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The ascension of parent-offspring ties:

How are bonds between parents and their grown-up children changing, and what impact do they have? Karen Fingerman looks at the evidence

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Western cultures place romantic ties on a pedestal. Taxes, legal decisions, property and social life pivot around the couple. Yet, for individuals who are widowed, divorced, never married or between partners, a tie to a parent or grown child may be the primary bond. Moreover, most individuals value their intergenerational bonds, regardless of their romantic status. When researchers ask adults to name their most important social partners, people list their parents and grown children as nearly as important and in some cases, more important than a romantic partner.

In fact, the prominence of intergenerational ties appears to be on the rise, in part because fewer adults are situated in long-term romantic ties. Among young adults (aged 20 to 34) in the UK, fewer than half reside with a romantic partner, and nearly a third of adults aged 18 to 25 reside with their parents (Office for National Statistics, 2012). Thus, the primacy of intergenerational ties between young adults and their parents may be shifting. We might ask: Which features of these ties are changing? And why?

As a caveat, family researchers and the public alike tend to use the mid-20th century as the epitome of family life and evaluate current family forms against that baseline (Furstenberg, 2011). For a variety of reasons, the 1950s and 1960s are salient in societal memory. The peace of the post-World War II era permitted a focus on family, and the rise of mass media (television, magazines and radio) reflected and conveyed norms about family ties to the wider public. Throughout much of the world, a large cohort of post-World War II 'Baby Boomers' entered young adulthood. In the UK, a second baby boom occurred in the 1960s bringing attention to parenting and perhaps to autonomy from one's own parents. Finally, social scientific research hits its stride during the mid-20th century, and documented a variety of features of family life. Researchers examined intergenerational ties between adults in the 1950s and 1960s, generating a social scientific portrait of these kinship ties. A dominant paradigm - intergenerational solidarity theory - arose and endured across several decades. The basic premise of this theory is that intergenerational ties often show high cohesion, and, moreover, families that share values and affection are the most cohesive (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). Scholars also documented markers of adulthood, including leaving the natal family, establishing a separate household, and procreating. Thus family patterns are often measured against an anchor period of the 1950s and 1960s, a period when

grown children in Western cultures were expected to leave the parental home and establish autonomy by their early twenties.

Whether this portrait of intergenerational ties remains true is of considerable interest to scholars. Given the primacy of the parent—child tie into adulthood, psychologists may be interested in fluctuations in this tie and its implications for wellbeing. Changes in three aspects of parent—child relationships in particular warrant consideration: how the parties treat one another (e.g. their level of involvement), how they feel about one another and their relationships (e.g. affection, conflict) and the effects of the relationship on psychological wellbeing. Each of these features of intergenerational ties may have changed in recent decades in ways that are associated with each party's emotional wellbeing.

Contact and social support

In Western cultures, ties between parents and grown children are to a large extent voluntary. Historically, laws applied to this tie. For example, English Poor Law initiated the idea that grown children were liable for their elderly parents if the parents could not care for themselves. Today, some countries have laws that require grown children to support aging parents in late life (e.g. France, Poland, Singapore) as do a few states in the US, but the laws are rarely enforced. Moreover prior to old age, during midlife and young adulthood, there are few legal proscriptions or even social sanctions that mandate contact or support between the parties. Parents and grown children *choose* to remain frequently involved in one another's lives by maintaining contact in person, by phone and via text.

Moreover, parental involvement may spill into support for young adult children via tangible material assistance (e.g. finances or a place to live) and via non-tangible assistance (e.g. advice and emotional support). Young adults may reciprocate support to some extent, but in Western cultures, support usually flows 'downstream' from the parents to the grown children (Fingerman et al., 2011; Kohli, 1999).

Rates of contact between young adults and their parents have increased dramatically over the past few decades. Studies in US in the 21st century find that over half of young adults (55 per cent) report contact with parents - by phone, in person, by text - daily or nearly every day and another 25 per cent report contact several times a week (Arnett & Schwab, 2012; Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe et al., 2012). Similarly, data from the Netherlands revealed that nearly three quarters (72 per cent) of young people had at least weekly phone contact with parents and nearly as many saw them in person that often (Bucx et al., 2008). In the 1980s, data from a variety of sources indicated that contact between adults and parents occurred less frequently; just over half of parents reported any type of contact with a grown child once a week or more often (Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe et al., 2012).

