Intergenerational Family Relationships

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to determine whether he is driven by self-interest or prosocial motives.

**Adaptation.** Where do the motives that guide the transformation process come from? In a novel situation, John may treat the situation as a unique problem, carefully examining his options; alternatively, he may react impulsively. In either event, he acquires experience: If his reaction yields poor outcomes, he may behave differently in future, parallel situations; if his reaction yields good outcomes, he is more likely to react similarly in future, parallel situations. **Adaptation** describes the processes whereby repeated experience in situations with similar structure give rise to stable transformation tendencies that on average yield good outcomes. Stable adaptations may reside within persons, relationships, or groups (see below).

**Interpersonal dispositions** are actor-specific inclinations to respond to specific situations in a specific manner across numerous partners. Over the course of development, people undergo different experiences with kin and peers. As a result, people acquire dispositions to perceive situations in specific ways, anticipate specific motives from others, and transform situations in predictable ways. In short, the "self" is the sum of one's adaptations to previous interdependence problems. For example, if John benefited from good caregiving as a child, he is likely to feel more comfortable with dependence, which may cause him to behave in a more trusting manner in situations involving high dependence and conflicting interests.

**Relationship-specific motives** are inclinations to respond to situations in a specific manner with specific partners. For example, Mary’s trust reflects her confidence in John’s benevolence. Mary develops trust when John enacts a prosocial behavior, departing from his self-interest to promote her welfare. His actions communicate responsiveness to her needs, thereby enhancing Mary’s trust in his motives, causing her to feel less fearful in situations involving conflicting interests, encouraging prosocial transformation, and thereby enhancing the probability of reciprocal benevolence. This form of trust is relationship-specific and exists above and beyond generalized tendencies people possess based on their longstanding dispositions.

**Social norms** are rule-based, socially transmitted inclinations to respond to particular situations in a specific manner. For example, societies develop rules regarding the expression of anger; such rules help groups avoid the chaos that would ensue if people were to freely express hostility. Likewise, dyads may also develop relationship-specific norms that promote harmonious day-to-day interaction (e.g., agreements about the fair division of household chores).

**Conclusion**

Interdependence Theory provides unique and necessary tools for analyzing interpersonal phenomena. Whereas most psychological theories focus on the individual, suggesting that people behave as they do because of their unique traits or cognitions, in interdependence theory, the relationships between people are as important as the people. Thus, the theory represents an elegant, functional model of the nature and implications of interdependence. It is a truly social psychological theory.

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**Further Readings**


**INTERGENERATIONAL FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

Ties between the generations have been of great interest throughout recorded history, as demonstrated by...
the central role of these relationships in popular works of fiction as varied as Shakespeare's plays in the 16th century and Bernhard Schlink's novel Homecoming and the television series Everybody Loves Raymond in the 21st century. Not surprisingly, both clinicians and scholars have devoted substantial effort to describing and explaining relations among family members in different generations. This high level of professional and popular attention is consistent with the importance that individuals place on their family relationships. Indeed, given high rates of divorce and geographic mobility in contemporary society, relationships between parents and children are likely to be the most stable and long-term ties that people experience. Further, research has shown that both parents' and children's well-being is affected by the quality of their relationship and by the problems they each experience. Thus, there is ample evidence to demonstrate the centrality of this intergenerational tie.

This entry begins by describing historical and demographic trends in intergenerational relationships, followed by discussion of the factors that characterize parent-child relationships that are the most satisfying and stable. The entry then turns to two issues of concern to aging families: caregiving to frail parents and elder maltreatment. Finally, the entry describes trends in grandparent-grandchild relations, a tie that has become increasingly complex in recent decades due to increased life expectancy and increasing rates of difficulties in the lives of many adult children.

Historical and Demographic Trends

Several trends over the last century have affected intergenerational relationships. The trend that has had the greatest impact is the dramatically lengthened life span; for a child born in 1900, life expectancy was 48 years; by 2005, it had increased to nearly 78 years. Perhaps even more important, for individuals who are now about 50 years of age, the life expectancy for women is 33 additional years and for men it is 29 years. Thus, family members now spend more time occupying intergenerational family roles as adult children, parents, and grandparents than did any earlier cohorts.

The second major demographic change is a decline in parent-adult child co-residence. Co-residence with adult children when parents entered their later years was common in earlier historical periods; however, there was a dramatic decline in this pattern across the 20th century in the United States. Nevertheless, many parents and adult children still co-reside, although more recently co-residence typically involves the adult child living in the parents' home rather than the reverse. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2006, 22 percent of householders 65 and older had an adult child living with them, whereas only 3 percent of householders ages 25 to 54 had an older family member co-residing.

The third important change involves women's increased participation in the labor force, reducing the time and energy devoted to "kinkeeping." In fact, married women's labor force participation has increased from 30 to 60 percent since 1970 alone. Although one might expect that this demographic change would lead to women doing markedly less caregiving, in most cases, women instead expand their responsibilities to meet their older parents' need for assistance.

