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Carolyn J. Rosenthal
Anne Martin-Matthews
Sarah H. Matthews

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**Caught in the Middle? Occupancy in Multiple Roles and Help to
Parents in a National Probability Sample of Canadian Adults**

Carolyn J. Rosenthal, ¹

Anne Martin Matthews, ²

and Sarah H. Matthews³

¹ Office of Gerontological Studies and Department of Sociology, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario.

² Department of Family Studies, University of Guelph, Ontario.

³ Department of Sociology, Cleveland State University.

ABSTRACT

This article considers, for a Canadian national probability sample of middle-aged women and men, the question of how typical is the experience of being "caught in the middle" between being the adult child of elderly parents and other roles. Three roles are examined: adult child, employed worker, and parent (and a refinement of the parent role, being a parent of a co-resident child). Occupancy in multiple roles is examined, followed by an investigation of the extent to which adults in various role combinations actually assist older parents and whether those who provide frequent help are also those "sandwiched" by competing commitments. The majority of middle-aged children do not provide frequent help to parents. Notably, the highest proportion of daughters who assist elderly parents are those in their fifties whose children are no longer co-resident. For both sons and daughters, being "caught in the middle" is far from a typical experience in this cross-sectional analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The effects on family structure of decreased mortality rates, increased life expectancy, and decreased fertility rates in modern societies have been described by demographers. Within families, members of more generations are likely to be alive at one time, although, with the exception of the oldest, the size of each generation is likely to be relatively smaller than was the case in the past (Bengtson, Rosenthal, and Burton, 1990; Uhlenberg, 1980, 1993). In addition, the increased participation of women in the labor force has changed the staging of family and occupational roles (Voydanoff, 1989). The staging of roles may be sequential or simultaneous. For example, if women staged their roles sequentially so that they first cared for dependent children, then for dependent elderly parents, and then entered the labor force, these roles would not conflict with one another. For women, sequential staging of employment and the role of parent to young children has been the norm until recently. Changes in patterns of labor force participation, however, as well as changes in kinship structure wherein greater proportions of middle-aged adults have parents alive, have increased the simultaneous staging of family and work roles, most notably for women but also for men.

Social gerontologists have expressed concern about the consequences of these changes for family members' ability to meet the needs of old parents, especially for women, the traditional purveyors of family care (Moen, Robison, and Fields, 1994; Treas, 1977). When demographic changes are considered together with economic changes, the effects on adult children are often seen as cause for considerable alarm. Women, who have traditionally cared for elderly parents in need, are now thought not only to face the demands of their parents, parents-in-law, husbands, children, and grandchildren, but those of employment as well. These are the "women in the middle" whose

plight has been described by Brody (1990).

Recent research has explored just how common the experience of being "sandwiched" among competing commitments is for adult women and men. As Uhlenberg (1993) notes, the arguments that the phenomenon of "women 'caught in the middle' is a growing problem are plausible and provocative, [but] empirical investigation is required to assess how common this phenomenon is" (p.229). After reviewing several articles that attempt to provide such evidence (Boyd and Treas, 1989; Rosenthal, Matthews, and Marshall, 1989; Spitze and Logan, 1990; Stone and Kemper, 1989), he concludes that "being 'caught in the middle' will continue to be an uncommon experience" (p.230, emphasis added). None of the studies cited by Uhlenberg, however, reports findings from a national probability sample, with the exception of Stone and Kemper (1989) who rely on a group of respondents derived from an initial probability sample. Evidence from such samples is required before Uhlenberg's conclusion can be accepted with confidence.

A related issue is whether various roles actually compete when adult children are structurally "caught" by virtue of occupying roles simultaneously (Franks and Stephens, 1992; Stoller and Pugliesi, 1989; Stull, Bowman, and Smerglia, 1994). The extent to which adult children who occupy multiple roles actually provide help to their parents must also be addressed. Spitze and Logan (1992) found that until parents reach the age of 75, adult children receive more help from parents than they give to them. Rosenthal, Matthews, and Marshall (1989) found that only a small proportion of adults provided help to elderly parents. Similarly, a study using data from the first National Survey of Families and Households and which focused on parent-child helping patterns but not on competing role demands indicated that, even when the provision of emotional support was included, fewer than 40 percent of adult children aged 19 and older gave assistance to their parents (Eggebeen,

1992). These findings suggest that the degree to which the structurally-based potential for role conflict actually translates into competing role demands on adult children in the population warrants exploration.

This study considers for a Canadian national probability sample of middle-aged women and men the percentages that are "sandwiched" between being the adult child of elderly parents and two other roles -- the parent role and employed worker role. Overall, the study asks how typical is the experience of being "caught in the middle." And for adult children who occupy roles simultaneously, to what extent do they in fact provide help to their parents?

Research Questions

Using a sample that permits generalization to a society as a whole, we ask the following research questions:

1. *What proportion of middle-aged women and men occupy various roles?*

1.a. How does occupancy vary by age and gender?

Answering research question 1 is a necessary step to provide the basis for pursuing the subsequent research questions.

2. *What proportion of middle-aged women and men occupy the adult child role in combination with the roles of parent and/or employee?*

2.a. How do these patterns of role occupancy vary by age and gender?