Although frequent contact is common between adults and parents today, some adults do not have contact with their parents. Estrangement is most likely to occur for fathers who are divorced from the child's mother or who never married the child's mother. In a recent national study of adults aged 24 to 32 in the US, 20 per cent lacked a father figure or did not have contact with their father, whereas only 5 per cent of these young adults reported being

estranged from, or lacking, a mother. Moreover, most grown children have contact with at least one parent; only 2 per cent of these adults were estranged from both parents (Hartnett et al., 2014).

For the most part, then, the ties appear to be robust and thriving. Increased contact between adults and parents reflects several societal trends, the most obvious being advances in communication. New technologies such as e-mail, texting and Skype make communication between parties easy, accessible and practically free. But these formats of communication have not supplanted the more pedestrian telephone and in-person contact: it's only just over a third of the time that the contact between adults and parents occurs via newer technologies.

Indeed, trends in communication pre-date the saturation of communication technologies. For example, the US showed a trend of increased contact between generations prior to widespread use of cellphones. Only 38 per cent of the US population reported using a cellphone in 2000, yet national data in the US reveals a trend of increasing contact between adults and their parents beginning in the early 1990s (Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe et al., 2012).

Increased contact between generations also reflects changes in the nature of young adulthood. In the 21st century, young adults spend more time in education, experience greater challenges finding jobs and delay marriage longer (if they marry at all) than was the case 30 or 40 years ago. Today, a much higher proportion of young adults attend college or another form of post-high school education than in the past (Fingerman, Cheng et al., in press; Furstenberg, 2011). Across countries, students have more frequent contact and greater involvement with their parents than non-students of similar age (Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2000; Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe et al., 2012; Fingerman et al., 2015). Moreover, young adults who are not married have more frequent contact with their parents than young adults who are married. A prolonged period of 'singlehood' or serial relationships with different partners may raise the importance of ties to a parent during young adulthood.

Historically, adults and parents have preferred separate living spaces. Dating back several centuries, parents and grown children resided in nearby dwellings or on a shared larger farm in separate households, but co-residence occurred when this was not possible (Furstenberg, 2011). Until the 1950s and 1960s, over one third of parents in Britain lived with a grown child (Grundy, 2005). Rates of co-residence decreased until the end of the 20th century, but have increased again over the past 15 years with nearly a third of young adults in Britain residing with their parents today (ONS, 2012). In the US in 2012, 32 per cent of women aged 18 to 31 co-resided with parents and 40 per cent of young men did (Fry 2013). Moreover, in southern Europe, in Spain and Italy up to 60 per cent of adults this age co-reside with parents.

Cross-national differences in young adults' ability to reside separately from parents reflects several factors: (a) the availability of affordable rental housing; (b) government policies (i.e. social welfare) assisting young adults, as opposed to their depending solely on parental support; (c) long-term stable employment in young adulthood; and (d) cultural preferences for co-residence (Newman & Aptekar, 2006). The first three factors pertain to society on the whole and economic opportunities. The last factor is subjective and reflects beliefs.

Regarding structural factors, nations differ in policies that facilitate young people leaving home. In northern European countries (including Britain), government safety nets assist young adults who are pursuing education or who are unemployed. Apartments and rental housing are typically available. Southern European nations have few government assistance programmes, and rental housing is difficult to obtain. Clearly ebbs and flows of the economy affect parent-child ties. For example, the recent Great Recession also saw an uptick in co-residence across countries, the poor economy generated fewer jobs for young adults. In addition, characteristics of the grown child predict whether they reside with a parent. Across Western countries, grown children who are unmarried, and particularly single parents, are more likely to live with their parents. Likewise, less educated and younger grown children are more likely to live with parents, as are sons compared with daughters (Dykstra et al., 2013).

Patterns of co-residence are not fully determined by structural factors, however. Research shows southern European parents and grown children indicate a preference for intergenerational co-residence (Newman & Aptekar, 2006). Studies have examined concepts such as familialism (beliefs that offspring should put family ahead of their individual preferences) and filial obligation to assist parents; cross-cultural and cross-ethnic patterns suggest that behaviours typically align with these beliefs. It is worth noting, though, that despite potential benefits of co-residence during difficult times, parents and grown children may experience ambivalence and conflicts over co-residence if autonomous households are preferred but unavailable due to economics.

