

Within-Family Differences in Mothers' Support to Adult Children

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Objectives. In this article we explore the ways in which mothers provide support differentially to their adult children and the factors that explain such differentiation.

Methods. We collected data for the present analysis during face-to-face interviews with a representative sample of 556 mothers ranging in age from 65 to 78 residing in the greater Boston area.

Results. We found substantial within-family variation in mother-to-child support. Multivariate analyses revealed a set of factors that explained within-family differences: Mothers were more likely to provide support to children who were daughters, unmarried, lived nearby, had health problems, and had provided the mothers with support.

Discussion. These findings indicate that within-family differences in support to children continue across the life course. Such variations within the family underscore the importance of using designs that provide information on relationships between parents and each of their children, rather than focusing on single parent-child dyads.

DURING the past three decades, the study of intergenerational relations has focused on exchanges of support between parents and their adult children. This line of research has explored the extent of intergenerational exchange and the conditions under which parents and children are most likely to engage in exchanges. However, as recently noted by Davey, Janke, and Salva (2005), one factor that is likely to be central to understanding these processes has been virtually neglected—within-family differences in exchanges between parents and children. Addressing within-family variation is critical to our understanding of intergenerational support because support between dyads within the same family may differ markedly.

In the present study we use data collected from 556 mothers aged 65 to 78 years about their relationships with each of their adult children to address questions regarding the ways in which mothers provide support differentially to their adult children and the factors that explain such differentiation. Specifically, we ask: 1) To what extent do patterns of support from mothers to adult children vary within the family? and 2) Can patterns of within-family differences be explained by the same set of characteristics of children and mother-child dyads that have been found to explain maternal support using between-family approaches?

WITHIN-FAMILY DIFFERENCES IN PARENT-ADULT CHILD RELATIONS

The developmental psychological literature on families with young and adolescent children has shown that parents differentiate among their offspring across a range of feelings and behaviors, including affection, disapproval, one-on-one interaction, and supervision (Brody & Stoneman, 1994; McHale, Crouter, McGuire, & Updegraff, 1995; Seff, Gecas, & Frey 1993). Theoretical perspectives from both sociology and developmental psychology suggest that such differentiation would be expected. For example, classic work on social interaction from both sociology (Simmel, 1964) and psychol-

ogy (Heider, 1958) proposes that the relationship between two members of a dyad would be affected by their relations with others outside that relationship. Further, the resource dilution model posits that as a greater number of children enter the family unit, the ability to provide equal resources to them all declines, resulting in differential treatment (Downey, 1995). Although such differentiation in later life has received little attention, these theoretical arguments suggest that the relationship between a parent and any one of his or her children is likely to be affected by the parent's relationships with other adult children in the family across the life course.

The few studies that have focused on within-family differences in relationship quality in later life support this suggestion. Mothers have been found to differentiate among their adult children in terms of closeness, whom they confide in, preferences for support, and ambivalence (Aldous, Klaus, & Klein, 1985; Brackbill, Kitch, & Noffsinger, 1988; Pillemer & Sutor, 2002; Sutor & Pillemer, 2000, 2004, in press). Based on these findings, we might expect that there would be a similar pattern of within-family differentiation regarding actual exchanges between mothers and their children. However, the literature has demonstrated that support exchange between the generations, particularly instrumental exchange, is not entirely dependent upon the quality of relations between parents and children (Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993; Parrott & Bengtson, 1999). In fact, although positive affect is associated with greater child-to-mother support (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Huck, 1994; Whitbeck, Simons, & Conger, 1991), mothers' feelings of closeness often have little effect on their support to their adult children (Parrott & Bengtson). Thus, patterns of within-family differences in intergenerational support may be markedly different from within-family patterns of positive affect.

As noted earlier, there has been virtually no study of within-family differences in parent-to-child support. Therefore, in developing our hypotheses, we have drawn upon the findings of

studies of intergenerational support that employed between-family designs. We will assess whether the same set of factors that affects support from parents to children across families will help to explain variations in support within the family. Given that our focus is on *within-family differences* in support, we will restrict our discussion to factors that can vary among parent-child dyads in the same family.