Finally, the paths that current middle-age Americans (referred to as the "baby boomers") have followed differ from earlier cohorts in ways that affect kin relations. Compared with earlier cohorts, baby boomers have been more likely to remain unmarried, have lower birth rates, and become divorced, each of which tends to weaken intergenerational ties, particularly for men.

Although these sociodemographic transitions have changed the face of family life in the past several decades, research has shown that none has reduced the importance of the parent-child relationship in adulthood. Both high levels of contact and mutually supportive exchanges are reported by parents and their adult children despite the presence of conflict and ambivalence common to intimate interpersonal relations. Further, at the end of parents' lives, adult children often provide care and support, particularly when a parent is widowed.

Closeness and Contact Between Parents and Adult Children

In the 1950s and 1960s, scholars expressed concern that intergenerational contact and support were increasingly threatened by industrialized societies. However, research has demonstrated these concerns were unfounded. Most parents and
adult children have relatively frequent and regular contact with parents despite that adult children are more likely to live farther away from their families of origin than were previous cohorts. Further, studies of the quality of relations between the generations find consistent evidence that the emotional ties between parents and adult children remain strong, particularly between women in the family. Recent investigations have revealed that conflict and ambivalence are more common characteristics of intergenerational relations than previously thought; nevertheless, the most prominent pattern of parent–adult child relations continues to be positive and supportive.

Exchange of Support, Parental Dependency, and Family Caregiving

Most families are characterized by mutual exchange between the generations, typically following a pattern reflecting the life course stages of parents and adult children. When offspring are young adults, support tends to flow from parent to child in the form of assistance in establishing independent lives. As children leave young adulthood, support still generally flows from parent to child, but usually diminishes somewhat. It is typically only in the late stages of the parents’ life that the direction of support flows more heavily from child to parent.

Most assistance provided to parents is routine and produces little strain; however, as parents age and experience declines in health and income, adult children are increasingly likely to assume the role of family caregiver. This represents a major life-course transition for adult children that typically has far-reaching consequences for the caregiver’s physical, mental, and social well-being. This is particularly the case if the parent has developed Alzheimer’s disease or some other form of irreversible dementia.

Studies have focused primarily on the difficulties that adult children experience when they begin caring for older parents. This line of research has shown that parents’ increased dependence on their adult children often reduces positive feelings between the generations while increasing children’s difficulty managing the competing roles of spouse, parent, and worker. Not surprisingly, caregiving is often associated with increases in adult children’s physical and emotional stress.

However, the effects of caregiving are not uniformly bleak. First, studies have found that many caregivers identify positive consequences of caregiving, such as feelings of gratification derived from helping someone they love and fulfilling expectations of filial responsibility. Second, several circumstances affect the consequences of caregiving on adult children. For example, caregiving is associated with fewer negative and more positive outcomes when the parent and child have a history of closeness and support and when there is little conflict among siblings regarding parent care. Further, among married adult daughters, those whose husbands are supportive of the daughters’ caregiving efforts experience more positive outcomes. Recent studies have shown that parents have specific expectations and preferences regarding which of their children take primary responsibility for caregiving. Future research may reveal that caregiving outcomes are better for both parents and children when those preferences and expectations are met. Understanding the factors that improve the quality of the caregiving experience may also be an important key to reducing the risk of elder maltreatment because individuals most likely to need assistance—those with physical and psychological impairments—are at a higher risk of becoming victims of such maltreatment than are more healthy persons.

Determinants of the Quality of Parent–Child Relationships

Understanding the quality of parent–adult child relations has been of great interest to scholars and clinicians. The most consistent finding in studies of intergenerational relations is the primacy of the bond between mothers and daughters, which is stronger than that of any other gender combination in the family. Children’s transitions into adult social statuses also typically improve relations between the generations. For example, the parent–child tie becomes more harmonious as adolescents move into adulthood, and it continues to strengthen as both children and parents move across the life course. Further, there is generally increased closeness when children begin to share a large number of adult statuses with their parents, such as employment, marriage, and parenthood. However, the trend toward greater closeness when children attain
adult status is not always straightforward because some adult transitions (such as becoming a parent) also increase competition for scarce time and energy, leaving fewer resources for intergenerational relationships. Nevertheless, children’s transitions into adult status increase the similarity of values and interests between parents and children, which enhance closeness and reduce conflict.

Recent studies have shown that parents often differentiate among their adult children in terms of emotional closeness, preferences for support, and provision of support to the younger generation. The factors just discussed are the best predictors of which children are most likely to be favored—daughters and children who are more similar to the parents in terms of values and social structural positions. In addition, parents favor children who live nearby.

Major problems in adult children’s lives have been shown to have detrimental effects on parent-child relationships. For example, parents are likely to experience poorer relationships with children who have mental, physical, substance abuse, or stress-related problems. Such problems have stronger effects on parent-child conflict and ambivalence than parents’ feelings of emotional closeness toward their children. Not surprisingly, problems for which children are perceived as not responsible, such as illness, have fewer negative effects than those for which they are perceived as responsible, such as substance abuse or trouble with the law. Regardless of whether the problem is voluntary, children’s difficulties have been found to affect their parents’ physical and psychological well-being.