Support from parents to young adult offspring also has increased over the past few decades. In Great Britain a study conducted in 1994 found that nearly three quarters of parents aged 60 to 69 reported giving practical help or money to grown children (Grundy, 2005). These parents were likely to have children who were in their thirties and forties. Parents typically give more support to younger adults (Fingerman et al., 2009) and thus, rates of support may be even higher. Indeed, a recent study in the US found that 29 per cent of parents provided several forms of support (e.g. advice, tasks, emotional support, companionship), several times a week or every day to a grown child (Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselmann et al., 2012); During the 1980s fewer than half of parents reported providing advice on a monthly basis and fewer than a third provided practical help every month. Thus, parents today provide dramatically more support to their grown children than they received from their own parents at a similar age. This perhaps reflects the changing economic and cultural factors described previously.

In addition, parents assist grown children today for three principal reasons; (a) the child experiences life problems or crises (e.g. unemployment, divorce, a health problem); (b) the child has potential for future success (e.g. pursuing education, raising a grandchild); or (c) during the course of everyday interactions, support occurs with or without intention (e.g. parents offer advice or emotional support during daily interactions; Fingerman et al., 2009; Fingerman et al., 2015). Moreover, when parents feel more affection for a grown child, they also provide more help (Fingerman et al., 2011). Thus, for the most part, parental support occurs in the context of strong bonds to further the child's future or because the parents and grown children enjoy one another's company.

Nonetheless, parents and children alike may experience discomfort regarding parental support. Popular media in the US refer to ‘helicopter parents’ who hover over their grown children, orchestrating their every move; and Danish psychologist Bent Hougaard coined the term ‘curling parents’ to refer to those who insist on sweeping everything that may get in the way of their child, their own polished stone, European media refer to ‘Mama’s boys’ in Italy, and ‘failed fledgling’ in Britain. These disparaging terms reflect the sentiment that parental support is smothering young adults, and that dependency among grown children reflects weakness and failure. University professors tell anecdotes of parents calling to request a change in a student’s grade and employers indicate that parents arrive at a child’s job interview. Despite widespread stories of this type, however, such events do not seem pervasive or common occurrences.

In fact, parents and grown children alike view the new levels of parental involvement askance. In a recent study, when parents provided support to grown children several times a week, the parents and children rated that support as ‘too much’ (Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselmann et al., 2012). Another study examined grown children’s perceptions of whether their parents provided support in a manner that was intrusive, demeaning, or that required repayment (i.e. ‘help with strings attached’). When parents viewed their children as too dependent and believed the children should be more autonomous, the grown children perceived parental support as having strings attached (Fingerman et al., 2013). In other words, expectations of autonomy between generations established in the mid to late 20th century persist into the 21st century, despite common (and desired) changes in actual behaviours in the relationship.

Relationships between adults and their parents and wellbeing

Given the high involvement between adults and parents, their relationships may affect each party’s wellbeing. Classic psychological theories (e.g. Freud, Erikson) argued that the initial relationship with a parent sets a course for individual differences in psychological functioning in adulthood. Subsequent empirical research has not established links between parental behaviours in preschool and adult outcomes. In fact, relationships between adults and parents may show considerable variability in quality over time. Longitudinal studies that have followed children and parents from early childhood, find continuity over short periods of time (i.e, a few years), but not from birth into adulthood (Belsky et al., 2001).

Nonetheless, qualities of the tie to parents and grown children may affect each party’s wellbeing at that time. In adulthood, grown children and their parents have three types of emotional experiences in their ties: (a) positive feelings of affection; (b) conflict and negative feelings such as worry, disappointment, or irritation; and (c) ambivalent or mixed feelings. This latter category ambivalence, is pervasive between young adults and their parents (Fingerman et al., 2004).

