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Giving to the Good and the Needy: Parental Support of Grown Children

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Abstract

Parents may provide many types of support to their grown children. Parents aged 40 to 60 ($N = 633$) reported the support they exchange with each child over age 18 ($n = 1,384$). Mothers and fathers differentiated among children within families, but provided emotional, financial, and practical help on average every few weeks to each child. Offspring received most assistance when they: (a) had greater needs (due to problems or younger age) or (b) were perceived as more successful. Parents received more from high achieving offspring. Findings support contingency theory; parents give more material and financial support to children in need. Motivation to enhance the self or to assure support later in life may explain support to high achieving offspring.

Keywords

family; intergenerational relations; intergenerational transfers; parent child relations; social support; transition to adulthood

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Popular culture laments that young people today remain dependent on their parents, and recent news reports indicate how expensive and time consuming grown children have become (Briggs, 2008; Haughney, 2007). Research partially supports these claims, with studies indicating that more help flows downstream from parents to children rather than upstream to parents (at least until parents suffer declines of old age; Grundy, 2005; Soldo & Hill, 1995; Zarit & Eggebeen, 2002). Yet, there is little research specifically examining the types of support exchanged among parents and each of their young adult offspring.

The first purpose of this study was to examine the range of support middle-aged parents provide grown children. By examining different types of support parents provide to each grown child, we can better understand when parents: (a) simply pass along potential future inheritance via financial transfers inter-vivo, (b) assist children's transitions into adulthood with advice and emotional support, (c) engage in socialization characteristic of friendship, or (d) provide a combination of these forms of support. The second purpose of this study was to understand factors that account for different support exchanges. That is, we were interested whether types of support vary by offspring's characteristics (offspring's needs and achievements) within families. We also examined parent characteristics (resources and demands) and support reciprocity (e.g., parents give more to offspring who provide them with more support) to garner a fuller portrait of parental support of grown children.

Types of Support

We know little about the scope of support parents provide young adult children. Social support includes financial transmissions, practical support, advice, information, guidance, emotional support, and companionship (Antonucci, 2001; Vaux, 1988; Wills & Shinar, 2000). Studies of parent-child relationships have focused primarily on financial and practical support, however. Parents provide considerable material support to young adult offspring (McGarry & Schoeni, 1997; Schoeni & Ross, 2005). Studies also have found that parents provide practical support, albeit infrequently (Eggebeen, 1992; Grundy & Henretta, 2006; Lye, 1996).

Although exchanges of instrumental and material support are important, parents probably provide other types of support. For example, parents may offer advice about health insurance plans when a child gets a new job or emotional support during the break up of a relationship. Young adults reported feeling supported when their mothers simply listened to them talk about their day (Fingerman, 2000). These types of support also may have implications for well-being (Cohen, 2004; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). Moreover, individuals can provide nontangible aid, such as emotional support, more often than practical or financial support, and can do so at geographical distance, or with limited material resources. Thus, the first purpose of this study was to document the range of support middle-aged parents provide grown offspring by examining: financial, practical, emotional support, companionship, advice (Vaux, 1988; Vaux & Harrison, 1985) and talking about one's day (Fingerman).

Offspring Characteristics Determining Frequency of Support

Our second purpose was to examine whether offspring characteristics elicit support from middle-aged parents. Intergenerational transfers may reflect social structural characteristics of both parties, such as gender and income (Davey, Janke, & Savla, 2005). Here, we asked parents about each of their grown children to understand within-family and between-family differences.

American norms suggest parents should allocate resources equitably across children. Nonetheless, research examining parents of young children (Jenkins, Rasbash, & O'Connor, 2003; McHale, Crouter, McGuire, & Updegraff, 1995) and research examining elderly parents of middle-aged adults (Sutor, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2006) has revealed that parents do distinguish among children, offering some children more help or resources than others. These distinctions may reflect parents' perceptions that either help is needed or that help would be a wise investment in a given offspring. We considered both of these ideas here.

Offspring needs

Contingency theory in sociology and altruism theory in economics suggest individuals offer greater assistance to family members in need (Eggebeen & Davey, 1998; Schoeni, 1997). Prior studies have found that middle-aged offspring increased support when elderly parents were in poor health (Eggebeen & Davey; Grundy, 2005; Silverstein, Gans, & Yang, 2006) and elderly mothers provided more support to offspring suffering troubles (e.g., victim of a crime, a disease; Pillemer & Sutor, 2006; Sutor, Sechrist, & Pillemer, 2007a). Attachment theory indicates sensitive parents provide succor when young children are in distress (Bowlby, 1969). A parental desire to nurture children may endure, such that grown children who suffer problems also elicit parental help. We hypothesized that middle-aged parents would provide more support to adult children suffering problems or a crisis, particularly material and practical support because such problems often demand finances or time (e.g., lawyer fees, health care).

