CHOOSING DAUGHTERS: EXPLORING WHY MOTHERS FAVOR ADULT DAUGHTERS OVER SONS

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ABSTRACT: *This article uses quantitative and qualitative data from 424 mothers' relationships with 1,494 adult children to explore gender differences in mothers' choices of children as sources of support and closeness. Despite strong theoretical arguments regarding the priority of the mother–daughter tie, empirical research has not provided consistent support for this pattern. This article explores whether inconsistent findings regarding the priority of mother–daughter relationships result from the way in which intergenerational affect is generally measured. In contrast to traditional measures that ask parents to rate their closeness to each child, the measures used here ask mothers to choose among their children. This method revealed a consistent pattern of preference for daughters over sons as sources of emotional and instrumental support, primarily on the basis of shared values and gender-specific similarities.*

KEYWORDS: intergenerational relations, parent–adult relations, parent–child relations, parental favoritism, social support, within-family differences

> *A son's a son 'til he takes a wife,*
> *but a daughter's a daughter all of her life.*
> *— Anonymous*

Throughout Western history, the mother–daughter bond has been viewed as one of the strongest of human ties. So strong is this tie that authors of fiction have often found it necessary to render girls and young women motherless to allow for the development of other intense adult relationships, as in the case of *A Little Princess*, *Sarah Plain and Tall*, and *Wuthering Heights*.

Given such cultural expectations regarding the strength of mother–daughter

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relations, it is surprising that contemporary studies have not provided consistent support for the priority of this intergenerational tie over other parent–child combinations. A combination of methodological factors masking the relationship between gender and parent–child relationship quality may explain the inconsistency in this line of research. This article, resting on data from 424 mothers' relationships with 1,494 adult children, seeks to answer three questions. First, do mothers choose daughters over sons when asked to identify the child whom they would prefer as a source of support across a variety of emotional and instrumental tasks? Second, does similarity play a greater role in explaining women's choices of daughters over sons? Third, if mothers' choices are affected by similarity, are they responding to structural similarity or to some other dimension of similarity, such as similarity of outlook?

GENDER, SIMILARITY, AND INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS

Mothers and Daughters: An Inconsistent Picture

Gender differences in family relationships have interested social scientists for several decades (Booth and Amato 1994; Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Umberson and Slaten 2000). The literature reveals a relatively consistent picture regarding the effect of *parent's* gender on intergenerational relations, with closest ties between adult children and mothers (Putney and Bengtson 2001; Silverstein and Bengtson 1997; Suitor et al. 1995; Vitulli and Holland 1993). However, there is far less consistency regarding the effects of child's gender. Although most studies report stronger affectional ties and greater confiding between mothers and daughters than between mothers and sons (Kulis 1992; Pillemer and Suitor 2002; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Silverstein and Bengtson 1997; Silverstein, Parrott, and Bengtson 1995; Spitze et al. 1994; Suitor and Pillemer 2000), some investigations find no effect of adult child's gender on relationship quality (Aquilino 1999; Brackbill, Kitch, and Noffsinger 1988; Eggebeen 1992; Lawton, Silverstein, and Bengtson 1994; Logan and Spitze 1996; Mercier, Paulson, and Morris 1988).

Such inconsistencies are surprising given both popular books (e.g., Gray 1992; Tannen 1990) and theoretical treatises by scholars (cf. Arcana 1981; Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982; Hey 1997) regarding the role of empathy and sharing in women's formation of intimate interpersonal relationships. Theoretical arguments suggest that an emphasis on sensitivity and sharing would lead mothers to experience differential rewards in their relationships with daughters and sons. For example, Arcana argues that mothers of daughters can anticipate a more intense interpersonal relationship based on an interconnection emanating from a shared gender experience (Arcana 1981; Nice 1992) than can mothers of sons. Further, unlike mothers' relationships with sons in which there is generally a distinctive separation by adolescence, the tie between mothers and daughters remains strong across all stages of the life course (Apter 1990; Arcana 1981; Chodorow 1978; Fingerman 2001; Fingerman and Griffiths 1999).

The strength of these theoretical arguments leads us to question whether a methodological confound might be the source of the inconsistency in the litera-

ture regarding child's closeness and gender: perhaps there is an empirical consistency between gender and closeness that is masked by limitations in the way in which mothers generally are asked about the quality of their relationships with their adult children. In particular, we question whether comparisons of mothers' responses to questions about their closeness to each of their children, without asking respondents to make specific comparisons among them, renders it difficult to discern gender differences.

The National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) provides an example of the approach most broadly used in measuring parent–adult child closeness (Sweet and Bumpass 1996). The NSFH asked parents to describe the quality of their relationships with each of their children on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 7 (excellent) in Wave I (1988), and from 0 (really bad) to 10 (absolutely perfect) in Wave 2 (1993). Most mothers reported very high closeness to each of their children, rendering it difficult to detect favoritism that may exist in families, especially in families in which the mothers share close relations with all of the children.

We believe that measures that ask mothers specifically to differentiate among their children will reveal variations in relationship quality that are likely to be masked when using measures of quality that allow parents to rate all their children in the same way. Traditional measures of parent–adult child closeness are able to differentiate adequately among children in families in which there are marked differences in relationship quality; however, they may not be able to tap subtle differences. Measures focused on choice can reveal distinctions in families in which parents feel closeness with all their children but may nevertheless feel closer to one child.