Young adults and their parents typically report feelings of affection for one another, particularly given the high levels of involvement and support that characterise these ties. Yet, their relationships may be complicated by the sense that the other party is intrusive or demanding, disappointing or worrisome. It is not surprising that relationships that involve

such cohesion also involve negative feelings. Conflict is inherent to other close ties, After all, psychologists typically examine how marital partners resolve conflicts (rather than asking whether such conflicts exists). Nonetheless, researchers have only recently begun to examine ambivalent feelings between adults and parents.

Ambivalence may arise in part because parents find it difficult to accept societal changes that have shifted their children's timetable compared with their own young adulthood. Parents (particularly fathers) typically report ambivalence towards grown children who have not achieved markers associated with adulthood, such as completion of education, marriage and securing a job (Pillcmer et al., 2012), In fact, one study found that when grown children reported that they were highly invested in their own career and their own children, their parents reported less ambivalence (Fingerman et al., 2006). In essence, even though their grown child may have less time for them, parents derive satisfaction from knowing then grown children are faring well.

For grown children, concerns about parental health remain a key issue in the experience of ambivalence, even when parents are relatively healthy (Fingerman et al., 2006). Young adults may worry about their own ability to care for parents in the future. These concerns may reflect worries about losing the parent or about caring for the parent, or may even serve as part of the recognition that parents are human and have weaknesses.

The key question remaining is whether parent-child ties affect each party's wellbeing. Parents are sensitive to their grown children's successes, but even more so their grown children's problems (Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt et al., 2012; Umberson et al., 2010). Parents report distress and poor psychological wellbeing when then children experience life crises such as a divorce, unemployment or a health issue. In fact, the nature of the problem does not seem to alter these effects. Parents do not appear to differentiate between problems that might be attributed to the child's lifestyle (e.g. drug addiction) and problems that seem due to outside events (e.g. victim of a crime). These patterns appear to support the truism that, 'a parent is only as happy as their least happy child' (Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt et al., 2012).

Parents may show complementary distress to a child's problems for a variety of reasons. The parent may worry about the child's future and the implications of the problem for how the child will fare in the long run. Parents also may view their grown children's success or failures as a reflection on their own job as parents. Further, parents typically step in and try to help their grown children who have problems (Fingerman et al., 2009); providing this help may be draining, particularly if the parent cannot resolve the problem. Parents also may question whether it is normal for grown children to be dependent on their parents. Parents who perceive their children as needing more help than other adults of comparable age report poorer wellbeing (Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselmann et al., 2012); it may be the case that these parents view themselves as remiss in raising children who are less competent than others of comparable age.

Moreover, relationships with children who suffer problems often become strained and involve ambivalence (Birditt et al., 2010), Poor-quality ties with grown children are associated with poorer parental mental health (Umberson et al., 2010). In fact, a recent

study of parents' daily experiences with grown children found that relationship quality played a key role in daily distress. When parents experienced poorer-quality relationships with grown children, they were more likely to report that the child got on their nerves or irritated them, or that they worried or thought about problems with that child on a daily basis. These negative experiences were associated with more negative mood on that day and the following day (Fingerman, Kim et al., in press). Grown children's problems and poor-quality relationships may therefore generate a cascade of daily and long-term psychological consequences for parents.

Grown children also may be sensitive to qualities of ties with their parents, but to a lesser extent. A vast research literature shows that parents are more invested in grown children than the reverse. Parents view their children as their legacy and invest in the child for decades before the children are launched. Children, on the other hand, seek to differentiate from parents, even in an era when bonds endure and are strong. Nonetheless, grown children appear to benefit from parental involvement. When parents offer young adults support on a weekly basis or more often, the grown children report greater life satisfaction and better adjustment, controlling for factors that elicit that support (Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselmann et al., 2012). That is, if two young adults are unemployed and one receives parental support (but the other does not), the adult receiving parental support will fare better. Thus, parents have the opportunity to improve their child's wellbeing even under adverse circumstances.

