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How Much Help Is Exchanged in Families? Towards an Understanding of Discrepant Research Findings

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SEDAP Research Paper No. 2

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HOW MUCH HELP IS EXCHANGED IN FAMILIES?

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF DISCREPANT RESEARCH FINDINGS

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Since the early 1980s, Gerontology in general and the study of aging families in particular has become increasingly dominated by the topic of caregiving to impaired older adults. It is important to remember, however, that this type of caregiving -- although very difficult for those families who experience it -- is an extreme point on a continuum of family helping and interdependence that extends over the life course. Therefore, let us move back on that continuum to the less dramatic but more widely experienced phenomenon of help in families in what might be called the normal or more typical case.

The reader should note that we use the term "helping" to refer to the broad spectrum of activities that family members might perform for one another. We reserve the term "caregiving" for situations involving extensive assistance to a family member with a significant level of dependency.

The impetus for this paper arose from the first author's research over the past two decades. At some point she began to realize that some of what she had been taking as the received wisdom was less clear cut than she had previously thought. A major source of this renewed interest in family helping was the 1990 General Social Survey of Canada. Specifically, it was becoming apparent that, when comparing a number of relevant studies, there were widely discrepant findings in terms of amounts of help given to and received by older family members.

This might at first seem like a minor issue, but in some contexts it can become quite a major one. Gerontologists have long used statistics on helping to convey to governments that families are heavily involved in the care of older adults. For example, a figure cited very often is that 80-90% of the assistance received by seniors comes from the informal network, mainly family and friends -- and family above all -- with the other 10-20% coming from the formal health and social service systems. This is an impressive figure and probably accurate as a general indication of the relative orders of

magnitude of informal and formal help. It does, however, create an impression that a vast quantity of informal assistance is being provided on a wide scale -- in most families.

Sometimes it suits our purposes to create the impression that families are heavily involved, even heavily burdened, in helping older people. For example, we might hope that to the extent we can convey this picture to government policy makers, they will be somewhat less inclined to view the family as an untapped resource and download further care responsibilities onto the family.

On the other hand, sometimes it might suit our purposes to underplay the extent of family help provision -- for example, if we want to reassure governments that, since relatively small percentages of adult children provide extensive care to parents, offering supportive services to care providers will not open the floodgates with a huge demand on those services.

Thus, the data scholars present on helping and the general statements that flow from the data may matter in some consequential ways. As scholars, however, what matters above all is acquiring an accurate understanding of aging families and feeling confident that we are making accurate statements and interpretations when we talk about what goes on in families, including what kinds of helping patterns are typical.

Gerontologists have been examining helping in aging families, along with other dimensions of family life, over the past 30 years. A strong incentive for this research arose from the mid-century stereotype of the isolated nuclear family and the abandonment of older people by their grown children. Studies have been lodged within a variety of conceptual frameworks, including: the modified extended family (Litwak, 1960), social networks and social support (Antonucci, 1990; Wellman and Hall, 1986; Stone and Rosenthal, 1996; Stone, Rosenthal and Connidis, 1998), intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson and Schrader, 1982; Roberts and Bengtson, 1990; Rossi and Rossi, 1990),

attachment theory (Crawford, Bond and Balshaw, 1994; Norris and Tindale, 1994), and, more recently, intergenerational equity (Stone, Rosenthal and Connidis, 1998). The large body of research that resulted provides ample documentation of intergenerational familial support. One particularly influential concept has been the "modified extended family" (Litwak, 1960) which portrays the contemporary multigenerational family system as one in which adult generations maintain separate households but are linked through ties of affection, contact, and mutual aid. The implication is that the level of mutual aid is considerable -- this is not a "latent" aspect of family relationships -- and indeed studies usually interpreted their findings as supporting this concept. Chappell, writing about this body of research in 1992, says,, "Litwak's notion of the modified extended family with an emphasis on mutual aid and close interpersonal ties among kin has been supported" (Chappell, 1992:5).We, too, have made this type of statement many times. Now, however, let us reconsider it.

We turn now to some findings from a few different studies to illustrate how discrepant findings can be. There are some explanations for these discrepancies -- these striking variations in reported levels of helping -- and we will explore these below. First, though, let us look at some data.

Table 1 presents data from the landmark study conducted by Ethel Shanas and her colleagues in the 1960s (Shanas et al., 1968), showing the percentage of parents in the United States aged 65 and older who said they gave help to a child and those who said they received help from a child. There was no time frame for this question, just a general question, "Do you help your children?". (There was, however, a list of specific questions which followed, but we do not draw on those data here.) Table 2 presents data from the Generational Relations and Succession Project conducted by Victor Marshall, Jane Synge and Carolyn Rosenthal in Hamilton, Ontario in 1980. The percentages here are for parents aged 70 and older and are based on whether respondents provided or received

help in the past year (Rosenthal, 1987).