We also postulated that younger offspring may have greater needs for support due to normative expectations of young adulthood. A burgeoning literature suggests parents support young adult

children to explore careers, complete education, develop relationships, and establish a foothold in adulthood (Aquilino, 2006; Furstenberg, 2000). Thus, parental support may be particularly evident for younger adults, as they establish themselves in adulthood.

Offspring achievements

Parents also may provide more support to children they view as high achievers. Family science has not considered the premise that relatives provide help to benefit themselves, except indirectly through survival of genes (Carstensen & Lockenhoff, 2003). Yet, social psychologists have argued that people may provide help because it makes them look or feel good (Davidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006). Parents, in particular, may help grown offspring for this reason. In midlife, parents may evaluate their grown children's accomplishments as an indicator of their own success as parents (Cichy, Lefkowitz, Fingerman, 2009; Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994). Thus, helping high achieving offspring could provide reflected glory for the parents.

Additionally, offspring who are more successful may provide support to the parent. When elderly mothers were asked to name a child to provide care in the future, they selected children who shared their values, were more successful, and had fewer problems (Pillemer & Sutor, 2006). Offspring who receive help from parents in young adulthood are more likely to support parents in old age (Henretta, Hill, Li, Soldo, & Wolf, 1997; Silverstein, Conroy, Wang, Gairrusso, & Bengtson, 2002). Thus, exchange theory may be relevant in understanding parental support of more successful progeny. Parents may help successful grown offspring to elicit current support or to assure future caregiving (Henretta et al., 1997). Here, we examined *current* reciprocal exchanges.

We also considered restricted vs. generalized exchange. Restricted exchanges involve the two parties (i.e., parent gives to child A, child A gives to parent). Generalized exchanges involve additional parties (i.e., parent gives to child A, but child B gives to parent; Takahashi, 2000). As such, an alternate hypothesis is plausible: high achieving children give help to their parents, but their needier siblings receive aid from the parents. We examined this competing premise here.

In investigating these issues, we controlled for offspring structural characteristics that may be associated with help from parents. For example, married offspring may require less help than unmarried offspring because they have a spouse to help (Eggebeen, 1992). By contrast, offspring with children may receive more help from their parents. Moreover, parents continue to support grown offspring who are students financially and in other ways (Aquilino, 2006; Schoeni & Ross, 2005). Finally, coresidence may enhance receipt of support due to the ability to share resources and time (Schoeni & Ross). We considered these factors here.

Parental Factors Associated with Support

Parental support also reflects what they have available to give and competition for those resources. Middle-aged adults face many competing demands for their time and energy. Resource depletion theory suggests that parents who face more demands will provide less to any given child. Indeed, studies have found that children in larger families achieve less success and receive less support due to depleted parental academic or financial assets for any given child (Blake, 1981; Davey et al., 2005; Downey, 1995). In today's cohorts, larger families also typically have lower socioeconomic status, and thus, fewer material resources may be available to the parents, further diminishing financial resources available for any given child.

It is not clear whether resource depletion applies to *all* types of support, however, or only material support. Although each day has only 24 hours, people find ways to tap reservoirs of

time or energy. For example, a recent study examining resource depletion theory in parents of preschool children found they developed new ways to allocate parenting efforts after they gave birth to an additional child (Strohschein, Gauthier, Campbell, & Kleparchuk, 2008). This pattern may extend into adulthood, where time-demanding practical assistance and material resources have finite limits, but emotional support is expansive.

Moreover, one study found that middle-aged women who provided care for aging parents were also likely to provide financial help for children over the age of 18 or to babysit for grandchildren (Grundy & Henretta, 2006), suggesting resource *expansion* rather than depletion. Nonetheless, when women had three or more grown children as well as aging parents, children were less likely to receive assistance. Here, we examined competing demands including work, number of children, and caregiving for aging parents.

