnes, 2005).

On the other hand, the conceptual framework we have developed suggests that ambivalence may be more common among Black than White mothers. First, Black adult children are more likely to have difficulty maintaining normative adult statuses. Black young and middle-aged adults continue to be disadvantaged educationally (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005) and are more likely than Whites to experience both job loss and divorce (Sweeney & Phillips, 2004; Wilson & McBrier, 2005). Second, Black adult children are more likely than Whites to experience medical problems (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005; Fiscella, Franks,

Gold, & Clancy, 2000) and, for men, substance abuse and problems with the law (Green, Ensminger, Robertson, & Juon, 2006; Martin, Tuch, & Roman, 2003). Thus, it is possible that Black mothers' levels of ambivalence will be greater than those of White mothers.

We suggest that there may also be differences in the predictors of Black and White mothers' ambivalence toward their children. Older Black women face the lifetime accumulation of social and economic disadvantages just noted; thus, these mothers may feel especially vulnerable to dependency. Black mothers, therefore, may be particularly sensitive to children's characteristics and behaviors that might affect their ability to provide assistance in the future. Thus, we anticipate that Black mothers will be most likely to report high ambivalence toward children who have not achieved normative adult statuses or who have problems.

Summary

We hypothesize that mothers will report greater ambivalence toward those children who: (1) are not married, (2) are not parents, (3) are unemployed, (4) have lower educational attainment, (5) are dependent on the mother, (6) are identified as having serious problems, and (7) are less similar to the mother in terms of gender and values. Further, we will examine differences in the prevalence and predictors of ambivalence by race; we hypothesize that Black mothers will report higher levels of ambivalence, and that children's characteristics that reduce their ability to provide support will be especially important predictors of within-family variations in ambivalence.

Methods

Sample

The data used for the present analyses are from the Within-Family Differences Study (WFDS). The design of the WFDS involved selecting a representative sample of community-dwelling mothers 65–75 years of age with at least two living adult children (for a detailed description of the WFDS sample and methods, see Suitor, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2006). Massachusetts requires communities to keep city and town lists of all residents, which provide the age and gender of individuals in the household. With the assistance of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, we drew a systematic sample of women ages 65–75 from the town lists from 20 communities in the greater Boston area. Interviews were conducted with 566 mothers, which represented 61% of those who were eligible for participation. The sample included an overrepresentation of African-Americans. The interviews were conducted between August of 2001 and January of 2003.

Sample Characteristics

Mothers' characteristics. The mothers were between 65 and 75 years of age ($M = 70.9$; $SD = 3.1$). Forty-six per cent were currently married, 36% were widowed, 17% were divorced or separated, and 1% had never been married. Twenty-four percent of mothers had completed less than high school, 43% had completed high school, and 33% had completed at least some college. Eighteen per cent were employed. Thirty-four per cent had a total family income of less than \$20,000 in the previous year, 26% had an income between \$20,000 and \$29,999, 12% had an income between \$30,000 and \$39,999, 8% had an income between \$40,000 and \$49,999, and 21% had an income \$50,000 or greater. Forty-six per cent of the women were Catholic, 45% were Protestant, 5% were Jewish, and 4% reported another religion or said that they had no religious affiliation. The number of living children of women in the sample ranged from two to 13 ($M = 4.4$; $SD = 1.7$). Seventy per cent of the mothers were non-Hispanic White, 27% were Black, 2% were Hispanic, and 1% was Asian.

Adult children's characteristics. The adult children ranged from 20 to 61 years of age ($M = 42.8$; $SD = 5.9$). Forty-nine per cent were daughters. Sixty-three per cent of the adult children were currently married (or living together as married), 14% were divorced or separated, 21% were never married, and 1% was widowed. Forty-four per cent of the adult children had completed high school, 13% had completed some college, 28% were college graduates and 15% had completed some graduate work. Eighty-one per cent of the children were employed. Seventy per cent of the adult children were themselves parents (mean number of children = 2.3; $SD = 1.2$).

Measures

Dependent Variable

We directly assessed subjective perceptions of ambivalence by asking respondents to what degree their attitudes toward each child were mixed or conflicted. Two global questions about ambivalent feelings were combined. Mothers were asked about the degree to which they had mixed feelings for each child (0 = *strongly disagree*, 1 = *disagree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *strongly agree*). They were also asked how often they felt "torn in two directions, or conflicted, about the relationship" with each child (0 = *never*, 1 = *rarely*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *fairly often*, 4 = *very often*). Further, to maintain these two items on a comparable scale, values of 3 and 4 to the question of how torn mothers felt in a particular relationship were recoded to 3. The correlation between the two items was .51. Summed scores for this direct measure of ambivalence ranged from 0 to 6 ($M = 2.23$; $SD = 1.56$; $r = .51$, $p < .001$).