We expect more men than women to combine the roles of adult child and employed worker.

We also expect this combination to decline with age due to the death of parents and, after age 55, to retirement.

3. *Among middle-aged women and men who occupy the adult child role, what proportion provide help to parents at least monthly and at least yearly?*

3.a. How do helping patterns vary by age, gender and type of help?

We expect that the proportions of adult children who help parents will be modest. We expect women will help more than men do, and that this will vary by type of help. We expect help to parents to increase as the average age of parents increases.

4. *Among middle-aged women and men who occupy the adult child role and who help a parent at least monthly, what proportion also occupy the roles of parent and/or employee?*

4.a. How do patterns of multiple role occupancy vary by age and gender?

We expect relatively small proportions of adult children to simultaneously have a co-resident child and/or a paid job, and to help a parent frequently; when adult children's own children are young, their parents are relatively young and healthy and therefore unlikely to need help. We expect somewhat larger proportions of adult children to be parents of children not living in the household and to help a parent monthly, since this role combination is likely more common among adult children who are in later middle age and therefore whose parents are older and more likely to need assistance. We expect that simultaneous occupancy in the roles of adult child, parent of a coresident child, and employee will be somewhat more common among men than women because of men's higher rates of participation in the paid labor force.

Although research on the "caught in the middle" issue has focused primarily on women, we include both women and men in our analysis. We do not mean to imply that the impact of multiple role occupancy is equal for women and men. Most research indicates that women bear a greater

share of family responsibilities than do men and were we to examine the impact of multiple roles, we might well predict a more severe impact on women. The present study, however, lays the foundation for future studies of impact by comparing women and men on role occupancy and the provision of help to parents.

Methods

The General Social Survey of Canada is conducted yearly by Statistics Canada to gather data on social trends in Canadian society and to provide information on specific policy issues. The survey is a national sample of the population aged 15 years or older. Excluded from the sampling universe are residents of the Yukon and Northwest Territories, households without telephones, and full-time residents of institutions. Compared with the total population, these are tiny subgroups. We draw on data from the 1990 General Social Survey (Cycle 5), in which a total of 13,495 individuals were contacted, one per household. In each responding household, an individual respondent was randomly selected from residents aged 15 or over. An interview response rate of approximately 80 percent was achieved. All interviewing was by telephone, with probability sampling used to draw the numbers called. The survey method involved random digit dialing sampling techniques.

This research focuses on persons aged 35 to 64, the age range in which adults are portrayed in the literature as being "caught" between competing commitments to elderly parents, children, and jobs in the labor force (e.g., Smith and Dumas, 1994). In the General Social Survey sample, there were 2,703 women and 2,412 men in this age range. The data are weighted such that they are applicable to the Canadian private household population as a whole, with the caveats noted above.

Role Occupancy

The roles examined in this study are those described in the literature as "sandwiching" middle-aged adults. The first role is being a daughter or son, that is, currently having at least one living parent. The second role is being a parent, and a refinement of this, being a parent of a co-resident child. We differentiate the parent role according to whether a child lives in the household based on the assumption that, while having children of any age involves responsibilities, children who live in the household entail more demands than those who live elsewhere. The third role is that of employed worker. This role carries responsibilities that may conflict with those for aging parents or for children, particularly children who are still in the household. These conflicts may involve lack of time to meet various demands, scheduling issues, fatigue, and feelings of overload (Gottlieb, Kelloway, and Fraboni, 1994; Martin Matthews and Campbell, 1995). Although employment may carry positive benefits for adult children who provide care to older relatives, for example by providing social and financial resources as well as respite, it also entails "more demands on an already full plate" (Aneshensel et al., 1995, p.87). As well, employment and family responsibilities may directly conflict with one another (Aneshensel et al., 1995).

The adult child role was measured through direct questions asking whether the respondent had a living mother and father. The parent role was assessed through a question asking the respondent how many living children he/she had. As well, a question on household composition established whether a child lived in the respondent's household. The employment role was determined by a question that asked what phrase best described the respondent's main activity during the past 12 months. Response categories were: working at a job or business, looking for work, student, keeping house, retired, disabled. Respondents who answered "working at a job or business"

were coded as "employed"; all others were coded as "not employed." The employment role thus included both full-time and part-time workers.

Provision of Help to Parents

In the research literature, provision of help to parents is measured in various ways including type, volume, intensity, duration, or any combination of these (Martin Matthews and Rosenthal, 1993). The broader the definition of help, the higher the estimate of the extent of helping (Gorey, Rice, and Brice, 1992). In this study, respondents were asked how often they had provided "...unpaid help...to others...who are not part of your household...during the past 12 months". The types of help asked about were housework, house maintenance or outside work, transportation, personal care such as help with bathing or dressing, and financial support. Respondents who said they had provided help were asked for which person they had done so and how often they had done so. In the analysis, helping frequency is recoded as "at least once a year" and "at least once a month." The latter is a relatively stringent measure of help and indicates "active helping" (Spitze and Logan, 1990).