Adult children’s problems also increase the risk of elder maltreatment. In fact, children’s problems are a better predictor of elder maltreatment than parents’ dependency. Abusive adult children are likely to be financially dependent, live with their parent(s), have problems related to alcohol and drugs, and have some indication of socioemotional maladjustment.

### Diversity and Older Parent–Adult Child Relations

Studies have revealed both similarities and differences in intergenerational relationships among racial and ethnic groups. Both parents and children of all racial and ethnic groups appear to place substantial importance on both the emotional and instrumental aspects of intergenerational relations, reporting high levels of closeness, as well as regular contact and a history of exchange. However, research has revealed notable racial and ethnic variations in these relationships. African Americans and Hispanics appear to have stronger ideals regarding filial obligations than do their White Anglo counterparts, and they are more likely to exchange support. Further, older African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to live with their adult children. Both African-American parents and adult children report higher levels of closeness and lower levels of conflict than do Whites; however, such differences are not found between Whites and Hispanics. Comparisons reveal greater filial responsibility, exchange of support, and intergenerational coresidence among Asian Americans than Anglos, but substantial diversity among Asian subgroups regarding intergenerational support. Rapidly expanding diversity in the United States makes it increasingly important to understand patterns and consequences of racial and ethnic variations in older parent–adult child relations.

### Grandparents and Grandchildren

In recent years, popular and scholarly interest in relationships between grandchildren and grandparents has grown. This can, in part, be attributed to the historical and demographic changes outlined earlier, each of which has influenced the role of grandparenting as well as parenting. First, due to increasing life expectancy, most parents of adult children will occupy the role of grandparent for nearly one third of their lives. Second, the effects of high rates of divorce extend to ties between grandparents and grandchildren. Adult children’s divorces often reduce contact and closeness between grandparents and grandchildren—particularly on the father’s side of the family. Third, although intergenerational coresidence has declined overall across the past century, such residential arrangements remain common in Black and Hispanic families, thus providing higher levels of grandchild-grandparent contact in these groups than that found in White families.

Grandparents often play a major role in raising their grandchildren. In coresidential families in which parents are present, grandparents are less
burdened by parenting stress, and can serve primarily as a source of support; however, when grandparents serve as sole guardians of grandchildren, they are more likely to experience decreased well-being—particularly greater depression and lower life satisfaction.

Predictors of the quality of grandparent–grandchild relations are well documented. Closeness and contact are greater when the generations live near each other and when grandparents are better educated, healthy, have fewer grandchildren, and are married. Families living in rural areas also have stronger intergenerational links. Other relations in the family also affect the quality of the grandparent–grandchild tie. For example, grandparents are likely to be more supportive and attentive to grandchildren if they had positive childhood experiences with their own grandparents. Also, grandparent–grandchild ties depend heavily on relationships with the parent generation. If there is high affectional solidarity and support between the grandparents and parents, the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren will also tend to be strong.

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See also Caregiving Across the Life Span; Elder Abuse and Neglect; Grandparent–Grandchild Relationship; Kinkeeping; Mother–Child Relationship in Adolescence and Adulthood; Multigenerational Households; Parent–Child Relationships

**Further Readings**


**Intergenerational Transmission of Abuse**

Most people believe that most or all abusive adults must have been exposed to abuse as children. Professionals have labeled this phenomenon “the cycle of violence” or “the intergenerational transmission of violence,” and it is the most heavily researched phenomenon within family maltreatment. Is there merit to these assumptions? If so, how strong is the effect? This entry reviews what has been learned, focusing on conceptualization of the phenomenon, extent of transmission, and possible mechanisms by which transmission may occur.

**Conceptualization**

One might think that intergenerational transmission of abuse would be a relatively straightforward concept; however, this is not the case. Children can be direct victims of maltreatment, they can be exposed to interparental violence, or both. As adults, they can maltreat their own children, they can perpetrate or be victimized by partner violence, or both. Maltreatment can be further subdivided into physical, emotional, sexual, and/or neglect subtypes.

In research, the definitions of maltreatment vary widely. Many studies follow children who were substantiated by local Child Protective Services (CPS) as being maltreated. However, state statutes vary widely, as do local CPS’ de facto standards for what is substantiated as maltreatment. In studies that rely on self- or parent reports of maltreatment, researchers frequently rely on reports of behaviors (e.g., being struck by a parent) without requiring impact on the victim (e.g., bruises) or extreme danger, as CPS investigations would. Furthermore, victims often experience more than one subtype of abuse (e.g., both physical and emotional), and child and partner maltreatment often co-occur in the same homes. With such variety in what can be and has been examined, interpretation and comparison of abuse research findings is often difficult. This entry is as specific as space will allow; interested readers will find more detailed information in the supplementary readings.

**Extent of Transmission**

What effect does the presence of violence or abuse in a childhood home (i.e., “family of origin” [FOO]) have on the probability that a particular type of abuse will be present in the adult homes of