Within-family approaches have been used by developmental psychologists extensively to demonstrate that differences exist in parent–child relations within families in the early years. For example, studies show that parents of young and adolescent children differentiate between their offspring on a variety of relational dimensions, including affection, pride, disapproval, punishment, and time investment (Brody, Stoneman, and McCoy 1992a, 1992b; Bumpass, Crouter, and McHale 2001; Dunn and Plomin 1990; Jenkins, Rasbash, and O'Conner 2003; Kowal and Kramer 1997; McHale et al. 1995; McHale et al. 2000). Further, this line of research shows that such within-family differences in parental responses often have important consequences for children's well-being and achievement (for reviews, see Hertwig, Davis, and Sulloway 2002; McHale et al. 2000; Steelman et al. 2002). Despite the obvious significance of such designs in explaining both causes and consequences of relationship quality and well-being, these designs have received little attention in the literature on families later in life, thus limiting the extent to which it is possible to determine whether these patterns continue into adulthood.

The few studies that have explored within-family differences in parent–adult child relations suggest that parents may differentiate in the later stages of the family life course. Studies by Aldous, Klaus, and Klein (1985) and Brackbill et al. (1988) report that parents often differentiate among their adult children in terms of affection, pride, and disappointment; similarly, Suitor and Pillemer (2000) find that mothers differentiate among their children in terms of emotional closeness.

Further, these investigations reveal that mothers tend to favor daughters over sons. However, the studies that have explored such within-family differences are limited by relatively small samples, thus shedding little light on whether such patterns exist in the larger population of later-life families. This study explores these issues using a more representative sample of families.

We believe that inconsistencies found in the literature regarding mothers' closeness to sons and daughters may be a function of measurement and can be addressed using measures that ask mothers to differentiate among their children. Therefore, the expectation is that when mothers are asked to choose among their adult children, the primacy of the mother–daughter bond posited in the theoretical arguments discussed earlier will be demonstrated consistently. In this study, we hypothesize that mothers will choose daughters over sons when asked to select the child to whom they are emotionally closest and to whom they would turn as a source of emotional and instrumental support; and that child's gender will have greater effects on mother's choice among her children than on mother's reports of general closeness to each of her children.

Explaining Intergenerational Relationship Quality: The Differential Role of Similarity

The second issue addressed in this study is the role of similarity in mothers' choice of children as sources of support and closeness. Of particular interest is whether similarity plays a greater role in explaining women's choices of daughters than in explaining their choices of sons. Further, if mothers' choices are affected by similarity, are they responding to structural similarity or to some other dimension of similarity?

Structural similarity has been shown to be important for understanding the development and maintenance of relationships throughout the life course (Feld 1982; Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; Marsden 1988; Suitor and Keeton 1997; Suitor et al. 1995; Wellman and Wortley 1990). In particular, this line of research demonstrates that individuals are more likely to develop and maintain supportive relationships with others who are similar to them on important social dimensions, such as marital status, parental status, educational attainment, age, and gender.

A review of the literature on intergenerational relations shows that similarity has been far less consistent in explaining parent–adult child relations than it has been in explaining other interpersonal relationships. For example, similarity of parental status is generally an important predictor of patterns of contact and closeness in studying other interpersonal relationships; however, this dimension of similarity does not appear to have consistent effects on parent–adult child relations. Whereas some studies (Aldous et al. 1985; Fischer 1981, 1986; Umberson 1992) find greater closeness and harmony when adult children become parents themselves, other studies (Brackbill et al. 1988; Lawton et al. 1994) find either no positive effects of parenthood or effects specific only to particular parent–child combinations (Rossi and Rossi 1990; Spitze et al. 1994). One study describes *greater* conflict when adult children are parents (Aquilino 1999). Findings regarding the effects of other dimen-

sions of structural similarity, such as marital status, provide an equally inconsistent picture. For example, Kaufman and Uhlenberg (1998) report that being happily married improves daughters' (but not sons') relationships with their mothers, whereas Kulis (1987) concludes that marriage increases sons' (but not daughters') affection for parents.

Theoretical arguments on the development of gender identity suggest that similarity in intergenerational relations without regard to child's gender may be even more important in explaining relationship quality between mothers and daughters than it is in explaining the relationship quality between mothers and sons. Work by Chodorow (1978) and Gilligan (1982) could be used to suggest that mothers' expectations for their daughters differ from those for their sons regarding similarity. Specifically, their arguments posit that mothers anticipate that their daughters will become more similar to them as they progress through life-course transitions. The expectations for similarity with daughters may result in stronger effects of similarity on mother–daughter than on mother–son relationships. If daughters do not become structurally similar to their mothers, their dissimilarity might be viewed as rejection, not merely the absence of similarity, as in the case of sons. The argument that such unmet expectations would be particularly deleterious to mother–daughter relationships is consistent with research demonstrating that the negative effects of violated expectations is greater than the positive effects of met expectations on both interpersonal relations and psychological well-being (Fingerman 2001; Luscher and Pillemer 1998; Pillemer and Suitor 1996; Schuster, Kessler, and Aseltine 1990). Therefore, although similarity is important in explaining mothers' relationship quality with both sons and daughters, the hypothesis here is that the effects will be greater for daughters.