Independent Variables

Attainment of adult statuses. Four variables were used to indicate adult children's successful completion of transitions to normatively prescribed social statuses: marital status (1 = *married*, 0 = *not married*; 56% married), parental status (1 = *has children*, 0 = *does not have children*; $M = .70$; $SD = .46$), educational attainment (1 = *less than high school*; 2 = *some high school*; 3 = *high school graduate*; 4 = *post-high school vocational*; 5 = *some college*; 6 = *college graduate*; and 7 = *completed graduate school*; $M = 2.35$, $SD = .63$), and employment status (1 = *employed*, 0 = *not employed*; $M = .78$; $SD = .42$).

Child's dependency. Two variables measured the child's continued dependency on the parent. The first item was whether the parent had provided financial help to the child in the preceding year (0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*). The second measured perceived inequity of help exchange, asking: "Do you give more in this relationship, does [CHILD] give more, or is the relationship equal?" This item was coded as 1 = *mother gives more*, 0 = *either of the other two responses* = 0 ($M = .17$; $SD = .37$).

Children's problems. To measure children's problems in adulthood, we asked mothers whether each of their children had experienced as adults a series of problems that individuals might face. Three types of problems were included in the present analysis: physical illness, mental health problems, and deviant behaviors. The items were: (1) "serious illnesses or injury"; (2) "serious mental or emotional problems"; (3) "problems with drinking or drugs"; and (4) "problems with the law" (0 = *neither problem*; 1 = *at least one problem*). Because voluntary and involuntary problems have been found to have different effects on parent-adult child relations (Suitor et al., 2006), we created separate measures. To create the measure of children's involuntary problems, we combined physical and mental health problems (0 = *no problems*; 1 = *at least one problem*). Mothers reported that 20% of their children had experienced at least one serious health problem in adulthood. To create the measure of voluntary problems, we combined problems with drinking or drugs and problems with the law (0 = *no problems*; 1 = *at least one problem*). Mothers reported that 14% of their children had experienced such voluntary problems.

Similarity. Value similarity was measured by asking respondents: "Parents and children are sometimes similar to each other in their views and opinions and sometimes different from each other. In your general outlook on life, would you say that you and [CHILD] share *very similar views* (4), *similar views* (3), *different views* (2), or *very different views* (1)?" ($M = 2.77$, $SD = .84$). Child's gender (i.e., gender similarity) was measured by asking mothers for the gender of the focal child (0 = *son*, 1 = *daughter*).

Control variables. Mothers' age in years, geographic proximity between mothers and children, and mothers' self-reported health were included as controls. Geographical proximity was measured in distance the child lived from the mother in terms of travel time by ground transportation: (1) *same house*; (2) *same neighborhood*; (3) *less than 15 minutes away*; (4) *15–30 minutes away*; (5) *30–60 minutes away*; (6) *more than an hour but less than two hours*; and (7) *two or more hours away* ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.89$). Self-reported health was measured with five categories (1 = *poor*, 2 = *fair*, 3 = *good*, 4 = *very good*, 5 = *excellent*; $M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.10$).

Analytic Strategy

Multilevel analyses were conducted using SPSS software (version 13) for hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to examine our main hypotheses regarding the associations of mother and offspring characteristics with mother ambivalence. This approach was selected because the data (children nested within families) are multilevel in nature (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). The 2,169 children who are the units of analysis are nested within the 566 mothers on whose reports the present analysis is based; thus, the observations are not independent and the mother reports will likely have correlated errors. Multilevel modeling procedures account for the independence assumption and allow for correlated error structures (Luke, 2004). The overall fit of the models was evaluated based on examination of the sample-size adjusted Bayesian information criterion (BIC; Schwarz, 1978), Akaike information criterion (AIC; Akaike, 1974).

Results

Experiencing Ambivalence

Examination of the distributions of the ambivalence variables suggests that a sizable proportion of the mothers experienced ambivalent feelings regarding their adult children. In over a quarter of the dyads, mothers agreed or strongly agreed that they have “very mixed feelings” about the child. In approximately 12% of the dyads, mothers reported that they felt “torn in two directions” often or very often, and 25% felt torn now and then. In less than a third of dyads (32%) did mothers indicate that they never felt “torn in two directions” about their children; in a similar percentage of dyads (31%), mothers reported that they seldom feel torn in two directions.