EXPLAINING MOTHERS' SUPPORT TO ADULT CHILDREN

Davey and colleagues' (2005) recent review classified factors explaining intergenerational support within four broad categories—characteristics of families, parents, children, and parent-child dyads. Because we are concerned with explaining variations in support *within* the family, as opposed to between families, we will focus primarily on characteristics of children and mother-child dyads. Within these categories, three sets of factors emerge for which there are theoretical arguments regarding the ways in which mothers may differentiate among their adult children: a) similarity between parents and children; b) reciprocity; and c) children's need. In addition, we consider mother's characteristics in a separate analysis of factors that predict differentiation.

Similarity and Intergenerational Support

Both classic and contemporary scholars have posited that similarity is important for understanding the development and maintenance of relationships throughout the life course (c.f., Fischer, 1982; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; Suito, Pillemer, & Keeton, 1995; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). In particular, this line of research has demonstrated that individuals are more likely to maintain supportive relationships with others who are similar to them on important social dimensions. Studies of kinship have shown that gender and attitudes are two of the most salient dimensions of similarity explaining relations between mothers and adult children (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Suito, 1987; Suito & Pillemer, 2000, in press); thus, we anticipated that these factors would play an important role in explaining within-family variations in support.

Gender.—The literature provides a consistent picture of the effect of a child's gender on mother-child relations. Mothers have been found to have stronger affectional ties with daughters than sons across the life course (Fingerman, 2001; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Silverstein, Parrott, & Bengtson, 1995). Further, studies using between-family designs have shown that mothers provide more instrumental and emotional support to daughters than sons (Davey et al., 2005; Spitze & Logan, 1990). Thus, we anticipated that mothers would be more likely to provide support to daughters; we also expected that the effects of gender would be greater for emotional than instrumental support, given the stronger affective ties found between mothers and daughters (Silverstein et al., 1995; Suito & Pillemer, 2000, in press).

Value similarity.—Similarity of values has been identified as a cornerstone of interpersonal relationships (c.f., Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; Marsden, 1988; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). The literature on kin relations has demonstrated that such similarity is also central to understanding intergenerational solidarity and affection (Bengtson, 2001; Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson,

1994; Wellman & Wortley). Further, Suito and Pillemer (2000, 2004, in press) have found that similarity of outlook is important in explaining mothers' differentiation among their children as preferred sources of support when facing personal problems or crises. On these bases, we hypothesized that mothers would be more likely to provide support to adult children whose outlook on life was the most similar to their own.

Reciprocity of Support

Exchange theory has been used for several decades to explain the quality of family relationships, including those between parents and adult children (cf., Nye, 1979; Silverstein, Conroy, Wang, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 2002). The empirical literature has shown that reciprocity helps to explain children's provision of support to parents; specifically, parents who provided high levels of support to their children in earlier stages of the life course are more likely to receive support in their later years (Eggebeen & Davey, 1998; Hogan et al., 1993; Silverstein et al., 1995). However, less is known about the effect of reciprocity on *parents'* provision of support to their children in the parents' later years. The findings of the few studies that have examined this issue are mixed, in some cases suggesting that parents are more likely to provide support to children who have themselves been a source of support (Hogan et al.); others have indicated that reciprocity plays only a small role in mothers' support to children (Levitt, Guacci, & Weber, 1992). Although the empirical literature on this issue is not consistent, we believe that the strong theoretical arguments regarding exchange, combined with the importance of reciprocity in explaining child-to-parent support, provide a basis for hypothesizing that mothers would be more likely to provide support to those children who provided them with support.

Adult Children's Need

Finally, we anticipated that mothers would differentiate among their children in terms of support on the basis of need. In this study we are interested in children's general "neediness" rather than their immediate financial needs. There are two conditions of need that we believe are the most likely to explain mothers' differentiation. The first of these is situations that impose limitations on children's ability to manage independently, such as illness, injury, substance abuse, or trouble with the law.