Finally, we controlled for parental characteristics associated with intergenerational support. Parents who have more education and are better off financially provide more material assistance to grown children than do less well off parents (Henretta, Grundy, & Harris, 2002; Schoeni & Ross, 2005). We examined parental gender because mothers may offer more support than fathers (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Parental health has implications for assistance to offspring; parents who are sickly may be unable to provide assistance (Henretta et al.), or may receive assistance from grown children instead (Fingerman, Hay, Kamp Dush, Cichy, & Hosterman, 2007; Grundy, 2005). We considered parental race, cognizant that differences between Black and White families may reflect economic more than cultural differences (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004; Sutor, Sechrist, & Pillemer, 2007b). We also controlled for parental marital status because married parents provide more to grown children than single, divorced, or remarried parents (Furstenberg, Hoffman, & Shrestha, 1995).

In sum, we assessed the range of support middle-aged parents provide each grown child. We hypothesized that parents would provide nontangible help (e.g., advice, companionship) more often than financial or practical support. We asked whether support varied by child characteristics. We expected parents would report providing more support to children with needs (e.g., problems, younger age) or who were perceived as more successful. We also considered parental competing demands (e.g., work full time, more children) and controlled for structural variables (e.g., income, gender) associated with familial exchanges.

Method

Sample

Data were from *The Family Exchanges Study* examining middle-aged adults' intergenerational relationships. Participants included 302 men and 331 women aged 40 to 60 ($M = 50.60$, $SD = 4.99$ years) who had at least one child over the age of 18. Participants resided in the Philadelphia Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (PMSA), encompassing five counties in southeastern Pennsylvania and four counties in New Jersey (Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2001) including urban, suburban, and rural areas. A stratified sampling procedure was used to obtain distributions by age (aged 40 to 50 and 51 to 60) and gender. Potential participants were identified via lists from Genesys Corporation and random digit dialing within regional area codes. Genesys Corporation derived lists from: the white pages, automobile registration, driver's licenses, voter registrations, birth records, consumer surveys, coupon redemption information, direct mail, books and merchandise, and other proprietary data sources.

Participants with a listed address received a prenotification letter and a follow-up telephone call; participants who did not have a listed address were recruited via telephone. In 2007, 92% of adults in the participants' age range lived in households with landlines (Blumberg & Luke, 2007). African Americans are less likely to have landlines than are European Americans, but

studies of Black Americans have successfully sampled using telephone interviews (Jackson & Hatchett, 1986). We oversampled individuals in Philadelphia county, high density minority areas, and lower SES households to assure high minority representation (37% of the sample). The sample was comparable to the Philadelphia PSMA with regard to income, but respondents were slightly better educated (Table 1; Pennsylvania Data Center, 2001; US Census, 2008).

Procedures

Participants completed one hour Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) regarding relationships with their grown offspring. Survey sections were presented in a randomized order.

Participants provided the name, age, and gender of each living child. For each child over the age of 18, parents reported exchanges of support, problems the child experienced, child's marital status, and distance in miles. On average, participants had 2.82 living children ($SD = 1.20$, range 1 to 11), with $M = 2.16$ children over the age of 18 ($SD = 1.46$, range 1 to 11). To avoid fatigue, participants provided additional detailed information for up to three grown children. Most participants ($n = 555$, 88%) had three or fewer children over age 18, and detailed assessments pertained to all of their children. For families with more than three grown children, we selected the child who received the most assistance, the least assistance, and a random other child. In sum, participants had 1,785 living children, 1,384 were age 18+, of whom 1,251 were included in detailed reports.

Outcomes

Support exchanges—Participants rated how often they provided six types of support to each grown child: emotional, practical, socializing, advice, financial, and talking about daily events. The first five items were derived from the Social Support Resources (SS-R) index (Vaux, 1988; Vaux & Harrison, 1985), with an additional item to assess listening to the other talk about daily events (Fingerman, 2000). Participants rated support on a scale where 1 was the most frequent support (e.g., daily). We reverse coded such that higher numbers equal more frequent support: 1 (*less than once a year or not at all*), 2 (*once a year*), 3 (*a few times a year*), 4 (*monthly*), 5 (*a few times a month*), 6 (*weekly*), 7 (*a few times a week*), and 8 (*daily*).

We reported the mean across the six items (which is mathematically equivalent) for ease of interpretation, $\alpha = .89$. We also examined each type of support separately in follow-up analyses.

Participants indicated how often they received each type of support from each child, using the same scale, $\alpha = .83$. We reverse coded responses for parental receipt of support.