Data Analysis

Data are presented by five-year age groups. In keeping with the well documented finding of gender differences in the provision of help to elderly parents, data for women and men are presented separately. Gender and age differences are assessed using chi-square. Strength of association is assessed using Cramer's phi for 2 x 2 tables, and Cramer's V for others. These are appropriate measures of association when one or both variables are at the nominal level (Healey, 1990). Differences are reported as significant when $p < .01$ and when the strength of association is .10 or greater. This rule was adopted because, without it, the large sample size resulted in almost all relationships being statistically significant. In the presentation of findings, percentages are based on

weighted data; thus no raw numbers are included in the tables.

The distribution of role occupancy is presented for the sample as a whole. Next, for those with at least one living parent (and, therefore, the structurally based potential to be "sandwiched"), the distribution of daughters and sons in the six combinations of the three roles for five-year age categories is presented. Then, descriptive findings are presented on the extent to which various types of help are provided within two time frames, at least once a month and at least once a year. Finally, the analysis focuses on the extent to which daughters and sons in various role combinations actually provide help at least monthly to parents.

Results

Occupancy in Various Roles

The first research question asks what proportion of middle-aged women and men occupy various roles and how occupancy varies by age and gender. Table 1 presents percentages for women and men on indicators of occupancy in family, employment, and household roles. Over 90 percent of both men and women in the youngest age category (age 35 - 39) have living parents, but the percentage decreases significantly and at an accelerating rate with age. Over half of men and women have a living parent until the age 55 - 59 age group, when only about 4 in 10 are still in the adult child role. In the oldest age group, 60 - 64, only 2 in 10 still occupy this role.

[Table 1 about here]

Although our analysis throughout the rest of the paper does not distinguish among adult children who have one living parent or two living parents, we present this information in Table 1 for the reader's information. In the youngest age category (age 35 - 39), a majority of men and

women have two living parents. The percentages of men and women with two living parents drop after that, however, such that adults who still occupy the adult child role typically have only one parent alive.

As is to be expected, the average age of mothers and fathers increases with each of the age categories from youngest to oldest. Only for the respondents aged 60 - 64 does the average age of parents mark them as "oldest-old," and only approximately 20 percent of respondents in this age category have living parents. The decreasing size of the standard deviations for age of parents indicates that those in early middle age have parents across a wide range of ages, while those in the older age groups are dealing with parents more similar in age.

Although the vast majority of both men and women report being parents, in this sample age is positively associated with having children. Having a child in the household declines significantly with age, beginning in the age category 45 - 49, although for men the drop is more precipitous in the 50 - 54 age category. In the two oldest age groups, men are significantly more likely to have children in residence than are women. This gender difference occurs because, on average, men initially become and continue to become parents at later ages than do women.

In all age categories, at least 81 percent of men and 71 percent of women are married. Although the proportion of women who are married is lowest in the oldest age category (age 60 - 64), when the rate of widowhood begins its inexorable rise, there are no significant differences in marital status with age. Significant gender differences in the proportion married occur only in the oldest age category. In subsequent analyses, the role of spouse is not included because of the high proportion of married respondents and because most other discussions of being "caught in the middle" do not include the spousal role.

Between 64 percent and 68 percent of women in the three younger age categories (35 - 39, 40 - 44, 45 - 49) are employed, whereas over 90 percent of comparably aged men are employed. In the three age categories representing age 50 and older (50 - 54, 55 - 59, 60 - 64), employment rates decrease from youngest to oldest, most precipitously so in the oldest age category (60 - 64) in which only 24 percent of women and 44 percent of men report being employed. In every age category, men are significantly more likely than women to be employed. For both women and men, employment declines significantly with age.

Finally, very small percentages, ranging from 1 percent to 7 percent, of both women and men in all age categories share a household with elderly parents. There are no significant gender differences on this variable. There is no significant difference with age among women. Among men, however, there is a significant change with age. The pattern is curvilinear, with the highest proportion of men having a parent in the household occurring in the age category 40 - 44.

Simultaneous Occupancy in Roles

The second research question asks what proportion of women and men occupy the adult child role in combination with the roles of parent and/or employee, and how these patterns vary by age and gender. Table 2 presents the distribution of women and men who have a living parent (and therefore currently occupy the roles of daughter or son) into six, mutually exclusive combinations of the other family and employment roles. Panel A is included in Table 2 as a reminder of the percentages of women and men who have no living parents and who, therefore, are not faced with the possibility of being "caught" by parent care responsibilities. As already noted, with each older age category, the number of respondents who are orphans increases from less than 10 percent in the youngest age category to approximately 80 percent in the oldest.

[Table 2 about here]

The first role configuration (B1) listed is potentially the most demanding because it brings together all three roles and includes not only having a child but also having one in the household. The configuration that is potentially the least demanding, because only one of the three roles is occupied (adult child) (B6), is listed last. Ranking the remaining combinations with respect to the potential for multiple demands is more difficult. Nevertheless, we suggest that having a job is likely to create more difficulties in assisting an older parent than is having a child in the household; our logic is based on time and flexibility constraints, it typically being easier to organize child care arrangements than to take time off work. Based on this reasoning, we consider having a child not in the household and having a job (B2) to be potentially more problematic than having a child in the household but no job (B3). By the same reasoning, we suggest that having no child but having a job (B4) involves more potential conflict than having a child not in the household and no job (B5).