Research has demonstrated that problems in adult children's lives have detrimental effects on the parent-child relationship, in part, because adult children's need for support expands considerably under these circumstances (cf. Cook, 1988; Pillemer & Suito, 1991). Most studies that have examined the effect of children's difficulties on parent-child relations have pooled all types of problems; however, we believe that it is important to differentiate between problems for which children are not perceived as responsible (e.g., illnesses) and problems for which they are likely to be viewed as responsible (e.g., substance abuse, problems with the law). Suito and Pillemer's (2000; Pillemer & Suito, 2002) study of mothers' favoritism and preference for support revealed a clear difference between problems for which the child was perceived as not responsible and those for which the child was perceived as responsible. Mothers reported being most emotionally close to adult children who had experienced serious health problems

(Suitor & Pillemer, 2000) but most ambivalent toward children who had engaged in substance abuse or been in trouble with the law and least likely to prefer these children as sources of support (Pillemer & Suitor, 2002). On the bases of these findings, we hypothesized that mothers would be most likely to provide support to those children in the family who had experienced involuntary problems in adulthood and least likely to provide support to those adult children who had engaged in deviant behaviors.

The second condition of need that we anticipated would affect mothers' differentiation among her children was the availability of alternate sources of support. The literature has shown that individuals who are married are more likely to receive high levels of support from members of their networks; further, married persons report greater satisfaction with their levels of support than do unmarried individuals (Kim & McKenry, 2002; Waite & Lehrer, 2003). Thus, we believed that mothers would be most likely to provide support to those children who were unmarried and, therefore, at greater risk of receiving inadequate support. The empirical literature provides support for this argument. Between-family studies have found that parents provide less support when children are married than when they are single—never married, divorced, or widowed (Hogan et al., 1993; Spitze, Logan, Deane, & Zerger, 1994), likely reflecting less need for parental support because of the presence of a spouse. On the basis of this set of findings, we hypothesized that children who were married would be less likely to be provided support from their mothers than would their unmarried siblings.

In summary, we hypothesized that mothers would provide support to adult children to whom they were most similar in terms of gender and values, who had provided the mothers with support during the previous year, who had experienced serious health problems but had not engaged in deviant behaviors, and who were unmarried.

METHODS

Design Goals

We designed the project to provide data on within-family differences in parent–adult child relations in later life. The research plan was similar to those that have been used by developmental psychologists such as McHale and colleagues (1995) in studying within-family differences in earlier stages of the life course. The design involved selecting a sample of mothers aged 65 to 75 years with at least two living adult children and collecting data from them regarding each of their children. We made a further decision to include only community-dwelling mothers in the sample to reduce the likelihood that the women would be in need of extensive caregiving, thus allowing us to study relationships outside of the context of caregiving.

Sample

We used Massachusetts city and town lists as the source of the sample. Massachusetts requires communities to keep city and town lists of all residents by address. Town lists also provided the age and gender of residents. The first step was to randomly select 20 communities from the total of 80 that were

available. With the assistance of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, we drew a systematic sample of women aged 65 to 75 from the town lists from 20 communities in the greater Boston area, specifically the census-designated Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (PMSA). Once we selected communities and obtained appropriate town lists, we selected an equal number of women in the target age group from each community. Using this strategy, we obtained a self-weighting sample of women from within each stratum. We then sent a letter of introduction to each woman describing the study and explaining that an interviewer would contact her from the Center for Survey Research to screen her to determine her eligibility for participation and attempt to schedule a face-to-face interview if she met the study criteria.

The design called for interviewing 550 mothers. The interviewers began contacting potential respondents and continued until they had reached the target number of cases. Because interviews were conducted simultaneously by several individuals who coordinated only once daily a slightly larger number of interviews was completed than originally planned. We collected data from 556 mothers, which represented 61% of those who were eligible for participation. Based on information available regarding nonresponders, the only consistent difference between eligible mothers who did and did not agree to participate in the study was race; Black women were slightly more likely to participate than were non-Black women (64% vs 60%, respectively). The interviews were conducted between August of 2001 and January of 2003.

Each of the mothers was interviewed for between 1 and 2 hr. More than 90% of the interviews were taped and fully transcribed. Field notes were prepared for each interview that was not fully taped.