This study explores this issue by examining whether structural similarity plays a more prominent role in explaining mother–daughter than mother–son relations. We believe that the primary explanation for the inconsistencies in the literature regarding similarity lies with the methodological limitations in measurement already discussed. We anticipate that with measures that ask mothers to differentiate among their children, structural similarity will play a more prominent role in explaining mother–daughter relations than mother–son relations.

Finally, we argue that the study of gender differences in explanations for parent–adult child relationship quality must give greater attention to nonstructural dimensions of similarity. Investigations that focus on similarity of attitudes and values find that these dimensions of similarity are important predictors of parent–child relationship quality (Pillemer and Suitor 2002; Suitor 1987; Welsh and Stewart 1995); in fact, such similarity is one of the core components of a model of intergenerational solidarity discussed by Bengtson and colleagues (Bengtson 2001; Lawton, Silverstein, and Bengtson 1994; Silverstein and Bengtson 1997). However, little attention has been paid to whether similarity has differential effects on relations with sons and daughters. The same argument outlined earlier regarding the greater importance of mother–child structural similarity on relations with daughters than with sons leads to the hypothesis that similarity of "outlook on life" will be substantially more important in explaining mother–daughter relations than in explaining mother–son relations.

METHODS

Design Goals

This article presents results from a project designed to provide data on within-family differences in parent–adult child relations in later life. The research design is similar to that used by developmental psychologists—including Dunn and colleagues (Dunn 1988; Dunn and Kendrick 1982; Dunn and Plomin 1990) and McHale and colleagues (McHale et al. 2000; McHale, Crouter, and Tucker 1999)—to study within-family differences among siblings in earlier stages of the life course. The design calls for the selection of a sample of mothers between sixty-five and seventy-five years of age with at least two living adult children, and the collection of data from the mothers regarding each of their children. Only community-dwelling mothers are included in the sample, to reduce the likelihood that the women are in need of extensive care, thus allowing study of relationships outside of the context of caregiving.

Sampling

Massachusetts requires communities to keep town lists of all residents by address. All town lists provide the age and gender of individuals, and some towns provide additional information. These town lists were the source of the sample in this study. From the total of eighty available communities, twenty in the greater Boston area, specifically the U.S. Census–designated Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area, were randomly selected. With the assistance of the Center for Survey Research at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, we drew a systematic sample (women aged sixty-five to seventy-five years) from the town lists. An equal number of women were selected from each community. This strategy results in a self-weighting sample of women from within each stratum. Letters of introduction sent to each woman described the study and explained that an interviewer from the Center for Survey Research would contact her to screen her to determine her eligibility for participation and to attempt to schedule a face-to-face interview if she met the study criteria.

Between August of 2001 and January of 2003, interviewers met with 556 mothers: 61% of those who were eligible for participation. The interviewers spoke with each mother for between one and two hours. They taped and fully transcribed more than 90% of the interviews and prepared field notes for each interview that was not fully taped.

Sample Characteristics

The analysis reported in this article focuses on the 424 mothers who had living children of both genders. The mothers were aged between sixty-six and seventy-eight years (mean = 70.8, SD = 3.2) at the time of the interviews. Seventy-three percent were white; 27 percent were black. Forty-seven percent of the mothers were then married, 35% were widowed, 16% were divorced or separated, and 1% had never been married. Twenty-two percent of the mothers had completed less

than high school, 44% had completed high school, and 33% had completed some college. Seventy-six percent were not employed; 24% were employed. Eight percent had a total family income of less than $10,000 in the previous year; 19% had an income between $10,000 and $19,999; 22% had an income between $20,000 and $29,999; 9% had an income between $30,000 and $39,999. The incomes of 7% fell between $40,000 and $49,000, and 17% had an income of $50,000 or greater. Forty-eight percent of the women were Catholic, 26% were Protestant, 6% were Jewish, and 20% reported another religion or said that they had no religious affiliation.

The number of living children of mothers in the subsample for this analysis ranged from two to ten (mean = 4.1, *SD* = 1.8). Although the mean number of living children in this subsample is higher than would be found in a nationally representative sample of women ages sixty-five to seventy-five (such as the NSFH), it is important to remember that this is due primarily to the criterion that all members of the subsample must have adult children of both genders. The mean number of children of women in the subsample is only slightly higher than the number of living children of NSFH mothers in the same age range and having two or more living children (4.1 vs. 3.7; Sweet and Bumpass 1996).

The adult children ranged from twenty to sixty-one years of age (mean = 42.8, *SD* = 5.9). Fifty percent were daughters. Seventy percent of the adult children were themselves parents (mean number of children = 2.3, *SD* = 1.2). Fifty-seven percent were then married, 6% were cohabiting, 14% were divorced or separated, 22% were never married, and 1% were widowed. Forty-three percent 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 percent of the children were employed.

Measures

Dependent Variables

Each mother answered a lengthy series of questions about her relationships with her children, including (1) with which child would she be most likely to discuss a personal problem, (2) from which child would she prefer help if she became ill or disabled, (3) to which child would she turn first in a crisis, and (4) to which child she felt the most emotional closeness. Each child was coded with 0 for each item for which he or she was not chosen and 1 for each item for which she or he was chosen.

