

Help With “Strings Attached”: Offspring Perceptions That Middle-Aged Parents Offer Conflicted Support

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Objectives. Middle-aged adults often provide beneficial support to grown children. Yet, in some relationships, grown children may feel beholden or intruded upon when they receive parental help. The purpose of this study was to examine such conflicted support in relationships between middle-aged parents and young adults.

Methods. Middle-aged parents (aged 40–60, $n = 399$) and their grown children ($n = 592$) participated. Parents rated perceptions of providing support and relationship quality with each child. Grown children indicated whether their mothers and fathers provided conflicted support and rated their perceptions of parental support, relationship quality, and other factors.

Results. Multilevel models revealed that offspring’s perceptions of conflicted support were associated with (a) parents’ evaluations about providing support (e.g., greater stress and beliefs that grown children should be autonomous), (b) poorer quality relationships, and (c) offspring having more problems.

Discussion. Findings suggest that perceptions of conflicted support are embedded in a larger constellation of relationship problems and underlying distress for parents and children. These patterns may reflect lifelong difficulties in the tie or that arise in adulthood. Researchers might seek to understand how dyads experiencing such conflicted support differ from more normative relationships characterized by warmth and well-received support.

Key Words: Family—Intergenerational relations—Personal relationships—Social support—Social exchanges—Intergenerational ambivalence.

ERIKSON’S (1950) stages of life-span development portray midlife as a period of generativity, when individuals invest in future generations. As such, middle-aged adults often serve as a mainstay of family support. Much of the intergenerational support literature focuses on help middle-aged adults provide their parents, particularly practical support (Aneshensel, Pearlin, Mullan, Zarit, & Whitlatch, 1995; Silverstein, Conroy, Wang, Gairrusso, & Bengtson, 2002). But consistent with theories of generativity, middle-aged adults in Western countries provide more frequent advice, emotional, practical, and financial support to their grown children than they provide to their aging parents (Fingerman et al., 2011; Grundy & Henretta, 2006).

Emotional processes underlying parental support remain largely uncharted. Generativity theory suggests that middle-aged parents’ help represents an investment in the future and should be well received. Yet, the broader social support literature also has identified situations when receiving practical support, advice, and even emotional support is associated with poorer outcomes (Rini & Dunkel-Schetter, 2010; Uchino, 2009; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). Individuals sometimes experience help from family members as controlling or ungenerous (Gleason, Iida, Bolger, & Shrout, 2003; Martire, Stephens, Druley, & Wojno, 2002). Similarly, some offspring may feel that parents provide help

in a manner that demands repayment or seems overbearing. We use the term “conflicted support” to refer to such situations.

This study investigates children’s perceptions of receiving conflicted support from their middle-aged parents as well as the influence of parents’ attitudes toward providing support, relationship quality, level of support, and children’s problems underlying these perceptions. It is important to examine children’s perceptions of support to understand the effects of that support. Indeed, perceptions of support may be more important for well-being than the actual support received (Uchino, 2009; Wethington & Kessler, 1986).

We examined a wide range of support, such as advice, emotional, practical, and financial support (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). The study focused on everyday situations that are widespread in this tie, rather than support in response to enduring needs, such as developmental delays, or high-intensity situations, such as incarceration or military deployment. Rather, we considered a range of common problems, such as divorce, health problems, financial difficulties, and other personal crises that evoke support.

Offspring do not typically perceive parental support as conflicted. In general, grown children benefit from parental support and view it favorably (Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe,

Birditt, & Zarit, 2012; Fingerman et al., 2012; Umberson, 1992). Yet, emotional responses reflect the ongoing relationship. For example, spouses react badly to support in poor-quality marriages (Berg & Upchurch, 2007; Dehle, Larsen, & Landers, 2001). Similarly, in poor-quality relationships, both parents and offspring may experience tensions regarding parental support.

Other dynamics in the relationship also may contribute to offspring's perceptions of conflicted support. When parents experience stress from providing support, offspring may pick up on their overt or covert feelings of distress and perceive the help as ungenerous. Furthermore, when the grown child elicits support because of personal problems, parents may experience such stress. Of course, these factors may be interrelated, but we treat each factor separately here.