Conclusion

In the 21st century it is clear that parent-child ties typically are highly involved, functional and serve as sources of support. The research literature stemming from the 1960s has focused on generalised trends in these ties, with less research on psychological aspects of the ties beyond relationship quality and wellbeing. In early life, ties between parents and children show systematic individual differences, as evidenced by research examining attachment theory (secure, insecure, ambivalent). Likewise, the adolescence literature regarding parenting styles has shown how distinct patterns of parenting (e.g. authoritative, authoritarian) are associated with adolescent outcomes. Yet, the literature regarding adult parent-child ties has primarily examined continuous phenomena, rather than discrete categories of parent-child ties. Recent studies in the family science literature have begun to use latent class analysis to generate typologies of parent-child ties in the US, Europe and Asia, but this research is largely theoretical. A sparse longitudinal literature following early parent-child ties into adulthood suggests only modest associations in relationship qualities, and then only over shorter periods of time. A few studies of late life have examined attachment styles in late life caregiving, but findings have been mixed. In sum, parent-child ties in adulthood warrant theoretical attention.

Likewise, the literature does not adequately reflect clinical phenomena involving adults and parents. Research consistently finds benefits for family members who receive support. When grown children incur problems, studies have documented parental empathetic distress but have not noted difficulties for the grown children stemming from parental involvement. Yet, popular media suggest parental over-involvement is detrimental. In 2011 the *Atlantic Monthly* carried a cover story written by a therapist who argued her young adult clients

suffered narcissism, low confidence, and psychological maladjustment due to parental over-involvement. The factors that determine when parent-child ties are beneficial and when they are toxic warrant research attention.

In sum, ties between young adults and parents appear to be thriving. Recent trends in marital patterns suggest intergenerational ties will continue to intensify. In Great Britain in 2011 only 52 per cent of men and 49 per cent of women were married, and rates of marriage are on the decline (ONS, 2013). The likelihood of cohabitating with a partner has increased, but these ties are less stable than marital ties. Thus, increasingly, relationships with parents and children are the most important enduring ties in individuals' lives. The tendency to lose touch with a father may increase in the future as well because more children are born to mothers who have tenuous relationships with the child's father than in the past.

For individuals who have a bond to a parent, however, the ties typically are highly rewarding. Current trends of frequent contact and supportive ties may continue. Today, the downside of these ties is ambivalence associated with changing norms regarding whether it is all right to have such strong ties and for parents to continue to help grown children. But as values come to align with the presence of strong intergenerational bonds, parents and children alike may benefit.

Meet the author

'In my first year of graduate school, a professor asked me to help interview adults of different ages. Eighty-year-olds told stories that were so interesting, I was hooked on adult development. For the next 15 years, I studied older parents and their middle-aged children as a faculty member in Human Development & Family Sciences, a multidisciplinary department including psychologists with a focus on the context of family life and development.

In 2008 my research team started a study of three-generation families that included young adult children. The global recession hit within weeks of the initial data collection, and we were fortunate enough to interview all the family members again in 2013. The data from the middle-aged parents and the young adult children were intriguing. Patterns of involvement, emotional qualities of the ties, and support exchanges seemed to be sensitive to the economic and social context. It soon became clear that these parent/child ties were increasing in importance, and our research focused on the implications of the ascension of intergenerational ties from there on.'



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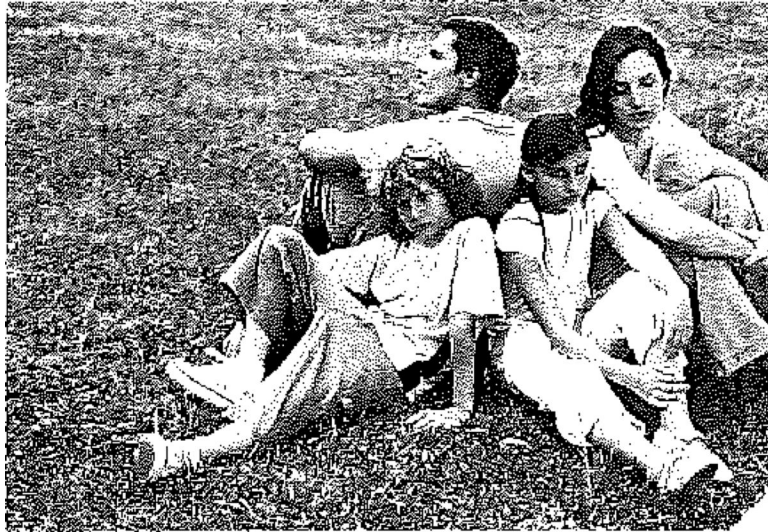
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