It is worth noting that a minority of mothers were unwilling to differentiate among their children. In this subsample, 19% did not name a child to whom they would talk first about personal problems, 26% did not name a child from whom they would prefer care when facing illness or disability, 18% did not name a child to whom they would turn first in a crisis, and 37% did not name a child to whom they were emotionally closest.[1] As shown in a separate study (Suitor et al. 2006), none of the mothers' characteristics for which data are available (e.g., age, marital status, education, race, religion, religiosity, or number of children) had consistent effects on their choices of particular children or their willingness to choose among their children.

Mothers also were asked to rate their closeness to each child: "The relationship between parents and children often varies from one stage of life to another. Use any number from 1 to 7, where 1 is very distant and 7 is very close, to describe the relationship between you and [child's name]." Mothers rated their relationships when the children were aged 10 years, 16 years, and "nowadays." This study used only the rating of the relationship "nowadays." The responses to this question were highly skewed, with more than three-fourths of the mothers rating their closeness to their children as 6 or 7. To reduce skewness and to allow for comparisons between mother's reports of closeness and child choice required collapsing closeness into two categories: very close (6 and 7) and less than very close (less than 6).

Independent Variables

The analysis included five measures of *mother–child similarity*: educational attainment, parental status, marital status, gender, and perceived value similarity. Mothers reported the educational category into which their own education and that of each of their adult children fell. Answers were coded 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. Three dummy variables allowed for the separate examination of the effects of children completing the same level of education as that of their mothers or a level of education higher or lower than that of their mothers.

Parental status similarity was measured by whether the adult child had any children (0, no children; 1, has child). Marital status similarity was measured by whether the adult child was then married (0, child not married; 1, child married). Although approximately one-half of the mothers were no longer married, all but six had been married when they were the present ages of their children. Marital similarity could be measured by either present status or status when the mothers had been in the same point in the life as the daughters at the time of the study. Given our emphasis on experiential similarity and on parents' expectations that their children attain normatively prescribed adult statuses, we felt that a measure that took into consideration similarity at the same point in the life course would be most appropriate. Child's gender was coded 0 (son) or 1 (daughter).

Perceived value similarity was measured by the item: "Parents and children are sometimes similar to each other in their views and opinions and sometimes different from each other. Would you say that you and [child's name] share very similar views (4), similar views (3), different views (2), or very different views (1) in terms of general outlook on life?"

Control Variables

Interviewers asked mothers whether their children were employed, but not the number of hours that they worked; thus, employment was coded 0 (not employed) or 1 (employed). Proximity was measured by how far away the child lived in terms of travel time by ground transportation. Answers were coded 1, same house; 2, same neighborhood; 3, less than fifteen minutes; 4, fifteen to thirty min-

utes; 5, thirty to sixty minutes; 6, more than an hour but less than two hours; and 7, two or more hours. Finally, although it was not the central focus of this article, birth order rather than child's age constituted an additional category. Previous analyses determined that children's structural positions in the family affect the quality of parent–adult child relations: in particular, that mothers report that they are emotionally closest to their youngest children, but rely on their eldest children as sources of support in a crisis (Suitor and Pillemer fothcoming). Table 1 is a correlation matrix of the variables in the analysis, including means and standard deviations.

Statistical Approach

Throughout the quantitative analysis, the child, rather than the parent, is the unit of analysis. In other words, the 1,434 children who are the units of analysis are nested within the 424 mothers on whose reports the analysis is based; thus, the observations are not independent. As noted, separate analysis (Suitor et al. 2006) has demonstrated that none of the mothers' observed characteristics, such as race, religion, age, or number of children, consistently affected either mothers' choices of particular children or their willingness to choose among their children. Nevertheless, it is possible that characteristics not measured could have effects on mothers' choices. To address this concern, we used conditional logistic regression throughout the multivariate analysis. Conditional logistic regression is preferable to standard logistic regression in this case because the procedure controls on mothers' characteristics; much as if a dummy variable was created for each of the 424 mothers and the regression equations in which the mother–child pair was the unit of analysis included the set of dummy variables (Alwin 1976; Suitor and Pillemer 1996). Thus, conditional logistic regression allows us to focus on the primary question of interest—within each family, which child does the mother choose?—while controlling for mothers' characteristics.

Open-Ended Responses

One of the study goals was to understand mothers' rationale for the choices they made when selecting from among their children. To this end, at each point at which mothers had to choose from among their children, an open-ended question asked why they had selected that child. The most relevant data here are the mothers' explanations for why they chose particular children as those to whom they were closest or to whom they would turn for support.