Parental Feelings and Beliefs

Middle-aged parents' feelings about helping may be associated with how offspring evaluate that help. Although parents provide considerable support to grown children, they do not always find it rewarding to do so (Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, et al., 2012). Furthermore, parents may harbor conflicted *beliefs* about helping grown children. Parental support contradicts American norms of independence (Furstenberg, 2010).

Research regarding intergenerational ambivalence documents parents' mixed beliefs and feelings about grown children's dependence (Fingerman, Chen, Hay, Cichy, & Lefkowitz, 2006; Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Pillemer & Suito, 2002). Conflicted support may represent ambivalent aspects of support—actions are intended to be helpful and may actually be helpful but are also viewed as demanding, intrusive, or developmentally inappropriate. Moreover, studies have documented that parental intrapsychic conflict over providing support may be associated with the parents' feelings of ambivalence. For example, Israeli parents who provided considerable help to their grown children also wished that their grown children required less support (Levitzki, 2009). Similarly, another study found that parents considered it abnormal for grown children to require intense support (Fingerman et al., 2012). Collectively, these findings suggest that parents who believe grown children should be autonomous may have children who perceive parental support as conflicted.

Qualities of the Relationship

Family support does not occur in an emotional vacuum. Rather, family members help one another in ongoing relationships of varying quality. Negative feelings do not deter support; parents and children exchange support in poor-quality relationships (Parrott & Bengston, 1999; van Gaalen, Dykstra, & Komter, 2010). Studies suggest that parents experience conflicted emotions when supporting children with whom they have more difficult relationships (Levitzki, 2009;

van Gaalen et al., 2010). Parents who experience difficulties with grown children may express their displeasure or provide support with expectations that offspring change their behavior in some fashion. Grown children also play a role in these difficult relationships, and their perceptions of conflicted support may be part of negative perceptions in the tie.

Similarly, in poor-quality relationships, individuals may question the intent of support or worry about consequences of accepting it (Lepore, 2001). Thus, we expected high negative and low positive relationship qualities to be associated with perceptions of conflicted support.

Reasons Underlying Support

Parents provide support to grown children for a variety of reasons, including investment in future success, such as education or a wedding, and in response to offspring's needs (Fingerman et al., 2009). Offspring may be more likely to perceive parental support as conflicted when they, the offspring, experience problems that elicit support. Although many individuals benefit from support, there is considerable heterogeneity in reactions to family support (Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000; Shrout, Herman, & Bolger, 2006). For some individuals, receiving support to alleviate troubles is associated with poorer daily mood, perhaps because the support draws attention to their problems or diminishes their sense of coping (Gleason, Iida, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008).

Parental well-being often suffers when offspring incur problems (Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, & Zarit, 2012; Milkie, Bierman, & Schieman, 2008; Pillemer & Suito, 1991). Surprisingly, parents experience distress even when the problems are outside the offspring's control (Birditt, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2010). Thus, some parents may offer support (at least in part) to alleviate their own distress or with the unspoken or explicit expectations that offspring take actions to address their problems. Offspring who suffer problems also often have poorer quality relationships with their parents (Birditt et al., 2010; Milkie et al., 2008), and as described previously, conflicted support may occur in poor relationships.

Further, some offspring may feel entitled to parental help when they incur difficulties. In these cases, parents may attempt to place appropriate boundaries, limit offspring demands, or remind offspring that support has been provided. Yet, the offspring may interpret the support as ungenerous. Thus, the offspring's reports of conflicted support do not mean that the parent is behaving inappropriately. In sum, for a variety of reasons, offspring's problems may be associated with their perceptions that parental support is conflicted.

Other Factors Associated With Conflicted Support

We also controlled for factors that might be associated with perceptions of conflicted support including gender and age. Mothers and daughters report greater emotional complexities in their relationships than fathers and sons

(Fingerman, 2001; Suito, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2006). We expected daughters to report receiving conflicted support from parents more than sons and for mothers to be the parent perceived as providing such conflicted support.

Offspring age may be associated with evaluations of parental support. Parental support is common in young adulthood and gradually tapers off (Bucx, van Wel, & Knijn, 2012; Fingerman et al., 2009; Hartnett, Furstenberg, Fingerman, & Birditt, 2012). Due to normative expectations, younger grown children may be less likely to perceive parental support as conflicted than older grown children.