Sample Characteristics

Mothers' characteristics.—The mothers were between 65 and 78 years of age ($M = 70.9$; $SD = 3.1$) at the time the interviews were conducted. Forty-six percent of the mothers were currently married, 36% were widowed, 17% were divorced or separated, and 1% had never been married. Twenty-four percent of the mothers had completed less than high school, 43% had completed high school, and 33% had completed at least some college. Eighty-two percent were not employed; 18% were employed. Thirty-four percent 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 of \$50,000 or greater. Forty-six percent of the women were Catholic, 45% were Protestant, 5% were Jewish, and 4% reported another religion or said that they had no religious affiliation. Seventy percent of the mothers were non-Hispanic White, 27% were Black, 2% were Hispanic, and 1% was Asian.

The number of living children of women in the sample ranged from 2 to 13 ($M = 4.4$; $SD = 1.7$). Although the mean number of living children in this subsample is higher than would be found in a nationally representative sample of women aged 65 to 75, it is important to remember that this is due primarily to the criterion that all participants must have at least two living adult

children. The mean number of children of women in the subsample is similar to that found in national samples, such as the National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996), when comparing specifically to mothers in the same age group who have two or more children.

Adult children's characteristics.—The adult children ranged from 20 to 61 years of age ($M = 42.8$; $SD = 5.9$). Forty-nine percent were daughters. Fifty-seven percent of the adult children were currently married, 6% were cohabiting, 14% were divorced or separated, 21% were never married, and 1% was widowed. Forty-four 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-one percent of the children were employed. Seventy percent of the adult children were themselves parents (mean number of children = 2.3; $SD = 1.2$).

Measures

Dependent variables.—The interviewers asked the mothers a series of questions about the support they had provided to each of their adult children. The interview was structured such that mothers would discuss each child at length, beginning with the eldest, then moving on to the same set of questions about their second eldest, and so on through the set of children. As part of this set of questions, the mothers were asked: In the past year, have you given [child's name]: a) help during an illness he/she had; b) comfort during a personal crisis; c) help with regular chores, such as shopping, yard work, or cleaning; or d) financial help, such as money or a loan. Each form of support was coded as 0 (no support provided) or 1 (support provided).

Within-Family Independent Variables

Similarity.—We coded the child's gender as 0 = son and 1 = daughter. We measured perceived value similarity 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?"

Reciprocity of support.—We measured support from child using the same items used to measure mother-to-child support, only asking whether the child had provided the mother with each of the four dimensions of support during the previous year. In each analysis, we included the reciprocal measure of support. For example, in the analysis of mothers' provision of comfort, "support from child" referred specifically to whether the child had provided comfort to the mother in a crisis during the previous year.

Children's need.—Marital status was measured by whether the adult child was currently married (0 = child not married; 1 = child married). To measure children's problems we asked mothers whether each of their adult children had experienced any of a series of problems that individuals might face. The problems we included in the present analysis were: 1) serious

illnesses or injuries in adulthood; 2) problems with drinking or drugs in adulthood; and 3) problems with the law in adulthood.

Control Variables

We included three controls that have been found to affect the exchange of support between parents and adult children—proximity, child's age, and child's educational attainment (Eggebeen, 1992; Hogan et al., 1993; Hoyert, 1991; Lawton et al., 1994; McGarry & Shoeni, 1997). We measured proximity as the distance the child lived from the mother in terms of travel time by ground transportation. Categories were: (a) same house; (b) same neighborhood; (c) < 15 min away; (d) 15–30 min away; (e) 30–60 min away; (f) > 1 hr but < 2 hr; (g) and ≥ 2 hr away. We measured the child's age in years based on the mothers' reports. We did not ask mothers to report their children's incomes; thus, we have included education as a measure of socioeconomic status. We asked mothers to state which educational category their own education and that of each of their adult children fell: 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.

Statistical Approach to Studying Within-Family Differences

It is important to note that throughout the multivariate analysis of mothers' differentiation, the parent–child dyad, rather than the parent, was the unit of analysis. In other words, the 2,140 parent–child dyads that were the units of analysis were nested within the 556 mothers on whose reports the present analysis was based; thus the observations were not independent. To address this concern, we used conditional logistic regression throughout the multivariate analysis. In this case, conditional logistic regression was preferable to standard logistic regression because the procedure controls on mothers' characteristics much as would be the case if a dummy variable was created for each of the 556 mothers, and the set of dummy variables was included in the regression equations in which the mother–child pair was the unit of analysis (c.f., Alwin, 1976; Suitor & Pillemer, 1996). Thus, conditional logistic regression allowed us to focus on our primary question of interest—within each family, which child does the mother choose—while controlling on mothers' characteristics.