A research team of nine students transcribed the interviews, coded the open-ended items, and prepared detailed case summaries of each family. The team developed codes for the open-ended items as data preparation continued rather than establishing them before the coding process. In contrast to studies where coders work independently and calculate kappas based on coders' consistency, this study used a consensus approach based on the group interactive analysis component of Borkan's "immersion-crystallization" method for analyzing qualitative data (Borkan 1999). Each week, one of the principal investiga-

TABLE 1
Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Mean	SD
1. General closeness	—															.78	.42
2. Chosen as emotionally closest	.16**	—														.26	.44
3. Talked to about personal problem	.23**	.37**	—													.28	.45
4. Preferred help if ill or disabled	.19**	.37**	.54**	—												.27	.45
5. Turned to first in crisis	.18**	.25**	.42**	.30**	—											.27	.44
6. Child's gender (1 = *daughter*)	.05*	.19**	.37**	.46**	.07**	—										.50	.50
7. Child eldest	−.06*	.02	.09**	.03**	.13**	−.02	—									.24	.43
8. Child youngest	.07**	.20**	.04	.12**	.01	.02	−.32**	—								.24	.43
9. Child employed (1 = *employed*)	.045	−.03	.00	−.06	.09**	−.08**	.00	−.01	—							.82	.39
10. Child has less education than mother	−.01	−.04	−.07**	−.05	−.07**	−.06*	−.02	.02	−.05	—						.15	.36
11. Child has more education than mother	.05*	−.02	−.07**	.03	.07**	.06**	.04	−.04	.06*	−.51**	—					.60	.49
12. Child's marital status (1 = *mar*)	.11**	−.03	.08**	.05	.12**	−.03	.04	.00	.12**	−.09**	.12**	—				.56	.50
13. Child is parent (1 = *parent*)	.02	−.07*	−.01	−.02	.00	.01	−.02	−.05	−.02	−.06*	.03	.38**	—			.70	.46
14. Similarity of general outlook	.34**	.23**	.25**	.25**	.19**	.07**	.02	.05	.10**	−.09**	.12**	.22**	.03	—		2.78	.84
15. Proximity	−.08**	−.08**	−.07*	−.13**	−.14**	−.04	.07**	−.07**	−.02	−.01	.05*	.15**	.06*	.00	—	4.49	1.90

*$p < 05$; **$p < .01$.

tors (PIs) surveyed all the open-ended coding that had been completed during the previous week. Approximately 90% of the coders' original decisions agreed with those of the PI; any coding that was not in agreement with the PI's assessment was discussed by the entire group at weekly team meetings until consensus could be reached.

FINDINGS

Do Mothers Choose Daughters?

The data presented in Table 2 support the hypothesis regarding mothers' tendency to choose daughters over sons across a variety of dimensions of closeness and support. Among those who named a particular child, mothers were almost four times more likely to name daughters than to name sons as their first choice for the child to whom they would be the most likely to talk about a personal problem; almost seven times more likely to name daughters than to name sons as sources of help if ill or disabled; and nearly twice as likely to name daughters as the children to whom they felt emotionally closest. The only dimension of support on which there was little gender difference was in regard to the child to whom the mothers would turn in a crisis; however, the small difference that did appear also favored daughters.

Comparison of the gender differences between choosing children for particular dimensions of support and closeness (shown in the first four rows of Table 2) and mothers' closeness ratings to each of their children (shown in the last row) supports the hypothesis that child's gender would be more important when mothers selected from among their children than when they reported separately about their closeness to each of their children. With the exception of choosing a particular child in a crisis, the differences between sons' and daughters' likelihood of being chosen are substantially greater than the gender difference in general closeness.

TABLE 2
Mother–Child Relationship Quality by Gender

Dimensions of Mother–Child Relations	Gender of Adult Children Mothers Chose (%)	
	Sons	*Daughters*
Child to whom mother would most likely talk about personal problem	20.2**	79.8
Child mother prefers to provide her help if ill or disabled	12.8**	87.2
Child to whom mother would turn first in a crisis	44.0**	56.0
Child to whom mother is emotionally closest	33.9**	66.1
Mothers giving the highest closeness rating to child	48.0*	52.0

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$ (significance of gender difference).

Why Mothers Choose Daughters:
The Roles of Similarity and Understanding

Altogether, the 424 mothers reported more than one hundred factors that played a role in their choice of particular children as sources of support and closeness. Gender plays a prominent role in these decisions. Of those mothers who chose daughters, 27% specifically focused on gender in choosing the child whom they would prefer as a source of help if ill or disabled; 22% noted gender in explaining their preferred source of support for personal problems; and 19% specified gender as a factor in naming a child to whom they were emotionally closest:

> Caroline being a daughter . . . every chance I get I talk to her.

> I think you can talk to your daughters more than—more so than your sons.

> Well, as a woman I think we can relate more. She's much more understanding [than my sons].

> I think it goes back to the old saying that a girl's your girl for the rest of your life; a boy's your son 'til he takes a wife.

> I don't know. There's something with having a daughter that you're, you're just more comfortable with. I talk to Johnny over money problems, you know, I may have . . . of course, personal problems I talk over with my daughter.

The mothers' statements about their daughters are particularly telling in that such explanations based on gender were nearly completely absent from their explanations for their choice of sons. Of those mothers who chose sons as the preferred source of support for personal problems, for instrumental support if ill or disabled, or as the child to whom they were most emotionally close, only 3% mentioned gender as an explanation for this choice.

In summary, mothers were disproportionately likely to select daughters across three of the four dimensions of support, often specifically because of gender. An important note is that mothers' tendency to choose daughters cannot be accounted for by the distribution of sons and daughters, because the sample of adult children was almost evenly divided by gender.