Finally, intergenerational support differs by socioeconomic status (SES) and ethnicity. Upper SES parents typically provide more financial assistance to grown children than do less well-off parents (Schoeni & Ross, 2005), but other types of support, such as practical assistance, may not vary by SES (Grundy, 2005; Henretta, Grundy, & Harris, 2002). Nonetheless, we controlled for parental years of education. Sharing of family resources is highly valued in many ethnic minority groups (Becker, Beyene, Newsom, & Mayen, 2003; Laditka & Laditka, 2001). Therefore, grown children from racial minority families may be less likely to perceive parental support as conflicted than grown children from White families.

In sum, we considered offspring's perceptions that middle-aged parents provide conflicted support. We hypothesized that offspring would be more likely to report parental support as conflicted when parents endorsed beliefs favoring offspring autonomy or when parents experienced stress and few rewards from helping those offspring. We also hypothesized that offspring would be more likely to perceive conflicted support in relationships characterized by higher negative and lower positive relationship qualities. Finally, we expected offspring who had a greater number of life problems to perceive parental support as conflicted.

METHODS

Sample

The sample was from the Family Exchanges Study (FES; Fingerman et al., 2009, 2011). Initial recruitment used lists purchased from Genysis Corporation and random digit dialing within area codes to identify middle-aged parents. Recruitment of parents occurred in the Philadelphia Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (PMSA), encompassing urban, suburban, and rural areas (Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2001).

The larger FES included middle-aged parents (633 total, 331 women, 302 men; mean age = 50.67, $SD = 4.80$) who had one or more grown child (i.e., 18 years or older).

At the end of their interviews, parents provided contact information for up to three grown children. Parents who had more than three grown children provided this information

for the child who received (a) the most support, (b) the least support, and (c) a child randomly selected by the computer. The majority of parents (88%) had three or fewer children. Parents provided contact information for 63% of grown children, and 75% of those grown children participated ($n = 592$). Several parents had more than one child who participated.

Participants and larger FES sample.—Because the outcome was grown children's reports of conflicted support, only the 399 parents who had one or more grown children participants were included. We compared the grown children and their parents in this study to the larger sample in the FES. We did not find systematic differences between middle-aged parents who provided contact information and parents who did not provide contact information for grown children on any background characteristics or ratings of health.

For offspring, t tests revealed that grown children who participated differed from grown children who did not participate with regard to age (participants were younger, $M = 23.7$ vs. 25.7), sex (participants more likely to be female, 53% vs. 47%), and geographic distance (participating children lived nearer parents, $M = 120$ vs. 270 miles). We did not find differences on other characteristics (e.g., race, education, marital status).

Characteristics of parents and children.—Sample background characteristics are found in Table 1. FES oversampled in high-density minority neighborhoods; 31% of the middle-aged parents in this study self-identified as African American and 6% self-identified as multiracial. The parent sample was approximately half female (52%) and reported an average household income of \$45,000–\$70,000 for 2007. A majority of parents were married or remarried (73%). Parents also were relatively well educated (mean years of education = 14.25, $SD = 2.02$). Middle-aged parents had 1.96 children aged more than 18 on average ($SD = 1.46$, range: 1–11).

Most grown children were young adults (mean age = 23.82, $SD = 5.13$). Approximately half were female (53%) and over a third (35%) identified as racial minority. With regard to work status, 35% were full-time students, 45% worked full time, and 33% worked part time. Few grown children were married (16%) or cohabitating with a partner (11%), most were single and never married (70%); 24% of grown children had children of their own (for additional details see Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, et al., 2012; Fingerman et al., 2012).

Procedures

Participants completed surveys lasting approximately 1 hr and received \$30 compensation. Data collection occurred between January and September, 2008.

All middle-aged parents completed computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI). Most grown children completed CATI, but 14% of grown children completed the survey via the Internet. Surveys administered via the Internet obtain data comparable to telephone or paper and pencil instruments (Birnbaum, 2004; Church, 2001; Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). The grown children who completed the web survey differed by sex (more likely to be male) and by race (less likely to be Black) from grown children who completed the telephone survey, but the groups did not differ on other characteristics.