RESULTS

Describing Within-Family Differences in Support

Table 1 presents the percent of mothers, within each dimension of support, who provided support to none of their children, to some of their children, and to all of their adult children. The findings revealed a substantial degree of within-family variation in mothers' support to adult children. More than 6 in 10 mothers gave comfort to some, but not all, of their adult children, approximately half gave financial assistance to some of their children, and nearly half gave help with chores and assistance during illness to some, but not all, of their children. Thus, it is clear that there was substantial variation in mothers' patterns of support to children, with differentiation most likely to occur regarding comfort in a personal crisis and least likely in terms of help during illnesses.

Table 1. Within-Family Differences in Support From Mothers to Children as Shown by Percent Who Provided Support ($N = 556$)

Dimension of Support	%
Help to child when ill	
Gave to no children	54.0
Gave to some children	44.4
Gave to all children	1.6
Financial help	
Gave to no children	40.3
Gave to some children	51.3
Gave to all children	8.4
Comfort to children in face of personal crisis	
Gave to no children	16.0
Gave to some children	61.8
Gave to all children	22.3
Help with chores	
Gave to no children	49.4
Gave to some children	46.3
Gave to all children	4.3

Note: The number of cases differs across support dimensions because the cases included in the analyses are only those in which mothers provided support to any of their children.

We questioned whether between-family patterns of mothers' differentiation could be affected by mothers' characteristics. To explore this question we conducted a series of logistic regression analyses in which we classified mothers as differentiating or not differentiating among their children for each dimension of support. We included mothers' age, marital status, educational attainment, employment status, religion, race, and number of living children. These analyses revealed that number of children was consistently and strongly related to which mothers differentiated among their children. For example, each additional child in the family increased mothers' odds of differentiating among her children in terms of financial support by 22%; each child increased her odds of differentiating regarding help with chores by 14% (tables not shown).

However, none of the other characteristics were associated with mothers' likelihood of differentiating among her children.

In sum, it appears that there was substantial within-family variation in intergenerational support. Further, the only characteristic that helped to explain which mothers were more likely to differentiate was family size; mothers with more children were more likely to differentiate among their children in terms of support.

Explaining Within-Family Differences in Support

Table 2 presents the within-family analysis of factors explaining mother-to-child support. The findings provided support for many, but not all, of our hypotheses. The most consistent findings were the effects of child's health, gender, and reciprocity. Mothers were more likely to have provided all four types of support to children with health problems than to their other children. Mothers were also more likely to have provided help to daughters than sons across all dimensions of support besides financial assistance; however, contrary to our expectation, child's gender had no greater effect on mothers' provision of emotional than instrumental support.

Although reciprocity has received little attention in studies of parent-to-child support, this factor appears to be important in explaining these patterns. Across three of the four dimensions—help during illness, comfort during a crisis, and help with chores—mothers were more likely to provide support to children who had served as sources of support during the previous year. Mothers were also less likely to provide emotional or financial support children who were married, and less likely to provide instrumental assistance to children who lived further away. Finally, mothers' provided help with chores and financial assistance to younger, rather than older, children.

In sum, it appears that mothers' differentiation of support among their children was affected by similarity, children's needs, and reciprocity. However, contrary to expectation, not all dimensions of these domains affected mothers' patterns of support. First, in the case of similarity, gender, but not