Although the bivariate associations between gender and choice are strong and consistent, this pattern may occur only because mothers are more likely to perceive daughters than sons as more similar to them. Perhaps when mothers believe that they and their sons hold similar outlooks on life, they are as likely to choose sons as daughters as sources of support and closeness. To explore this possibility, a set of multivariate analyses controlled for mothers' perceptions of similarity to their children regarding general life outlook. The conditional logistic regression analysis (Table 3) reveals that gender continues to play an important role in mothers' selection of specific children across three of the four dimensions of closeness and support: to whom they were emotionally closest, to whom they were most likely to talk about a personal problem, and whom they would prefer as a caregiver. The only dimension of support in which this does not apply is choosing a child to whom they would turn in a crisis.

Table 3 also shows support for the hypothesis regarding differences in the effect

TABLE 3
Conditional Logistic Regression Analysis of Mother–Child Relationship Quality (Full Sample)

	Dimensions of Mother–Child Relationship Quality									
	Emotionally Closest		Talk to About Personal Problem		Prefer Help if Ill or Disabled		Turn to First in a Crisis		General Closeness	
Independent Variables	B (SE)	e^B	B (SE)	e^B	B (SE)	e^B	B (SE)	e^B	B (SE)	e^B
Child characteristics										
Youngest	.588 (.163)**	1.800	−.146 (.157)	.864	.187 (.176)	1.206	−.072 (.154)	.930	.032 (.076)	1.033
Eldest	.225 (.181)	1.252	.281 (.149)	1.324	.225 (.182)	1.253	.395 (.144)**	1.484	−.063 (.077)	.939
Employed	−.394 (.213)	.674	.166 (.195)	1.180	−.170 (.232)	.844	.426 (.204)*	1.532	−.042 (.095)	.959
Parent–child similarity										
Daughter	.620 (.146)**	1.860	1.501 (.141)**	4.486	2.131 (.185)**	8.420	.219 (.122)	1.245	.033 (.063)	1.033
Child less educated than parent	−.347 (.321)	.707	−.526 (.295)	.591	−.490 (.329)	.613	−.614 (.289)*	.541	.015 (.134)	1.015
Child more educated than parent	−.286 (.237)	.751	.352 (.224)	1.422	.107 (.266)	1.113	.508 (.198)**	1.662	.008 (.104)	1.008
Married	−.482 (.199)*	.617	.193 (.164)	1.213	.195 (.199)	1.215	.600 (.166)**	1.823	.048 (.083)	1.049
Parent	−.170 (.202)	.843	.012 (.173)	1.012	−.286 (.215)	.751	.039 (.168)	1.040	−.045 (.086)	.956
Similar outlook	.737 (.108)**	2.089	.774 (.097)**	2.167	.787 (.112)**	2.197	.477 (.091)**	1.610	.228 (.046)**	1.257
Proximity	−.175 (.048)**	.839	−.116 (.042)**	.890	−.256 (.052)**	.774	−.306 (.042)**	.737	−.011 (.020)	.990
Model χ²	115.581**		224.365**		261.117**		123.328**		30.804**	
df	10		10		10		10		10	
n	1042*		1358		1184		1348		1519	

Note: The number of cases differs across models because the only cases included in each analysis are those in which mothers were willing to choose among their children, which varied by the dimensions of support and closeness. SE, standard error.
*p < .05; **p < .01.

of gender on choosing among children and on mothers' reports of general close-ness to each child. Examination of the odds ratios indicates substantial differences between the effects of gender on general closeness and gender's effect on three of the four child choice measures.

There is a highly consistent pattern regarding the effects of perceived similarity of outlook. Across all five dimensions of support and closeness (the four child-choice measures and the individual closeness ratings), perceived similarity of outlook is, after gender, the strongest and most consistent predictor of which children are chosen. Mothers' explanations for why they choose particular children often focus specifically on such perceptions of similarity:

> Um, she's a little more like me. [Int: In what way?] Uh, just, um, the way we think.

> We're compatible . . . she's very much like me. Our personalities are more um, I'm probably giving you the wrong impression that [my other children and I] don't get along, and that isn't true at all. It's just that Kim and I just blend. [My other daughter] says that [Kim's] more like me.

> And her interests are very similar to mine. I was always interested in drama when I was in school and college, and then to have her come along and be interested too. I didn't have a daughter [until I had her], and so I was very curious about [what it was like to have a daughter].

Similarity and Gender

The second question under investigation was whether similarity was equally important in explaining mothers' choices of sons and daughters. Tables 4 and 5 present separate analyses of data on sons' and daughters' relationships with their mothers. These analyses reveal smaller gender differences than anticipated in the models. Most important, perceived similarity of outlook was salient in explaining patterns of closeness and support in both sons and daughters. Further, tests of the magnitude of the coefficients for sons and daughters reveals that none of the differences across models is statistically significant.

The mothers' explanations for their choice of particular children indicates that the sensitivity and compassion typically associated with value similarity are equally important in their choice of sons and of daughters. In fact, in those cases in which sons were chosen over daughters, the mothers' statements indicate that this was because their sons provided greater warmth and compassion than did their daughters:

> My boy treats me better than [my daughter], I would say. She's not so kind to me. [My son's] a good kid. He's been good to me, too. Because he's kind to me. He wouldn't say no. [My daughter] say, "Mom, I don't help you."