Examination by race indicated that, as hypothesized, Black mothers reported higher levels of ambivalence than did White mothers. In about 10% of the White dyads, mothers reported having mixed feelings often or very often toward children, compared to 17% of Black dyads ($p < .01$). Race differences regarding feeling torn in two directions were somewhat greater; in about 24% of White dyads,

Table 1. Hierarchical Linear Model Results Predicting Mother's Ambivalence from Mother and Child Characteristics

Predictor	Estimate	SE	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)	<i>p</i>
Intercept	3.99	1.14	3.50 (499.95)	.001
Mother's age	.00	.02	.20 (485.64)	.840
Mother's health	-.09	.04	-1.98 (496.89)	.049
Gender of child	-.01	.06	-.20 (1,364.42)	.844
Marital status of child	-.29	.08	-3.71 (1,393.08)	.000
Child has any children	.06	.08	.76 (1,412.64)	.449
Child's education	-.08	.06	-1.34 (1,510.34)	.181
Child's employment status	-.08	.09	-.96 (1,401.12)	.335
Mother gave child money	.05	.08	.65 (1,494.81)	.515
Mother gives more	.74	.09	7.88 (1,452.81)	.000
Child health problem	.23	.08	2.90 (1,396.37)	.004
Child deviant behavior problem	.32	.10	3.07 (1,454.35)	.002
Mother's general outlook similar to child's	-.56	.04	-13.70 (1,397.52)	.000
Child's distance from mother	.00	.02	-.10 (1,444.64)	.920

BIC: 5,134.65; AIC: 5,123.99; parameters: 16.

mothers agreed or strongly agreed that they felt torn toward children, compared to approximately 36% of Black dyads ($p < .05$). Thus, in examining descriptive statistics, it appears that Black mothers have higher levels of ambivalence toward their children than do White mothers.

Taken together, these results confirm the findings of studies cited earlier that parental ambivalence regarding adult children is sufficiently widespread to be of scientific interest. The experience of intergenerational ambivalence (at least at low levels of intensity) appears to be quite common. Further, as hypothesized, levels of ambivalence are higher for Black than for White mothers.

Multivariate Results

The results of the multivariate analysis are presented in Table 1. The findings show partial support for our hypothesis regarding status attainment. Specifically, mothers were less ambivalent toward adult children who were married. However, the other three status attainment variables did little to explain maternal ambivalence. The results provided stronger support for several of our other hypotheses. Mothers were found to be substantially more ambivalent toward children who had experienced serious problems in adulthood; however, contrary to our hypothesis, the effects of voluntary and involuntary problems were similar. Mothers were also more ambivalent toward children to whom they gave more than they received in the relationship. We had anticipated that mothers would also be more ambivalent toward children to whom they provided financial assistance, but this was not the case. Thus, it appears that a sense of inequitable exchange with children, rather than the simple provision of financial support, is a source of ambivalence among these mothers. We hypothesized that mothers would report less ambivalence toward

children to whom they were similar; the analysis revealed that mothers reported less ambivalence toward children who shared their values, but there was no effect of gender similarity.

Next, we conducted analyses by race to determine whether the patterns shown using the full sample differed for Black and White mothers. In separate analyses, race was included as a control variable (models not shown). Analyses with race alone entered in the model predicting ambivalence indicated somewhat elevated levels of ambivalence for Black mothers. However, when controlling for factors that might explain race differences in ambivalence (such as children's status attainment), race had no effect on maternal ambivalence. This suggests that any race difference found in mothers' ambivalence is likely due to typical factors associated with ambivalence, rather than any unique effect due to race.

Discussion

The present study examined sources of ambivalence, using a sample that allowed us to take into consideration mothers' reports on all of their adult children. The results provide general support for the conceptual approach to parental ambivalence that highlights conflict between norms regarding solidarity with children and expectations that adult children should become independent. Mirroring Pillemer and Suito's (2002) findings, marital status of the adult child was strongly related to ambivalence. Thus, it appears that children who have not achieved or remained in marriage may be a particularly important source of normative conflict. Further, children's problems—both voluntary and involuntary—were associated with ambivalence, as was the mother's perception that exchange in the relationship was inequitable in the child's favor. As noted by Lowenstein and colleagues (Lowenstein, Katz, & Gur-Yaish, 2007), a balance in reciprocity appears to benefit the quality of intergenerational relations.