The configuration that holds the greatest structural potential for competing commitments for adult children (B1) describes substantial minorities of daughters in the three younger age categories (35 - 39 [41%], 40 - 44 [42%], 45 - 49 [35%]), but at older ages the percentages are extremely small. In every age category, higher proportions of sons are found in this configuration, largely because men are more likely to be employed. As well, the notable decrease in the percentage of sons in this configuration occurs in an older age category (age 55 - 59) than it does for daughters (age 50 - 54). As noted earlier, this is likely due to the fact that on average men become parents at later ages than do women and, thus, also experience the departure of the last child from the home at later ages.

The only other configuration for daughters that describes a sizable proportion of adult children is B3, the traditional woman who has a child in the household and who does not work

outside the home. This role configuration is more common among women than men in every age category. Thirty percent and 25 percent of women in each of the two youngest age categories (35 - 39, 40 - 44), 16 percent in the age category 45 - 49, and 13 percent in the age category 50 - 54 fall into this configuration. Other configurations that describe more than 10 percent of the women with children are B2 for daughters in the age categories 45 - 49 and 50 - 54, and B5 for daughters in the age categories 50 - 54 and 55 - 59. These daughters in B2 and B5 are counterparts to B1 and B3 when children are no longer in residence. Configuration B4, age 35 - 39, is the only other configuration describing more than one-tenth of daughters; this configuration denotes daughters who have a job but do not have children. The only configuration other than B1 which describes over one-tenth of sons with children is B2 in the age categories 45 - 49, 50 - 54 and 55 - 59, the counterpart to B1 when children are no longer in residence. The only other configuration describing over one-tenth of sons is B4 in the age category 35 - 39. None of the other role configurations is common for sons.

To highlight the main gender differences within age categories, men are consistently more likely than women to have the potentially most demanding combination of roles: having a living parent, child in household, and a paid job. Women, in contrast, are, until the oldest age category, more likely to have a living parent, child in household, and no paid job. By age 50 - 54, women are also more likely to have a living parent, no child in household, and no paid job. With the exception of this latter difference, gender differences in role configurations fade by the age category 60 - 64.

With respect to changes with age, two features bear note. One is the impact on patterns of occupancy of role configurations that results from children reaching adulthood and leaving the parents' home. Percentages of women and men in configurations including a child in household

decrease with age. The second aspect is the decrease, in later middle age, in being employed. Among men, this no doubt reflects early retirement. Among women, the decrease is likely due to either early retirement or a cohort effect in which labor force participation rates among older women are lower than among their younger counterparts. These trends combine such that occupancy in configuration B1 decreases with age for both women and men, and in configuration B3 decreases with age for women. There is a corresponding curvilinear pattern for B2; the rise reflects the departure of children from the household, while the ensuing decline reflects decreased labor force participation in older age categories.

Actual Provision of Help by Daughters and Sons

The third research question shifts the focus from women and men to daughters and sons, those who have at least one parent alive, and asks what proportion helped their parent and how helping varies by age and gender. The description of the actual provision of help to parents lays the foundation for the discussion to come as to whether those "sandwiched" are in fact providing help to parents. In Table 3, the percentages of daughters and sons in each age category who provided each of the specified types of help to a non-coresident parent at least monthly within the past year are presented. The table also includes the percentages of daughters and sons who provided at least one of the five types of help monthly or more often. Table 4 shows the percentages who helped the parent at least once during the past year. Helping monthly or more often is no doubt a better indication of being "active" in the role (Spitze and Logan, 1990), and for this reason we emphasize help monthly in the presentation of results. Data on help yearly are included to provide a more comprehensive picture of help provision. Ranges are included in Tables 3 and 4 as a measure of variation across age categories within gender.

[Table 3 about here]

[Table 4 about here]

For housework, the highest proportion of daughters who provided assistance at least monthly is 6 percent in the age categories 45 - 49 and 55 - 59. The highest proportion of daughters who helped at least once a year is 12% in the age category 45-49. Proportions of sons who provided this type of help are significantly lower, for both monthly and yearly, than proportions of daughters in all but the oldest age category.

Across age categories and types of help, transportation was provided by the highest proportions of both daughters and sons. The highest proportion of daughters who helped with transportation at least monthly is 14 percent (age 50 - 54); the highest proportion of sons is 10% (age 55 - 59). For at least once a year, the highest proportion of daughters is 18 percent (age 40 - 44) and of sons, 14 percent (age 55 - 59). In the age categories spanning ages 40 - 54, for help monthly or yearly, women are significantly more likely to have helped with transportation than are men. As well, for help monthly, women in the oldest age category are more likely to have provided this type of help than are men.

Personal care is arguably the most important type of help both because it may signify that the parent is highly dependent and it is the most demanding and intensive type of care. Very small percentages of daughters provided personal care, although the percentages increase with age, peaking at 7 percent at least monthly and 13 percent at least yearly for daughters aged 55 - 59. Among sons, a high of 1 percent provided personal care at least monthly and a high of 3 percent provided this type of care at least once a year. In the age categories 50 - 54 and 55 - 59, daughters are significantly more likely than sons to have provided personal care. Surprisingly, sons are slightly

more likely to have provided personal care at least once a year, although this difference disappears when the time frame is at least once a month.