The analyses revealed no support for the hypotheses regarding the greater effect of structural similarity on choice of daughters than on that of sons. Further, there are few consistent effects of either social structural positions or structural similarity on mothers' choices of sons or daughters. The only clear pattern is that, when mothers choose sons on whom to rely in a crisis, they are more likely

TABLE 4
Conditional Logistic Regression Analysis of Mother–Son Relationship Quality

| | Dimensions of Mother–Child Relationship Quality | | | | | | | | | |
| | Emotionally Closest | | Talk to About Personal Problem | | Prefer Help if Ill or Disabled | | Turn to First in a Crisis | | General Closeness | |
Independent Variables	B (SE)	e^B	B (SE)	e^B	B (SE)	e^B	B (SE)	e^B	B (SE)	e^B
Child characteristics										
Youngest	.875 (.415)*	2.400	−.977 (.569)	.377	−.034 (.685)	.967	−.292 (.360)	.747	.057 (.141)	1.059
Oldest	−.407 (.426)	.666	−.293 (.454)	.746	.347 (.716)	1.415	1.140 (.336)**	3.127	−.128 (.138)	.880
Employed	−.301(.515)	.740	1.461 (.670)*	4.309	−.053 (.779)	.948	1.640 (.568)**	5.156	.127 (.182)	1.135
Mother–child similarity										
Child less educated than parent	−1.316 (.818)	.268	−2.184 (1.177)	.113	−.541 (1.648)	.582	−.735 (.687)	.479	.004 (.236)	1.004
Child more educated than parent	−1.366 (.645)*	.255	.914 (.669)	2.495	−.343 (.667)	.709	.582 (.393)	1.791	.016 (.175)	.984
Married	−.966 (.541)	.381	−.213 (.545)	.808	−.443 (.696)	.642	.323 (.411)	1.381	.017 (.154)	1.017
Parent	−.721 (.503)	.486	−.531 (.539)	.588	−1.420 (.739)	.242	.051 (.407)	1.052	−.098 (.164)	.907
Similar outlook	.819 (.324)*	2.267	.735 (.278)**	2.086	.494 (.384)	1.639	.879 (.243)**	2.408	.228 (.088)**	1.257
Proximity	.036 (.117)	1.036	−.064 (.130)	.938	−.307 (.203)	.736	−.325 (.105)**	.722	.005 (.036)	1.005
Model χ²	28.148**		17.879*		13.830		41.666**		10.454	
df	9		9		9		9		9	
n	210		162		99		339		689	

Note: SE, standard error
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

TABLE 5
Conditional Logistic Regression Analysis of Mother–Child Relationship Quality

| | Dimensions of Mother–Child Relationship Quality | | | | | | | | | |
| | Emotionally Closest | | Talk to About Personal Problem | | Prefer Help if Ill or Disabled | | Turn to First in a Crisis | | General Closeness | |
Independent Variables	B (SE)	e^B	B (SE)	e^B	B (SE)	e^B	B (SE)	e^B	B (SE)	e^B
Child Characteristics										
Youngest	.648 (.296)*	1.912	-.123 (.236)	.884	.304 (.237)	1.355	-.196 (.313)	.822	.021 (.136)	1.021
Oldest	.193 (.295)	1.213	.567 (.215)**	1.764	.239 (.249)	1.271	.111 (.276)	1.117	-.002 (.137)	.998
Employed	-.278(.405)	.757	.167 (.571)	1.182	-.086 (.327)	.918	.476 (.373)	1.609	-.080 (.170)	.923
Mother–child similarity										
Child less educated than parent	-.157 (.568)	.855	-.385 (.446)	.681	-.184 (.426)	.832	-.477 (.513)	.620	.006 (.243)	1.006
Child more educated than parent	.587 (.419)	1.799	.747* (.356)	2.111	.616 (.386)	1.852	.791 (.416)	2.205	.020 (.201)	1.020
Married	-.567 (.309)	.567	.184 (.229)	1.202	.427 (.274)	1.532	.329 (.287)	1.390	.057 (.135)	1.058
Parent	-.109 (.317)	.897	.116 (.252)	1.123	-.132 (.293)	.876	.017 (.303)	1.018	-.051 (.140)	.950
Similar outlook	.606 (.173)**	1.832	.935 (.153)**	2.547	.870 (.163)**	2.386	.678 (.184)**	1.970	.227 (.081)**	1.255
Proximity	-.237 (.075)**	.789	-.154 (.060)**	.857	-.299 (.071)	.741	-.333 (.076)**	.716	-.007 (.035)	.993
Model χ^2	30.090**		62.884**		48.311**		46.991		8.928	
df	9		9		9		9		9	
n	393		594		538		441		727	

Note: SE, standard error.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

to turn to the sons who were first-born and employed. Mothers' comments reveal that they make this choice because they view these sons as particularly mature and responsible:

> Well, Tony works in a bank, and he has worked in the bank since he was [very young] . . . he's the most stable of them all.

> My son is very up on everything and finances and everything else, and my daughter tends to go along with the flow if you know what I mean. So he's the one who helps me out with finances and balances my bank . . . my checkbook. He can figure things out and things like that.

> I would say that Roger is conservative and dependable and very mature.

In contrast, mothers describe daughters to whom they would turn in a crisis as unusually warm and supportive. Most often, these daughters were the same children whom the mothers choose as being emotionally closest to them.