Looking at these figures one could justifiably make a general statement that most older parents give help to and receive help from their children, although the data do not allow one to talk about high levels of help or high frequency. Comparing the two studies, it is apparent that smaller percentages of American parents gave and received help compared to Canadian parents. One contributor to this variation might be that Shanas used a national sample while the Hamilton study had a sample from one urban area. Over-riding the differences, however, is the similarity in that a majority of parents -- and in some instances a very substantial majority -- gave help to and received help from their adult children.

Table 3 presents data from a study conducted by Glenna Spitze and John Logan in the early 1990s in the Albany area of New York State(Spitze and Logan, 1992). The first column is based on parents' reports and shows percentages of parents who said they gave help to a child. You can see here that help provision to children decreases dramatically in the 75 and older age group. When you look at the second column, which shows children's reports of the help they gave to parents, you see a corresponding increase in the help given to parents aged 75 and older. Prior to that, however, when parents are in their 60s and 70s, notice how low the percentages are -- only 14-16% of children said they helped parents. These percentages are much lower than in either the Shanas or Hamilton studies in which between 59% and 75% of parents said they received help from a child.

One major contributor to this difference between the Spitze and Logan study and the other two has to do with measurement. Whereas the Shanas and Hamilton studies asked not only about “hands on” instrumental help (e.g. help with transportation, child care, shopping, preparing meals, doing laundry, home maintenance, and so on), they also asked about financial help, gifts, advice and

emotional support. The Spitze and Logan study, however, restricted its attention to instrumental help.

Let us turn now to the 1990 General Social Survey of Canada. Of all studies I've talked about, this survey has by far the best sample -- in terms of size, being national, and being representative of the Canadian population. Using General Social Survey data, Table 4 shows the percentage of Canadian sons and daughters who said they had provided help to a parent during the past year (Rosenthal, Martin-Matthews and Matthews, 1996). The data are broken down by the age of the child. The figures are comparable to those in the Spitze and Logan study, at least with respect to children whose parents are under age 75. If, however, if you compare these percentages with the percentages of parents in the Hamilton and Shanas studies who said they received help from children, there is quite a gulf in between. How can we account for these differences?

Like the Spitze and Logan study, the GSS was limited to instrumental help, although it did include financial help. It asked about only five types of help (home maintenance, transportation, household work, personal care and financial support) than did any of the other studies. Fewer types of help lead to lower percentages who say they provide help.

As well, the GSS data I have shown are the reports of one adult child, whereas parents in the Hamilton and Shanas studies answered the questions in terms of all of their adult children. Parents typically had more than one child and if any one of their children helped them they would report receiving help. When the child is reporting, that child is usually one of two or more children, meaning that even if the child in question is not helping one of their siblings may well be giving help to their parent. Similarly, in the Spitze and Logan study, data on how much help was provided to parents were obtained from only one randomly selected child of each parent.

This brief consideration of data from several studies serves to illustrate several methodological

sources of what are often fairly dramatic differences in data on helping in older families.

1. Sample size and type: Small samples and those which are not representative of the national population yield higher estimates of help provision than do large, population based samples. Samples which are not population based and nationally representative produce biased results because structural factors influence intergenerational exchange. These include region, rural/urban, family size, geographical proximity, age, gender, marital status, household structure, employment status, socioeconomic status/social class, and ethnicity. If any of these factors are over- or under-represented in samples, the result may be rates of helping (whether higher or lower) that do not correspond to those that really exist in the general population.

2. Focus of the survey: National surveys, which do not specifically focus on the family, yield a picture of less help than do local surveys which have family issues as their main focus. In the latter, individuals who are less involved in family life will be more likely to decline to participate. People with more personal interest in the research topic at hand tend to have higher levels of response to surveys (Gorey et al., 1992: Fowler, 1988). As a consequence, studies which focus specifically on intergenerational exchange between adult children and older parents may draw participation from a greater proportion of individuals actively involved in such exchange than would be found in the population as a whole. This sample bias results in higher estimates of help.

3. Generational position of respondent: Parents report higher levels of help given and received than do children because parents are usually asked about help to/from all or any of their children, while children report only on themselves. The rates of help to parents will always be higher when parents are in the denominator of the rate, than when children are in the denominator.

4. Types of help asked about: Studies which focus only on instrumental help produce lower estimates

of help than do those which include emotional support, advice, and help in crises.

5. Number of types of help asked about: The greater the number of types of help asked about, the more likely it is that a respondent will say he/she has provided/received some help.

6. Time frame: The broader the time frame, the more likely respondents will report providing or receiving help. Therefore, studies which ask about help given or received within the past year produce higher estimates than those which ask about help within the past month or week.

Another factor which we have not discussed relates to the "intergenerational stake" hypothesis (Bengtson and Kuypers, 1971; Giarrusso, Stallings and Bengtson, 1995; Marshall, 1995). Almost all the research that has explored this hypothesis has focused on perceptions of affect and agreement on norms and values. Only one study (Gesser, Marshall and Rosenthal, 1985) has examined the intergenerational stake hypothesis in relation to the exchange of help between parents and children. When parents' and children's reports about the same 'help stream' were compared, parents reported somewhat lower amounts of help than children reported. These differences were interpreted as being related to parents' (and children's) fears of dependency on the part of the older parent. This "dependency hypothesis" was not explicitly tested, however, and few if any other such studies have been conducted. We therefore suggest this as a useful area of future research. Such research, however, requires that detailed data be collected from parents and children within the same family, a design that is unlikely to be implemented in a large, national survey.