Taken together, these factors represent situations in which children may be seen as exhibiting flawed development, in that they have not achieved important family roles and are experiencing serious life problems. It is probable that in such situations, mothers vacillate between normative pressure to provide emotional and instrumental support, while simultaneously resenting such provision based on the norm of reciprocity. Because of the virtually indissoluble nature of the parent-child relationship, ambivalent patterns such as these are likely to continue over the long term. The findings suggest that poor health on the part of the mother (presaging needs for care from offspring who may not be in a position to provide it) and belief that the child's values are dissimilar further contribute to ambivalence.

In addition, the present study is the first to consider the role of race in intergenerational ambivalence. As hypothesized, Black mothers reported higher levels of ambivalence toward their adult children than did White mother's. Our analyses, however, suggest that this pattern reflects the greater levels of children's difficulty

with status attainment, continued dependence on parents, and children's problems among Black families (Green, Ensminger, Robertson, & Jron, 2006; Martin, Tuch, & Roman, 2003; Sweeney & Phillips, 2004; Wilson & McBrier, 2005). When controlling for these factors, the findings from the multivariate analyses did not find independent effects of race on ambivalence. These findings are consistent with other studies that find general similarity in patterns of intergenerational relations among racial groups (Jackson, Forsythe-Brown, & Govia, 2007).

Implications for Practice and Policy

Several scholars have suggested making a distinction between sociological and psychological ambivalence. This distinction differentiates, but also draws a connection, between mixed emotions, attitudes or cognitions at the individual level, and social structures that create dilemmas that in turn produce ambivalence on the individual level. Attention to intergenerational ambivalence has implications for practice and policy in both of these domains.

First, on the individual level, continued research on intergenerational ambivalence may have benefits for clinicians and other individuals working to improve family life in the later years. There has been considerable growth in family therapy approaches to parent-child relations in later life (Fine & Norris, 1989; Qualls, 2000). It is useful in this context for family therapists to be aware of how commonly parents experience ambivalence toward adult children. Indeed, for parents struggling with issues related to children who have life problems, it may be reassuring to realize that such ambivalence is normative rather than unusual. Additionally, it may be useful for clinicians to explore the possibility of ambivalence among parents whose adult children are not successfully launched or who remain dependent. Such attention to older parent-adult child ambivalence may be particularly important given the possibility that it may reduce psychological well-being (Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998; Raulin, 1984; Uchino, Holt-Lunstad, Uno, & Flinders, 2001).

Second, although the present study does not lead to specific policy recommendations, we believe that the intergenerational ambivalence perspective may help inform policy debates. Political scientists have raised awareness that individuals often hold conflicting "core values" regarding public issues. Further, extremely difficult policy dilemmas arise when fundamental values or principles are in conflict, such as abortion rights versus "right to life" or protecting jobs versus saving habitat for endangered species (Alvarez & Brehm, 1995). Thus, scholars in political science see greater recognition and understanding of ambivalence in attitudes and emotions as key to unraveling policy dilemmas.

Acknowledging the ubiquity of ambivalence in older parent-adult child relationships may have similarly beneficial effects for policies affecting intergenerational relations. To provide only one example, in the field of economics an extensive literature has debated motives that can explain financial and other transfers

between the generations (Light & McGarry, 2003). The exchange perspective posits that individuals engage in intergenerational transfers to maximize benefits to themselves. Altruistic motives, in contrast, are based on promoting the best interests of other family members. Programs to promote informal care of older persons by their children, for example, or to encourage grandparental caretaking of grandchildren in need, would be designed differently depending on which motivation is assumed.

In this example, the present study supports the view that an integrative approach is preferable to the either/or dichotomy of altruism versus exchange (Charness & Haruvy, 2002). Specifically, the findings presented in this article indicate that this type of contradiction is by no means uncommon, and may in fact be characteristic of older parent–adult child relations. Our findings suggest that parents are motivated both by the norm of reciprocity, which suggests that profit and loss should be equitable between relationship partners, and by the norm of solidarity, which implies that individuals should give close family members whatever help they need, without concern for a “return on investment.” By acknowledging that individuals often simultaneously hold opposing core values and motives toward relationships with older parents or adult children, evaluations of the effectiveness of policy innovations can become more nuanced.

Finally, it has been noted that policy debates regarding family life have typically focused on polarized images, emphasizing either family strengths or imminent family dissolution (Lüscher, 2004). Cole (1992) sums up historical research on aging in a similar fashion: “American culture has characteristically oscillated between attraction to a ‘good’ old age . . . and repulsion from a ‘bad’ old age.” For policy purposes, what is required is “a new and integrated appreciation of aging that transcends our historical tendency to split old age into positive and negative poles” (p. 237). Greater attention to ambivalence in intergenerational relations may illuminate not only basic processes in older parent–adult child relations, but also practice and policy relating to them.

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