In summary, both the quantitative and qualitative data reveal a consistent pattern in which mothers select daughters over sons as sources of emotional support and closeness. Further, the gender differences are greater when mothers choose among their children than when they report general closeness to each child. Contrary to expectations, perceived value similarity is nearly equally important in mothers' choices of daughters and sons across all dimensions of support and closeness. As anticipated, gender-specific factors also play a role in mothers' choices. Mothers often explain their choice of daughters on the basis of similarity of gendered experiences; in contrast, they choose sons as sources of support in a crisis on the basis of knowledge and maturity.

CONCLUSIONS

This study draws on classic feminist arguments regarding gender-role socialization to explore differences in mothers' relationships with their adult daughters and sons. The findings reveal a consistent pattern of mothers' preference for daughters as sources of closeness and emotional support. Equally important, the findings indicate greater ability to detect differences in mothers' relationships with their adult children when using measures that ask mothers to choose among their children rather than by using traditional approaches that allow mothers to report similar closeness to all their children. Such greater sensitivity of child choice measures provides a strong basis for arguing that future studies should emphasize within-family differences in their research designs.

Examination of the qualitative data reveals a pattern consistent with expectations based on discussions of mothers and daughters by Chodorow (1978), Nice (1992), and Apter (1990). Mothers not only disproportionately choose daughters over sons as sources of closeness and emotional support, but they often explain their choices specifically on the basis of the child's gender. When mothers select sons over daughters as sources of emotional support and closeness, their explanations indicate that sons who were selected were unusually understanding and responsive to their mothers, particularly in comparison to daughters or other sons.

This article hypothesized that both structural and value similarity would be more important in explaining mothers' choices of daughters than their choices of sons. This hypothesis was based on arguments by Chodorow (1978) and Arcana (1981) regarding mothers' expectations that their daughters "reproduce" the mothers' experiences. The findings do not support our expectations regarding these gender differences. Structural similarities do not affect any dimension of mother–daughter relations, and perceived similarity of outlook is clearly the strongest predictor of mothers' choices of both daughters and sons. It is possible that the relationships between perceived value similarity and both closeness and support may be reciprocal rather than unidirectional; nevertheless, the strength and consistency of this finding demonstrates that perceived attitudinal similarity is important in understanding patterns of closeness and exchange, regardless of the direction of causation.

The findings regarding the high salience of perceived value similarity have important theoretical implications for the study of later-life families. In particular, the findings provide evidence that perceived value similarity may be even more important than structural similarity when parents differentiate among their children, a finding consistent with the model of intergenerational solidarity proposed by Bengtson and colleagues (Bengtson 2001; Lawton et al. 1994; Silverstein and Bengtson 1997).

The only dimension of relationship quality in which mothers are nearly as likely to choose sons as daughters is in choice of child to whom they would turn first in a crisis. However, mothers' descriptions of the children they choose on all dimensions follow the pattern that would be anticipated on the basis of mother's differing expectations for their sons and daughters. Mothers choose daughters whom they describe as warm, understanding, and compassionate and choose sons whom they view as especially mature and responsible—sons who will "take charge."

Finally, the findings presented here indicate that the differential closeness that developmental psychologists have documented in the earlier stages of the life course continues after children enter adulthood. Such within-family differences may have important implications for understanding both mothers' and children's well-being. For example, the literature has shown that difficulties faced by their adult children affected mothers' well-being (Pillemer and Suitor 1991; Ryff et al. 1996; Umberson 1992). However, if mothers are closer to some of their children than to others, it may well be that when more-favored children face problems, it affects mothers' well-being most intensely. We hope that scholars studying intergenerational relations will use within-family designs that can address such questions. We also hope that future studies will explore fathers' favoritism. Given the greater closeness generally found between children and mothers than between children and fathers, the patterns reported in this article might differ when investigating fathers' choices.

It is possible to question whether these patterns are cohort-specific. Perhaps because younger cohorts of mothers hold less traditional gender-role attitudes (Kozimor-King and Leicht 1999; Powers et al. 2004; Twenge 1997), they would be equally likely to choose daughters and sons as sources of emotional and instru-

mental support. However, it is very likely the findings presented here would be similar to data collected from mothers born more recently. Although there has been considerable muting of traditional gender roles since the period in which the mothers in our study were being socialized themselves and when they were socializing their children, studies continue to demonstrate the persistence of somewhat traditional gender role socialization (Albert and Porter 1988; Brownlow, Jacobi, and Rogers 2000; Eccles, Jacobs, and Harold 1990; McHale et al. 1999). Further, although occupations are becoming increasingly less gender-segregated, even the most recent data indicate that women continue to disproportionately pursue occupations that reward high compassion and sensitivity to interpersonal relations (Fronczek and Johnson 2003). Such differences in both childhood socialization and career choices are likely to reinforce the sorts of gender differences in sensitivity to relationships discussed by Chodorow (1978) and Gilligan (1982) more than two decades ago, thus continuing the pattern of mothers' greater reliance on daughters for emotional support and personal care seen in this study.

NOTE

1. If a mother did not initially name a specific child (e.g., if she responded "I call all of my children if there is a crisis"), the interviewer prompted the mother with the question "But is there one child whom you would call first?" Analyses of these data revealed that prompting changed the mothers' responses in fewer than 5% of the cases, and there was no systematic difference between mothers who did respond and those who did not respond to the prompt. Further, separate examination revealed that none of the findings was affected by the inclusion of these women.

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