A very small proportion of both daughters and sons provided financial assistance to parents. A gender difference appears only in the oldest age group; sons are more likely than daughters to have provided this type of help at least monthly and yearly.

The highest proportions of daughters and sons who helped with house maintenance/yard work at least monthly are 3 percent and 4 percent, respectively. The highest proportions who helped at least once a year are 7 percent of daughters and 10 percent of sons. In contrast to other research (Montgomery and Kamo, 1989), there are no significant gender differences with respect to the provision of this type of help.

Across age categories, from 11 percent to 22 percent of daughters and 7 percent to 12 percent of sons provided at least one of the five types of help to a parent monthly or more often. The percentages who provided at least one type of help at least once a year are higher: 16 percent to 29 percent for daughters and 12 percent to 22 percent for sons. The highest proportion of daughters who helped monthly is in the age category 50 - 54, while the highest proportion of sons is in the age category 40 - 44. The highest percentages of both daughters and sons who provided any help at least once a year are in the age category 40 - 44. There are significant gender differences in overall help provision between ages 45 and 59, with daughters being more likely than sons to have helped at least once a month and at least once a year.

Tables 3 and 4 indicate that somewhat higher proportions of adult children helped their parents at least once a year than once a month or more often. Only small minorities of adult children are "active" helpers. What is perhaps most noteworthy is that relatively small percentages of both

daughters and sons provided help to parents on even an annual basis. The findings regarding gender also bear note. As would be expected, where gender differences are found they usually indicate that daughters provided more help. However, the strength of association is weak in most instances. Moreover, in many instances there are no gender differences.

Of the five types of help, the broadest range is for personal care for daughters (<1% to 7% for monthly or more often, <1% to 13% for at least yearly). The only other range that rivals this is for transportation, the type of help provided by the highest proportions of daughters and sons. For the other three types of help, the ranges are quite small, indicating that relatively constant percentages of daughters and sons provide these types of help across age categories. This is especially evident for help at least monthly.

Multiple Role Occupancy and Help to Parents

The fourth research question focuses directly on the "sandwich generation" issue by asking what proportion of women and men have a parent alive, provided at least one type of help to a parent at least monthly, and have a child and/or a paid job. In Table 5, the proportions of adult children in each age and gender category who provided help monthly or more often are presented according to distribution among the role configurations. Therefore, total column percentages indicate all daughters and sons in the age category who provided frequent help. The reader is reminded that whereas Table 2 presented data for women and men in the population, Table 5 presents data only for women and men who have living parents. The percentages in each age and gender category would, therefore, be lower if the table were based on the total population rather than just on adult children. In Table 5, percentages of adult children that are described by some of the role configurations are so small that selecting only those who provided help to parents effectively

empties the cell. We omit configuration B6 from our discussion since it describes only 3 percent or less of the population in any age category (see Table 2).

[Table 5 about here]

Looking at the role configuration with the most potential for multiple demands (B1, child in household, job), the range for daughters was from a low of 0 percent for the two oldest age categories to a high of 7 percent for the two youngest age categories. For sons, the range is from a low of 3 percent in the age category 60 - 64 to a high of 8 percent in the age category 40 - 44. The other role configurations of interest are B2 (child not in household, job), B3 (child in household, no job), and B5 (child not in household, no job). In none of these is the percentage higher than 12 percent in any age category for daughters and 3 percent for sons. It is noteworthy that the two age and configuration categories in which the highest proportions of daughters provided help are B2 (9% of daughters aged 50 - 54) and B5 (12% of daughters aged 55 - 59). For daughters, then, helping parents at least monthly occurred when few other roles were occupied. For sons, the highest proportion providing frequent help to parents occurred in configuration B1, the prototypical "caught in the middle" situation; relatively small proportions of sons (the highest being 8%), however, have the roles described by B1 and help parents frequently. As indicated in Table 5, there are significant gender differences in the distribution of daughters and sons among the various configurations. There were also significant changes in distribution with age for daughters, but not for sons.

Overall, then, among people who have a parent alive, the likelihood of actually helping that parent is very low. Further, with respect to the issue of being "caught in the middle," women who actively help a parent tend not to be in the configurations denoting multiple roles. Even if all who coreside with a parent (Table 1) are considered to provide help (completely ignoring the issue of

reciprocal help from the parent to the child), the new percentages would still be low. For example, looking at daughters aged 40 - 44 who have a child in the household and a job, adding 4 percent for coresiding parents (assuming all daughters who have a coresident parent are in this particular role configuration) there would be 17% of Canadian daughters who are "caught." Therefore, including coresident parents would not alter our overall conclusions about how common or uncommon active helping is nor how typical it is to be "caught in the middle."