MEASURES

Ratings of Support

Perceptions of conflicted support.—Offspring completed an instrument developed for this study via (a) focus groups of middle-aged and young adults separately and (b) a pilot study of adults of different ages ($n = 151$). Individuals participating in the development of the instruments did not participate in this study.

In the final version, the stem read, “Sometimes when people give help it’s done in ways that can make the recipient feel bad. Please tell me if the following things happen when your father/mother gives you help. . . .” Grown children then responded *yes* (coded 1) or *no* (coded 0) to four items: (a) there are strings attached or a price to pay, (b) she/he expects something from me in return, (c) she/he reminds me later of help she/he gave me, and d) she’s/he’s intrusive when she/he gives help, $\alpha = 0.75$. Participants rated the items for their mother and father separately.

Frequency of support.—Offspring indicated frequency of support from parents using the Intergenerational Support Index (ISI; Fingerman et al., 2011), which includes multiple dimensions of support: emotional, practical, companionship, advice, financial assistance, and listening to the other talk about daily events. The frequency was rated 1 (*less than once a year or not at all*), 2 (*once a year*), 3 (*a few times a year*), 4 (*monthly*), 5 (*a few times a month*), 6 (*weekly*), 7 (*a few times a week*), and 8 (*daily*), $\alpha = 0.86$.

Parents’ perceptions of providing support.—Parents reported the frequency of help they give to each child using the ISI (described earlier), $\alpha = 0.85$. Then, parents indicated how stressful they found providing support to each child and how rewarding they find it to help each child, rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

Parents’ beliefs about offspring autonomy.—Parents completed an index assessing beliefs that grown children should not require parental assistance. This measure also was generated based on the focus groups and the pilot study. The stem read: “Sometimes, there is a good reason

not to help adult children. Think about times in the past 12 months when you did not help an adult child, was it because. . . .” Parents responded *yes* (coded 1) or *no* (coded 0) to four items: (a) parent wanted to encourage child(ren) to be independent, (b) “the help” was something grown child could do on their own, (c) parent thought it would be better for grown child(ren) if they did not help, and (d) helping grown child would not solve the problem, $\alpha = 0.68$.

Relationship Ratings and Offspring Problems

Grown children’s and parents’ ratings of the relationship.—Parents and offspring rated qualities of their relationship. Positive quality was assessed by asking how much the other party “loves and cares for” and “understands” them, rated 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). Similarly, parents and children rated negative relationship quality by indicating how much the other is “critical of you or what you do” and “makes demands on you” using the same 5-point scale (Birditt et al., 2010; Fingerman et al., 2011; Umberson, 1992). Grown children provided ratings for their mother and father separately.

Problems eliciting support.—We assessed grown children’s problems in the past 2 years using the *Life Problems Scale* (LPS; Fingerman et al., 2011; Greenfield & Marks, 2006). The scale assessed whether a child experienced eight problems (e.g., victim of crime, alcohol or drug problem, financial difficulties), coded 1 (*occurred*) and 0 (*did not occur*) with a total score. As in our prior studies, we also considered two subscales of the LPS, lifestyle, and physical/emotional problems (Birditt et al., 2010). The lifestyle problems may be more attributable to offspring’s behaviors (e.g., drug addiction), whereas physical and emotional problems might be viewed as uncontrollable. When we reestimated analyses treating these subscales as predictors, the pattern of findings was the same, and thus, we present findings from the full LPS.

Control Variables

We obtained background information about each grown child and parent: gender, 1 (*father/son*) or 0 (*mother/daughter*); age in years; education; and minority status, 1 (*racial minority*) or 0 (*White*) were included as control variables.

Analytic Strategy

We estimated separate models for parents’ and offspring’s reports on the relationship. In all models, offspring’s reports of conflicted support served as the outcome. Models tested hypotheses involving (a) parents’ feelings and beliefs about providing support, (b) relationship qualities reported by the offspring, (c) relationship qualities reported by the parent,

and (d) problems that offspring experience. Offspring and parent gender, parent education, offspring age, and minority status served as control variables in each model.

Parents reported on each grown child. But we included only parental reports on offspring who participated in the study because we had data from those offspring regarding conflicted support. Thus, analyses including parental feelings and beliefs about support and parental ratings of relationship quality involved the 399 parents for 592 participating offspring.