Table 2. Conditional Logistic Regression Analysis of Mother-to-Child Support

Variable	Help During Illness		Comfort During Crisis		Help With Chores		Financial Help	
	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	B (SE)	Odds Ratio
Similarity								
Daughter	.511** (.136)	1.67	.231** (.075)	1.26	.696** (.128)	2.01	.079 (.101)	1.08
Similar outlook	.095 (.081)	1.10	.005 (.046)	1.01	-.088 (.079)	0.92	.078 (.062)	1.08
Support from child	.394* (.168)	1.48	.331** (.105)	1.39	.437** (.149)	1.55	-.229 (.185)	0.80
Children's neediness								
Child married	-.267 (.147)	0.77	-.180* (.082)	0.84	.035 (.135)	1.04	-.319** (.115)	0.73
Deviant behavior as adult	.357 (.206)	1.43	.121 (.120)	1.13	-.049 (.217)	0.95	.406** (.156)	1.50
Health problems as adult	.748** (.151)	2.11	.253** (.091)	1.29	.337* (.156)	1.40	.287* (.125)	1.33
Controls								
Distance from mother	-.083* (.041)	0.92	-.008 (.021)	0.99	-.165** (.037)	0.85	-.042 (.028)	0.96
Child's age	-.008 (.013)	0.99	-.006 (.007)	0.99	-.028* (.012)	0.97	-.036** (.010)	0.97
Child's education	-.099 (.061)	0.91	-.018 (.033)	0.98	-.042 (.058)	0.96	-.081 (.045)	0.92
Model χ^2	80.535**		40.234**		92.658**		57.004**	
df	9		9		9		9	
n^a	998		1,748		1,060		1,247	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

attitude similarity, affected mothers' choices. Second, regarding children's needs, health problems explained mothers' differentiation across all four support contexts, whereas child's marital status affected only comfort and financial assistance. This may be due to normative expectations that married couples will rely on one another for immediate tasks such as household chores and care if ill, whereas emotional comfort and financial assistance remain continuing features of the parental role. Third, reciprocity of support helped to explain mothers' differential provision of care during illness, comfort, and help with chores but not financial assistance. In fact, mothers were somewhat less likely to provide financial assistance to adult children who had helped them financially during the past year, suggesting that mothers' financial support is affected more by children's needs than reciprocity; children who could afford to provide assistance to their mothers probably had fewer financial needs for assistance.

The one hypothesis for which there was no support was the effect of children's deviant behaviors. Mothers were no less likely to provide children with support if they had problems with drugs or alcohol or had been in trouble with the law; in fact, the odds of mothers providing financial assistance to these children rather than their siblings were 50% greater. It is possible that parents respond to a norm that they should provide some form of assistance to children in trouble, even when problems result from the child's deviance or antisocial behavior (Cohler & Grunebaum, 1981; Pillemer & Suitoer, 1991)

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We believe the findings from this study have several major implications for the study of parent-child relations in later life, and we suggest avenues for future research. The first of these is methodological: the need for within-family studies of parent-child relations. With a few notable exceptions (Cohler & Altergott, 1995; Pillemer & McCartney, 1991; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994), the study of parent-child relations has employed models specific to later life, while paying only limited attention to the broader issues that have interested social scientists studying families of young children and adolescents. Although scholars have called for bridging the gap between models for the study of families in earlier and later life course stages (Hagestad, 1986; Rossi & Rossi), such efforts remain rare.

In contrast, the present study extends an important insight from the developmental psychological literature to the study of later-life families: the importance of within-family differences. Despite the evidence discussed earlier that some dimensions of within-family differences, such as parental favoritism and differential treatment of siblings, exist across the life course, the designs of most studies of intergenerational relations do not permit an examination of these issues. Almost all studies have asked parents about their adult children in the aggregate, rather than about each child separately, or have focused on only one target child. In the case of intergenerational support, such approaches ignore the crucial issue of within-family variations both in mothers' allocation of support among children and in the factors that predict such allocation.

The present study provides one of the first large-scale explorations of within-family differences in later life; in this

case, support from mothers to adult children. The special nature of the design allowed us to address two research questions in this study: 1) to what extent are there within-family differences in mother-to-child support in later life, and 2) can within-family differences in support to be explained by the same set of factors drawn from studies using between-family designs? We believe that our findings shed light on both questions.