Discussion

Using a Canadian national probability sample, this study addressed four questions relating to the "sandwich generation" issue: (1) What proportion of middle-aged women and men occupy various roles? (2) What proportion of middle-aged adults are "sandwiched" by virtue of occupancy of the adult child role in combination with the roles of parent and/or employee? (3) What proportion of middle-aged adults who occupy the adult child role actually help their parent(s)? (4) Among adult children who help a parent at least monthly, what proportion also occupy the roles of parent and/or employee and might therefore be considered to be "caught in the middle"? Throughout, attention has been given to gender and age differences.

Role Configurations

The proportion of middle-aged Canadians who have no living parents is striking, especially so in the older age categories. This means, of course, that they cannot be "sandwiched" between responsibilities for elderly parents and other role commitments or, in Himes' (1994) words, they are not "at risk."

Also noteworthy is that the proportion of adults with living parents drops sharply from age

50 - 54 onward such that in the age category 50 - 54 only slightly more than half of men and women have a living parent, dropping to about 4 in 10 in the age category 55 - 59. These men and women are at some risk of facing the demands of parent care since the average age of parents is over age 75, placing them in the "old old" age range and suggesting an increased likelihood of health-related disabilities. Research by Spitze and Logan (1992) on the provision of help to parents by children and vice versa found that, in general, far greater proportions of parents helped children than received help from children but that this pattern shifted for parents who were over the age of 75. Adults aged 45 - 49 have considerable potential to be "sandwiched" between the demands of the adult child role and other roles: most women and men in this age category have a living parent whose age is about 75 or older; about one-third to one-half have a widowed parent; a substantial majority have a child in the household, and most are employed.

The distribution of Canadian men and women into the various role configurations we examined shows that about one-third of women and half of men aged 45 - 49 have the potentially most demanding combination of roles and have parents whose age places them at some risk of disability with subsequent need for assistance from children. In the older age categories the proportions of respondents who have a living parent, children in residence, and who are employed are smaller. Substantial minorities of women in the two youngest age categories are in the potentially most demanding combination of roles, that is, an employed daughter with at least one child in residence. It is also noteworthy that 25 percent to 30 percent of Canadian women in the two youngest age categories fall into the configuration denoting nonemployed wife with at least one child in residence. Younger women (and men), of course, are likely to have relatively young parents who are not likely to need help.

As was the case for women, the highest proportions of men in role combinations indicating the potential to be "caught" are found in younger age categories. The distribution is different for men, however, because of their higher rate of labor force participation and their somewhat later timing of parenthood. For the potentially most demanding role combination -- employed son with at least one child in residence -- from a high of 62 percent for the youngest age category (35 - 39) the proportions gradually decrease to 29 percent for the age category 50 - 54 and drop sharply after that. In the age category 50 - 54, the other men are distributed among those with no parents (42%) and those who are employed husbands/sons with children who are not in residence (18%). The remaining sons (11%) are distributed among the other four role combinations. In the age category (50 - 54), over 80 percent are employed and over 80 percent are married, which means that only a small proportion of sons is available for any role configuration that does not include these two roles.

Helping Parents

Our analysis examined the proportions of adult children who provided any of five types of help to a parent at least once a month and at least once a year. We suggest that the figures for helping monthly or more often, rather than less than monthly, indicate children who are actively involved in helping parents (although some might argue that the time frame should be even more stringent). In fact, small percentages of children are so involved. It should be noted that the percentages reported for helping behavior are based only on respondents who are daughters and sons. Had the percentages been based on all women and men in the Canadian population, they would have been considerably smaller, especially for the older age categories in which most respondents are orphans. In addition to the relatively low percentages, most striking is the

consistency in the proportions of adult children providing help across age categories within each gender. For each age category for most types of help, similar proportions of adult children provide help. The exceptions are transportation, and, for daughters, personal care. The proportions providing personal care, however, were extremely small. Even the percentages of daughters and sons who provided at least one type of help monthly or more often are low, never more than 22 percent of daughters and 12 percent of sons. This relatively low variation across age categories and the relatively small proportions of children providing help are in sharp contrast to Himes' projection (1994) based on simulated data that "among older women who have a surviving parent caregiving is common" (p.207). The findings reported here indicate that daughters and sons in the older age categories are not a great deal more likely to be providing care than those in younger age categories. As well, rather small proportions provide any help, even on a yearly basis. It should be noted that Himes' measure asked about any help within the past year, a measure that we would argue is too broad to be properly termed "caregiving."

A strength of the measure of help used in this research is that it is tied to behavior and incorporates frequency of provision. Had emotional support been included, the percentage of positive responses would be higher (Rosenthal, 1987). It would, however, be much more difficult to interpret what it means to be "caught" had our measure been broadened in this way. Our help measure did not explicitly include help in a period of crisis. As parents age and experience health declines, the provision of episodic care, often in conjunction with a health crisis, becomes more common (Gignac, Martin Matthews, and Rosenthal, 1995). In all likelihood, however, our measure captured episodic help, since the time frame was the past year.