Grown children reported on both their mother and their father (not just the parent participating in this study). Thus, analyses including grown children's reports considered data for mothers and fathers ($N = 592$ grown children, responses on 1,158 parents).

The analytic technique relied on multilevel models. Multilevel models account for nonindependence of reports (i.e., grown children typically reported on two parents and multiple children in the same family participated) using SAS PROC Mixed (Littell, Milliken, Stroup, & Wolfinger, 1996; Singer, 1998).

The outcome was offspring's score on the conflicted support index. There was a skew in endorsement of conflicted support. To ascertain whether this skew influenced findings, we generated a dichotomous variable for conflicted support where 1 indicated endorsement of one or more items on the index. Then, we estimated models treating conflicted support in two manners: (a) as a continuous variable and (b) as a dichotomous variable if the offspring endorsed any item on the index: 1 (yes, endorsed at least one item in the index) and 0 (no, on all 4 items). For the continuous outcomes, we used mixed models. For the dichotomous scores, we used the glimmix function for binomial distribution with mixed models. The pattern of findings was the same. For ease in interpretation, we present findings regarding the continuous outcome.

RESULTS

Table 1 includes descriptive information regarding variables in this study. Parental support was frequent. On average, offspring received multiple types of support several times a month on the ISI. These reports are consistent with our prior research (Fingerman et al., 2009, Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, et al., 2012). The average parental ratings for feelings of reward in providing support was between "somewhat" and "quite a bit" on the 5-point scale, and the average for stress from helping was "a little" to "somewhat."

The distribution for the index of conflicted support revealed that 40% of grown children endorsed at least one item. However, the items did not receive equal endorsement. One item (she/he reminds me later of help she/he gave me) was endorsed by 29% of grown children, whereas the other three items were each endorsed by 15%–17% of grown children.

Table 1. Descriptive Information for Variables Regarding Support and Relationships

| Variables | Mean | SD |
|--|-------|-------|
| Conflicted support ^a | 0.78 | 1.18 |
| Parent beliefs and feelings | | |
| Do not help to encourage independence ^b | 0.77 | 0.29 |
| Parent rating rewarding to help ^c | 3.56 | 1.11 |
| Parent rating stressful to help ^c | 2.16 | 1.21 |
| Relationship qualities | | |
| Offspring rating positive quality ^d | 4.15 | 0.80 |
| Offspring rating negative quality ^d | 2.31 | 0.99 |
| Parent rating positive quality ^d | 4.16 | 0.73 |
| Parent rating negative quality ^d | 2.15 | 0.87 |
| Offspring problems | 0.89 | 1.19 |
| Frequency of support ^e | 5.24 | 1.688 |
| Control variables | | |
| Parent gender ^f | 0.48 | |
| Parental years education | 14.25 | 2.01 |
| Offspring gender ^f | 0.55 | |
| Offspring age | 23.82 | 5.12 |
| Minority status ^g | 0.34 | |

Notes: ^aSum of four items offspring's perceptions of parental conflicted support rated 0 (no) and 1 (yes).

^bSum of parental responses to four reasons for not helping: 0 (no) and 1 (yes).

^cRated 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal).

^dMean of two relationship quality items rated 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal).

^eAverage of six types of support rated 1 = less than once a year or not at all, 2 = once a year, 3 = a few times a year, 4 = monthly, 5 = a few times a month, 6 = weekly, 7 = a few times a week, 8 = daily.

^fProportion of each gender 0 (women) and 1 (men).

^gProportion of minority participants 0 (White) and 1 (racial minority).

Table 2. Multilevel Model Examining Offspring's Perceptions of Conflicted Support as a Function of Parental Feelings and Beliefs

| Predictors | B | SE _B |
|--|---------|------------------------|
| Intercept | 1.66** | 0.61 |
| Does not help to encourage autonomy ^a | 0.10* | 0.05 |
| Rewarding to help ^b | -0.02 | 0.06 |
| Stressful to help ^b | 0.18*** | 0.04 |
| Control variables | | |
| Parent gender ^c | -0.12 | 0.11 |
| Parental education | -0.05 | 0.03 |
| Offspring gender ^c | -0.11 | 0.09 |
| Offspring age | -0.03** | 0.01 |
| Minority status ^d | 0.05 | 0.11 |
| -2 log likelihood | | 1,674.0 |
| Comparison to null model | | $\chi^2(8) = 139.4***$ |

Notes: ^aSum of parental responses to four items for fostering offspring autonomy, 0 (no) and 1 (yes) for each item.