Having made the above points, we wish to make two further and related points, one related to need and the other to what the notion of helping means to family members. With respect to the issue of need, we must emphasize that the relatively low levels of instrumental help to which current research points belie the amount of help provided to older people (or to adult children) when help is

needed. Stone, Rosenthal and Connidis (1998), for example, found that patterns of help provision among parents and children at different ages and life course stages were reflective of changing needs on the part of each generation. Thus, the highest levels of help received by parents are reported by those in advanced old age, and the highest levels of help given to children are reported by parents whose children's ages suggest they are engaged in bringing up their own young families. Although the focus of this paper has been the amount of help exchanged among generations, a related question is whether help is available when it is needed. A comprehensive understanding of helping patterns in Canadian families will only be attained when we have information on both the extent to which help is provided when needed and the overall amount of help that is exchanged in families.

It is probably also the case that a lot more help is exchanged in families than is ever reported in surveys because people do not consciously think about what they are doing as providing help. For example, if while visiting his mother last week a son changed a light bulb for her, he might not report that on a survey questionnaire. A slightly different type of help is that which is, in Shanas' words, "deliberately organized." For example, one might set aside times each week to do one's mother's grocery shopping or heavy housework. This type of organized help takes more planning and effort than more spontaneous help and is likely to be reported in response to questions asked by a researcher. However, we might well hypothesize that much more of the former type of help is exchanged in families than the latter type.

Finally, without intending to completely undermine the purpose of this paper, we would like to raise the issue of what data on helping, especially instrumental helping, tell us and what they fail to capture. Do we really want to know how much the generations help each other with transportation? Or do we want to know how much they are involved in each other's lives -- what they mean to one

another and how this meaning is expressed or manifested?

A narrow focus on helping -- or caregiving, which by some conceptualizations is helping in its most extreme or active form -- tends to obscure or distort the context of meaning within which helping occurs. A few researchers who have studied family caregiving to institutionalized elders (e.g. Bowers, 1988; Ross, Rosenthal and Dawson, 1997) have argued that scholars need to move beyond a focus on tasks to a broader focus on meaning. We would argue that we need to do this as well in the context of everyday family life.

Spitze and Logan urged researchers to begin to think about intergenerational helping as interdependence, as something that may occur as a part of normal visiting and interaction between parents and their adult children..."helping occurs in a range of situations varying from care for a totally dependent elder...to the incidental help that occurs as people interact. This range should be kept in mind as researchers continue to investigate reciprocal helping patterns in intergenerational relations." Spitze and Logan made this comment in 1992. 1999 is fast approaching. It is anything but apparent that we are closer to taking a broader perspective on helping or seeing aging families as far more than current or potential caregiving units.

The title of this paper suggests a narrow focus on helping. However, ultimately it points to a paradox and the resolution of that paradox lies, we suggest, in viewing helping between generations in the broader context of meaning. Ironically, while some scholars have been trying to move us towards a recognition of this broader context in the study of caregiving to highly disabled elders, a situation which while extremely challenging is experienced by a relatively small proportion of the population, there has been a neglect of the broader context of helping within the context of "normal" family life, a situation which is experience by the vast majority of the population. Beyond this,

however, we emphasize again that there is more to family life than helping or caregiving. Marshall, Matthews and Rosenthal have referred to the “elusiveness of family life” in the sociological study of aging families. They argued that preoccupation with a small set of issues has created a literature that likely appears “lifeless” in contrast to individuals’ own experiences of family life. Helping is only one dimension of family life. To fully understand helping in families, we must work towards viewing it in the broader context of its meaning to family members.

Table 1

Older Parents' Reports:
Percent of parents aged 65+ who give help to and receive help from a child (no time frame). United States, Shanas et al., 1968

Give help:	
Fathers	59
Mothers	60
Receive help:	
Fathers	61
Mothers	75

Table 2

Older Parents' Reports:
Percent of parents aged 70+ who gave help to and received help from a child in past year.
Hamilton, Ontario, Rosenthal, 1987

Gave help:	
Fathers	84
Mothers	71
Received help:	
Fathers	80
Mothers	84

Table 3

Parents' and Children's Reports
Percent who gave help to a child, gave help to a parent
Albany Area, New York, Spitze and Logan, 1992

Parent's Age	Parents' Reports: Gave help to child	Children's Reports: Gave help to parent
65-69	40	14
70-74	48	16
75+	16	38

Table 4

Adult Children's Reports:
Percent of Canadian children who helped a parent at least once in the past year.
1990 General Social Survey of Canada, Rosenthal et al., 1996

Age	Sons	Daughters
40-44	12	17
45-49	8	15
50-54	7	22
55-59	11	18

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