Multiple Role Occupancy and Help to Parents

Our analysis brought together the two issues of multiple role occupancy and active provision of help to parents. In all age categories, the proportions of daughters and sons in the potentially most problematic combination of roles who actively helped parents were very small. Being truly "caught in the middle" is, therefore, very uncommon. Perhaps ironically, however, this situation describes the highest proportion of sons who actively help parents. Among daughters, active help to parents is more common at older ages when there are fewer potentially conflicting roles. Thus, for example, while 18 percent of daughters aged 55 - 59 provided active help to parents, these daughters no longer had a child in the household and were not in the paid labor force. It should be noted, moreover, that the highest proportion of daughters in any age group which actively helped parents was 22 percent, not a very large proportion by any count.

In sum, among people who have a parent alive, the proportion who help that parent is very low. Further, with respect to being "caught in the middle," the highest proportions of daughters who help parents are not in the configurations denoting multiple roles.

Future Research

The strength of the analysis presented here is that it is based on a national probability sample. The data, however, are cross-sectional. Men and women move from one set of role configurations to another throughout their lives. Recent work by Moen, Robison, and Fields (1994), however, suggests that longitudinal data would support the findings of the present study. Moen and colleagues asked women in four age cohorts to describe transitions in and out of role configurations over the course of their lives, in order to estimate the prevalence of the combinations of roles over the life course. Similar to the results of the intensive interviews reported by Rosenthal, Matthews, and Marshall (1989), the proportion who provided care to parents in combination with other roles was

quite low. Research with a prospective longitudinal design, however, is needed to provide a truly comprehensive understanding of multiple role occupancy and the provision of help to aging parents.

Future research should include investigation of both occupancy in and the content of other roles, for example, the child-in-law and spouse roles. Incorporating the amount of help provided to adult children into analyses is also needed. Moreover, research that focuses less on the individual as the provider of help and more on couples or families is very much needed. Additionally, future research using samples generalizable to the population should include variables related to the needs of aging parents such as health, and marital and economic status. Similarly, analyses should include variables related to the resources of adult children and to the needs of their children.

Finally, this study's focus on being "caught" needs to be extended to address the issue of the degree to which roles complement one another. Terms such as "women in the middle" convey an implicitly negative view of multiple roles. The impact, however, need not be wholly or even partially negative. Recent research (Stull, Bowman, and Smerglia, 1994) suggests that the number of roles daughters of elderly parents occupy is unrelated to their levels of stress, with the exception of employed daughters reporting more physical stress. Work by Verbrugge (1983) and Baruch and Barnett (1986) on the relationship between number of roles occupied and physical and mental health raises questions about the linear relationship between number of roles and levels of stress. Rosow (1994) argues that "the relations among an individual's roles" is a neglected area of research:

But roles do not only interfere with or reinforce one another. They also modulate each other qualitatively. The problem is how this occurs. How do different roles modify each other, singly and in combination? Or, in technical sociology, what is the interaction within the status set? (p.295)

In the context of this study, Rosow's comments raise the question of what is the interaction of the roles within the status set adult child, parent, and member of the labor force? How does occupancy in these roles and the variety of ways in which these roles are actually performed affect persons' ability to confidently meet the demands? Clearly, these are issues that merit further investigation.

Conclusion

Much like the myth of abandonment of old parents as described by Shanas (1979), the image of the "sandwich generation" may become an entrenched myth that will contribute to the growing lore about the "burden" on modern societies of "too many" elderly people. In fact, the image of "women in the middle" has found favor with the popular press as it has with those who are concerned with family caregivers (Briar and Kaplan, 1990). Before concluding that "women in the middle" are representative of middle-aged women (and men) in North American societies and putting in action policies based on this assumption, it is necessary to determine just how common these circumstances are in the general population.

In this study we have shown that being "caught in the middle" is not a typical experience. This provides an important counterpoint to the view of older people as dependent and adult children as burdened. This does not, however, diminish the importance of examining the experiences of those adult children who are "caught" or, more broadly, who may be properly defined as "caregivers" to older parents. In other words, while being "caught" may not be typical, when it does occur its impact may be severe. Researchers should continue to investigate the impact of multiple roles and their ensuing demands, but should keep clear and separate the extent to which such impact is experienced by middle-aged sons and daughters.

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Address correspondence to Dr. Carolyn J. Rosenthal, Office of Gerontological Studies, DC 229, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, L8S 4K1. Internet: crosent@mcmail.cis.mcmaster.ca

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Table 1. Percentage of Canadians in Various Roles by Age and Gender

Age:	35 - 39		40 - 44		45 - 49		50 - 54		55 - 59		60 - 64	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Role												
Number of Parents												
0	9	8	15	15	21	26	47	41	61	62	79	82
1	36	36	46	41	52	47	39	46	35	33	18	17
2	55	56	39	44	27	27	14	13	5	4	3	1
Age of mother (\bar{X})												
$\frac{M}{SD}$	64	65	70	69	74	73	78	78	82	83	86	86
SD	6	6	6	6	6	6	5	5	5	4	4	3
Age of father (\bar{X})												
$\frac{M}{SD}$	67	68	72	72	76	77	79	79	83	84	86	86
SD	6	7	6	6	5	5	6	5	5	4	3	4
Have living children	80	78	88	86	88	88	93	88	91	92	90	87
Have child in household	77	71	80	78	63	70	49	54	36	48	19	29
Married	77	82	81	83	76	84	77	83	78	82	71	81
Employed	64	93	64	91	68	93	54	88	44	79	24	44
Parent(s) lives in household	5	3	4	7	5	4	2	4	3	1	3	2