^bParental rating of how rewarding or stressful to help 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal).

^cGender: 0 (women) and 1 (men).

^dMinority status: 0 (White) and 1 (racial minority).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Parents' Beliefs and Feelings About Support and Conflicted Support

We asked whether parents' feelings and beliefs were associated with offspring's perceptions of conflicted support. The model in Table 2 included parents' ratings of single items for stress and rewards from supporting the

grown child and the four-item measure of beliefs that grown children should be autonomous. Participating parent's ($n = 399$ for 592 grown children) reports were predictors, and the grown child's reports of conflicted support from that parent was the outcome.

Grown children reported conflicted support when parents reported greater stress helping and when parents scored higher on beliefs about fostering grown offspring's autonomy. Parental reports of rewards from helping the child were not associated with offspring's perceptions of conflicted support. Younger offspring reported more conflicted support than older offspring.

Relationship Qualities and Conflicted Support

Next, we examined relationship qualities. The independent variables included parents' and offspring's ratings of positive and negative relationship qualities in separate models.

Grown children rated each parent, mother, and father ($n = 1,185$). As can be seen in Table 3, positive and negative indicators of relationship quality were associated with grown children's ratings of conflicted support. That is, grown children who reported poorer relationship quality (more negative, less positive) with a parent were more likely to report conflicted support from that parent. Offspring reported more conflicted support toward mothers than fathers.

Table 3 also shows the model for parents' ratings of positive and negative relationship quality and the child's rating of conflicted support from that parent. When parents rated the relationship as more negative or less positive, the grown child was more likely to perceive support as conflicted. Younger offspring were more likely to report conflicted support.

Table 3. Multilevel Model Examining Offspring's Perceptions of Conflicted Support as a Function of Offspring's and Parents' Ratings of Relationship Qualities

| Predictors | Offspring ratings | | Parent ratings | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>SE_B</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>SE_B</i> |
| Intercept | 2.70*** | 0.53 | 2.39*** | 0.59 |
| Positive relationship ^a | -0.49*** | 0.05 | -0.22** | 0.07 |
| Negative relationship ^a | 0.45*** | 0.04 | 0.23*** | 0.06 |
| Control variables | | | | |
| Offspring age | -0.01 | 0.01 | -0.02* | 0.01 |
| Offspring gender ^b | -0.12 | 0.08 | -0.05 | 0.09 |
| Parent gender ^b | -0.18* | 0.09 | -0.20 | 0.06 |
| Parental education | -0.04 | 0.02 | -0.04 | 0.03 |
| Minority status ^c | 0.03 | 0.09 | 0.10 | 0.11 |
| -2 log likelihood | 1585.4 | | 1750.8 | |
| Comparison to null model | $\chi^2(7) = 139.4***$ | | $\chi^2(7) = 62.6***$ | |

Notes: ^aRelationship quality two items rated 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal).

^bGender: 0 (women) and 1 (men).

^cMinority status: 0 (White) and 1 (racial minority).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Offspring's Problems and Conflicted Support

We reran the models and included the number of problems that offspring had experienced (LPS). As can be seen in Table 4, the number of problems was associated with conflicted support; offspring who incurred more problems were more likely to perceive conflicted support. Again, younger offspring reported more conflicted support.

Follow-Up Analyses

We conducted follow-up analyses. First, we reran the models including the amount of support measured with the ISI. Across models, receiving less support was significantly associated with offspring's reports of conflicted support. Interestingly, when amount of support was included in the model in Table 2, parents' beliefs that children should be autonomous were no longer significantly associated with conflicted support. Thus, low support mediated the effect of parental beliefs on conflicted support. All other variables in the models in Tables 2, 3, and 4 remained significant when amount of support was included.

We also asked whether certain types of support were associated with perceptions of conflicted support. Each type of support (e.g., emotional, practical, advice) was negatively associated with perceptions of conflicted support when entered separately, except financial support, which showed no significant association with conflicted support.