First, support for a within-family differences approach comes from our findings regarding differential support by mothers. The study revealed that the majority of mothers differentiated among their adult children regarding one or more dimensions of support. These findings suggest that within-family variations in parents' provision of interpersonal resources do not end when children enter adulthood but rather continue across the life course. Further, these patterns are not affected by mothers' characteristics, although the likelihood of mothers differentiating among their children increases markedly with family size. A methodological implication of this finding is the need to collect data regarding multiple offspring in the same family to obtain a complete picture of support exchange. It is likely that the "target child" approach masks variation among dyads within the family.

The design also pointed toward specific factors that predict whether a mother does or does not provide help to a particular child, in comparison to other children within the same family. To some degree, the analyses revealed similar factors to those uncovered in between-family designs. For example, mothers were more likely to help a child based on health status, gender, marital status, age, and proximity. Specifically, mothers were the most likely to provide support to children who were female, younger, lived closer, had experienced serious health problems as adults, and were unmarried.

However, several findings emerged that may be attributable to the within-family design. First, when differentiating among her offspring, mothers appeared inclined to help a particular child who had been a source of support in the recent past. It is interesting that this pattern prevailed despite the tendency to provide support to younger, unmarried children with health problems. Although mothers may in fact be motivated by altruism (Hogan et al., 1993), it appears that the norm of reciprocity also operates to create differentiation between dyads, allowing a particular child to receive more help if he or she had previously been helpful.

Similarly, although prior research suggests that value dissimilarity and deviant behaviors by adult children would diminish parental support, the within-family analyses did not support this set of findings. It may be that parental help to any particular offspring, in comparison to other children in the same family, may not be dependent upon the quality of relations between parents and children. Rather, such within family differences are explained on the basis of perceived need relative to other children, in combination with past provision of support.

Several limitations of the present study point to future directions for research. First, this research collected data from mothers only; it is possible that data collection from other family members would reveal different patterns of support. Studies involving multiple members of the same family often reveal substantial discrepancies in reporting (cf. Aquilino, 1999; Fingerman, 1995; 1996; Giarrusso, Stallings, & Bengston, 1995). Studies of generational differences in reporting

have focused primarily on issues of relationship quality and family solidarity; however, research on the provision of instrumental support between other role partners has shown substantial discrepancies—generally in the direction of overestimating one's own contributions and underestimating the role of a partner's contribution (see Kamo, 2000, for a discussion of these issues). Thus, to understand within-family patterns of support and its predictors, it is necessary to collect data from both parties who are involved in the exchange.

A second limitation is the reliance on indirect measures of adult children's need. It is possible that the findings regarding the effects of need would have been stronger and more consistent if we had been able to include direct measures of children's needs from both mothers and the children themselves. For example, mothers may have provided support to all of their children whom they perceived as needy; however, we were not able to explore this issue. Future research is needed using more detailed measures of children's needs that may result in differential allocation of support.

Third, the cross-sectional nature of the data precluded our examining whether these patterns of support were consistent across the life course. For example, the children whom we found received support from their mothers at this point in the life course may not have been the primary recipients of support at other points—in particular, transitions in the children's social structural positions may have affected their ability to provide support to their mothers or increased the children's neediness.

Substantively, the findings from the present study paint a relatively complex picture of the way in which mothers may allocate support differentially among their adult children. The pattern revealed by our results may initially seem contradictory: Mothers appear to provide support to children who are more vulnerable or needy (younger, unmarried individuals who have had health problems) but also appear to be motivated by social exchange principles, whereby they provide more help to children from whom they have received assistance. There is mounting evidence, however, that this type of contradiction is by no means uncommon and may, in fact, be characteristic of older parent–adult child relations.

Specifically, several scholars have pointed to the fact that when older parents are called upon to help children, they tend to experience conflict between two powerful norms: the norm of reciprocity and the norm of solidarity (George, 1986). Parents are motivated by both the norm of reciprocity, which suggests that profit and loss should be equitable between relationship partners, and the norm of solidarity, which implies that individuals should give close family members whatever help they need, without concern for a “return on investment.” Indeed, there is evidence that these competing norms produce ambivalence and distress in older parents related to the issue of provision of help to offspring (Cohler & Grunebaum, 1981; Farber, 1989; Pillemer & Suitor, 2002; 2005). Future research using within-family designs should examine not only patterns of support but also their potential consequences for intergenerational relationship quality and parental well-being.

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