Table 2. Canadians in Combinations of Role Occupancies, by Age and Gender (Column percentages)

Combination of Role Occupancies	Age:	35 - 39		40 - 44		45 - 49		50 - 54		55 - 59		60 - 64	
		Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
		A. No living parent	9	8	15	15	21	27	47	42	61	63	80
B. Living parent and:													
1. Child in household and job		41	62	42	61	35	50	11	29	4	15	<1	3
2. Child not in household and job		2	6	5	8	14	11	13	18	10	13	3	5
3. Child in household and no job		30	3	25	4	16	2	13	2	8	2	2	2
4. No child and job		15	17	8	9	8	8	1	6	1	2	1	2
5. Child not in household and no job		1	1	2	1	5	1	13	1	14	4	12	5
6.No child and no job		3	3	3	2	2	<1	2	2	2	1	2	1
Gender: V		.38*		.32*		.31*		.40*		.29*		.17*	

Age: Women V=.31*
Men V=.28*

Note: Columns may not total to 100% due to rounding.

*p <.0001

Table 3. Percentage of Canadian Daughters and Sons Who Help Parents at Least Once a Month, by Age

Age:	35 - 39		40 - 44		45 - 49		50 - 54		55 - 59		60 - 64		Range	
	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons
Housework	4*	1*	5*	1*	6*	2*	4*	1*	6*	<1*	4	3	4 - 6	<1 - 3
Transportation	8	6	13*	5*	11*	5*	14*	3*	12	10	8*	3*	8 - 14	3 - 10
Personal care	2	<1	1	1	2	1	6*	<1*	7*	<1*	<1	<1	<1 - 7	<1 - 1
Financial support	1	1	2	2	<1	<1	1	1	<1	<1	<1*	3*	<1 - 2	<1 - 3
Outside work/ Household maintenance	3	4	2	4	3	3	1	3	2	4	1	4	1 - 3	3 - 4
Provide at least one of the above	13	10	17	12	15*	8*	22*	7*	18*	11*	11	10	11 - 22	7 - 12

*p<.0001. Significant gender differences within age category.

Table 4. Percentage of Canadian Daughters and Sons Who Help Parents at Least Once a Year, by Age

Help With:	Age: 35 - 39		40 - 44		45 - 49		50 - 54		55 - 59		60 - 64		Range	
	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons
Housework	7*	2*	9*	3*	12*	2*	8*	1*	8*	<1*	7	6	7 - 12	<1 - 6
Transportation	11	10	18*	8*	16*	9*	16*	7*	14	14	11	7	11 - 18	7 - 14
Personal care	3	1	3	1	5	2	7*	<1*	13*	<1*	<1*	3*	<1 - 13	<1 - 3
Financial support	4	4	4	5	2	3	3	4	1	2	<1*	3*	<1 - 4	2 - 5
Outside work/ Household maintenance	7	9	6	10	4	5	3	5	4	4	1	4	1 - 7	4 - 10
Provide at least one of the above	23	20	29	22	28*	16*	28*	14*	25*	15*	16	12	16 - 29	12 - 22

*p<.0001. Significant gender differences within age category.

Table 5. Canadian Daughters and Sons Who Help Parents Monthly or More Often,
by Age and Combination of Role Occupancies (Column percentages)

Age:		35 - 39		40 - 44		45 - 49		50 - 54		55 - 59		60 - 64	
		Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons
Combination of Role Occupancies													
A.	Living Parent(s), do not help	87	90	83	89	85	92	79	93	82	89	89	90
B.	Living Parent(s) and:												
1.	Child in household and job	7	6	7	8	6	6	4	4	<1	7	<1	3
2.	Child not in household and job	<1	<1	1	2	3	1	9	2	4	2	1	3
3.	Child in household and no job	4	1	6	1	3	<1	2	<1	1	<1	1	3
4.	No child and job	2	3	2	<1	1	1	<1	<1	1	<1	1	<1
5.	Child not in household and no job	<1	<1	1	<1	1	<1	6	<1	12	2	8	1
6.	No child and no job	<1	<1	<1	1	<1	<1	1	<1	<1	<1	<1	1
Gender: V		.12*		.19*		.16*		.25*		.29*		.24*	

Age: Women V=.15*
Men V=.09

Note: Columns may not total to 100% due to rounding.

*p<.0001.

IESOP RESEARCH PAPERS

Number	Title	Author(s)
(1996)		
No. 1:	Public Pensions in Canada	J.B. Burbidge
No. 2:	How Old Is Old? Revising the Definition Based on Life Table Criteria	F.T. Denton B.G. Spencer
No. 3:	The Future Population of Canada and Its Age Distribution	F.T. Denton C.H. Feaver B.G. Spencer
No. 4:	Caught in the Middle? Occupancy in Multiple Roles and Help to Parents in a National Probability Sample of Canadian Adults	C.J. Rosenthal A. Martin-Matthews S.H. Matthews