We ran models examining the explanatory factors simultaneously. For parents, we entered beliefs and feelings about helping, relationship qualities, and offspring problems. In this model, parental beliefs, stress, and offspring life problems remained significant, but relationship quality ratings were only marginally associated with offspring perceptions of conflicted support ($p < .10$). For offspring, relationship qualities and problems were entered in the equation (offspring did not rate their parents' beliefs) and remained significantly associated with offspring perceptions of conflicted support.

Table 4. Multilevel Model Examining Offspring's Perceptions of Conflicted Support as a Function of Offspring Problems

| Predictors | <i>B</i> | <i>SE_B</i> |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Intercept | 2.07*** | 0.50 |
| Offspring problems ^a | 0.19*** | 0.04 |
| Control variables | | |
| Parent gender ^b | -0.19 | 0.11 |
| Parental education | -0.03 | 0.03 |
| Offspring gender ^b | -0.06 | 0.09 |
| Offspring age | -0.04*** | 0.01 |
| Minority status ^c | 0.10 | 0.11 |
| -2 log likelihood | 1771.4 | |
| Comparison to null model | $\chi^2(6) = 40.0***$ | |

Notes: ^aSum of offspring problems.

^bGender: 0 (women) and 1 (men).

^cMinority status: 0 (White) and 1 (racial minority).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Finally, offspring's student status and parental status might mitigate perceptions of conflicted support. Geographic proximity or coresidence also might shape the likelihood of experiencing conflicted support. We ran models with these variables, but these variables were not associated with perceptions of conflicted support.

DISCUSSION

A large literature links social support to psychological and physical well-being (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Uchino, 2009). Parents are a mainstay of support for grown children, and as such, most offspring benefit from their middle-aged parents' help (Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, et al., 2012). However, findings from this study suggest that implications of support may vary in different types of relationships. Warm relationships (which may be typical) foster positive emotions and well-received parental support. By contrast, relationships involving lower positive regard and higher negative regard may evoke a sense that support is conflicted. Indeed, parents' ambivalence and stress when helping offspring also feed into these perceptions.

Ties characterized by conflicted support may be distinct from other types of relationships. Researchers have argued for categorical family typologies regarding intergenerational solidarity (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). Our own prior work suggests that certain mother/daughter pairs are characterized by problematic interactions and tense emotions, and these relationship dynamics are distinct from positive ones (Fingerman, 2001). In conceptualizing relationships between middle-aged adults and their grown children, we might seek to identify dyads in which provision of support is accompanied by tensions and ask how these relationships differ from more normative patterns.

Moreover, offspring's perceptions that parents are coercive or intrusive are not rare. A substantial proportion of grown children (40%) experienced their parents' support as conflicted in some respect. That is, offspring felt support was given in a way that expected repayment, involved reminders that support was received, or that felt pushy. Nonetheless, it is important to avoid overstating tensions regarding support. When we examined each item separately, more young adults endorsed being reminded of help (29%), whereas only 15%–17% of offspring endorsed items that the help was given with strings attached or intrusively. Although the items worked as a scale, being reminded may serve a distinct function. Middle-aged adults sometimes repay parental support received in young adulthood via caregiving in late life (Silverstein et al., 2002). Reminders may enhance these processes and encourage future reciprocity. Nonetheless, in many families, offspring's perceptions that the support is conflicted may be embedded in relationship dynamics fraught with tensions.

From a developmental perspective, parents may have weighed benefits and drawbacks of giving support when

their children were young. Cultural admonitions warn parents against spoiling children by giving too much emotional support, gifts, or money. At each developmental step, parents must consider children's changing needs and capacity and continually rebalance the amount and types of assistance they give. Parents continually must balance when to withhold help or encourage children to manage challenging situations on their own to foster independence. It is not surprising, then, that many parents continue to convey ambivalence or conflict over giving help to their adult offspring or that offspring perceive that conflict.

The developmental aspect of conflicted support also was evident in findings regarding offspring age. Younger offspring were more likely to perceive conflicted support than older offspring. Although parental support is normative in the young adult years (Aquilino, 2006; Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, et al., 2012), these findings suggest that the individuation process may involve reframing parental support as conflicted, perhaps in the process of letting go of that support.

Parents' and Offspring's Feelings and Beliefs

Dyadic patterns suggest that relationship dynamics underlie perceptions of conflicted support. Parents' beliefs and feelings about supporting their grown children were associated with the offspring's reports of conflicted support. Research on social support between romantic partners often considers both persons' perceptions (Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Gleason et al., 2008; Maisel & Gable, 2009), but studies of intergenerational support rarely have done so.

The dyadic patterns are consistent with a larger literature addressing ambivalent relationships between parents and children (Birditt et al., 2010; Fingerman et al., 2006; Pillemer & Sutor, 2002). Studies have found that many parents experience ambivalence about helping their grown children (Levitzi, 2009). When parents experience ambivalence, offspring report conflicted feelings of their own (Fingerman et al., 2006). Here, offspring appeared to sense their parents' ambivalent feelings and beliefs regarding provision of support.

Moreover, when amount of support was entered in the equation, low-frequency support was associated with offspring's perceptions of conflicted support, but parental beliefs were no longer significantly associated. These findings suggest parents who believe offspring should be autonomous withhold support or provide less support, and offspring's perceptions reflect parental behavior. It is also worth noting that parents typically provide more support to offspring suffering problems rather than less support (Fingerman et al., 2009; Kalmijn, 2013). Thus, parental beliefs appear to be a factor in the relationship dynamics of less support and offspring's perceptions that support is conflicted and not just the problems per se.

We did not assess the offspring's beliefs about receiving support, but offspring perceptions of conflicted support may

reflect their own feelings about parental help. Offspring in these relationships may be disappointed in themselves or embarrassed by their dependency on parents. The parents' ambivalence may partially reflect the offspring's internal conflicts.

Relationship Qualities and Other Factors Associated With Conflicted Support

Indeed, conflicted support appears to be embedded in difficult relationships. Both parents' and children's ratings of poorer quality relationships were associated with offspring's reports that support was conflicted. In general, in poor-quality relationships, it may be difficult to convey support in a manner that truly meets the recipient's needs (Berg & Upchurch, 2007; Gleason et al., 2008). Alternately, offspring in such relationships may be primed to disregard parental generosity.

Additionally, when offspring experienced personal problems, they were more likely to perceive conflicted support. Prior research has established that parents experience distress when their children incur problems (Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, et al., 2012; Milkie et al., 2008; Pillemer & Sutor, 1991). Under these circumstances, parents may pair support with criticism or expectations that offspring will change behaviors that led to problems in the first place. Alternately, offspring with problems may place unreasonable demands on parents and may interpret appropriate parental limit setting as conflicted support.

Perceptions of conflicted support in adulthood also may be part of longstanding tensions within the family over giving and receiving. Parents may have long conveyed approval or displeasure through withholding support and/or tying gifts or support to expectations for improved behavior in childhood or adolescence. Alternately, offspring may have disagreeable personalities or have been unable to appreciate parental generosity from a young age. In adulthood, tensions around giving and receiving may persist although the context and types of help exchanged have changed.

Expression of gratitude may play a role in these processes as well (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). When grown children perceive conflicted support, they may show less gratitude, which in turn feeds into less support and poorer quality relationships. Longitudinal data regarding earlier patterns in the relationship might provide insights into conflicted support.

The general public will find it no surprise that tensions can co-occur with family support. Indeed, the patterns observed here may precipitate future dynamics in this relationship, particularly as the parent ages and requires support from the offspring. For example, a recent study found that parents are more likely to involve children in long-term care planning when they view their children as both emotionally supportive and critical of them (Boerner, Carr, & Moorman, 2013). Thus, conflicted support may occur

between grown children and parents throughout the adulthood in varying forms, with parents also perceiving conflicted support.

In sum, today, middle-aged parents provide more frequent support to grown children than was the case two decades ago (Fingerman et al., 2009, 2012), but giving and receiving do not necessarily lead to positive reactions. Grown children experience their parents' support as conflicted, intrusive, or accompanied by expectations for repayment. Parents, in turn, perceive some exchanges as stressful and perhaps as reflecting a lack of autonomy in their children. These perceptions of conflicted support are embedded in features of the dynamics and tensions in parent/child ties, including poorer relationship quality, that warrant consideration in the study of intergenerational ties.

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