Predictor Variables

Offspring needs—We examined problems offspring experienced in the past two years as an indicator of needs. Using a measure derived from a national study (Greenfield & Marks, 2006), participants indicated whether any of their children had experienced any of 10 problems in the past two years (e.g., victim of a crime, serious health problem or injury, financial problems). When a participant indicated one or more children incurred that problem, we asked which child(ren) had experienced that problem. We coded the occurrence of each problem for each child dichotomously (0, 1). The frequency with which offspring incurred problems ranged from 3% who had a physical disability to 27% who experienced a financial problem, comparable to national studies (Greenfield & Marks). We used a sum of number of problems each offspring experienced. As mentioned previously, we also considered offspring age (measured in years) as a normative indicator of offspring needs.

Offspring achievement—Participants rated each child's achievement compared to others the same age with regard to: (a) relationships and family life and (b) education and career from

1 (*less successful*) to 5 (*more successful*; Cichy et al., 2009; Ryff et al., 1994). On average, participants rated their offspring as similar to, or somewhat more successful than, other adults their ages ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.17$ for education/career and $M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.06$ for relationships/family). Ratings on the two achievement items were correlated, $r = .38$. In analyses, we used a sum of the two items for each offspring ($M = 6.66$, $SD = 1.84$). This scale of achievement was negatively associated with the measure for problems, $r = -.38$, suggesting that the two groups of offspring were fairly distinct, but overlap was possible (i.e., some high achieving offspring also suffered problems).

We compared parents' ratings of achievement to objective indicators (i.e., education, marital status). Correlations were: $r = .20$ for being married and ratings of success in relationships, $r = .13$ for educational attainment and $r = .12$ for employment status with ratings of success in education and career. Nonetheless, these patterns, however, may vary by age of offspring; young adults are likely to be in the process of obtaining education and establishing relationships. Thus, their actual attainment and their parents' ratings of success may be tempered by their age. Put another way, parents may judge success for a 21 year old differently than for a 35 year old. We used a median split, offspring ≤ 23 years old or > 23 years of age to examine this issue. For younger offspring, correlations between objective attainment and parental ratings were not significant. For offspring over age 23, correlations were significant, $r = .37$ for education, $r = .22$ for employment, and $r = .28$ for relationship success. In sum, by using a subjective measure of success, we examined whether parental views of offspring's success were associated with provision of support, regardless of offspring's age.

Offspring characteristics—Parents provided offspring's age, gender, and marital status for all 1,384 grown children. Offspring ranged in age from 18 to 46 years ($M = 25.20$, $SD = 5.80$); most offspring (90%) were aged 18 to 33; a total of 664 (48%) were daughters and 720 (52%) were sons. Most offspring were single and never married ($n = 1,140$, 82%), but many were married ($n = 244$, 18%); we considered marital status in analyses (1 = *married*, 0 = *not married*).

In the detailed section pertaining to 1,251 offspring, parents indicated that 350 offspring had children of their own (28%). We considered offspring's parental status as dichotomous (1 = *has children*, 0 = *does not have children*). Offspring work status varied, such as employed full time ($n = 632$) or working part time for pay ($n = 220$). We considered student status separately ($n = 239$, 1 = *student status*, 0 = *other*) because being a student may evoke parental support.

Participants indicated the number of miles offspring resided from them, $M = 188.66$ miles, ($SD = 613.36$). Moreover, 282 offspring (20.8%) coresided with their parents and we considered coresidence (1 = *coresides*, 0 = *independent household*) in analyses.

Parental competing demands—We considered competing demands parents face as follows: working full time (1 = *works full time*, 0 = *does not*); children under age 18 (1 = *children under age 18*, 0 = *all children are 18 or older*), number of children over age 18, and whether they provide personal care to anyone (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*). We controlled for parental material resources using SES estimated as years of education and household income.

Control Variables

Participant background information—Participants provided their age gender, education in years, marital status, and rated their health on a scale of 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). Participants rated their health on average as good to very good ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.09$).

Results

Analyses focused on two research aims: (a) describing types of support middle-aged parents exchange with grown children, and (b) understanding whether support varies by offspring needs and achievement, parental resources and demands, and reciprocity.

Frequency of Different Types of Support

We first examined descriptive statistics to ascertain how often each type of parental support occurred and whether offspring reciprocated in support. As shown in Table 2, parents reported helping most grown children on a frequent basis. They provided listening and emotional support most frequently (once a week), advice approximately once a month, and practical and financial assistance from monthly to several times a year.

Parents reported *receiving* support from the average grown child only a few times a year. Much of that support involved talking about daily life with their child or socializing. Parents received financial assistance less than once a year or never. We estimated Wilcoxon signed rank tests, a non-parametric test of paired ordinal data, to compare support given and received. Parents reported giving more than they received for each type of support (except for socializing, which involves both giving and receiving), $p < .001$ for each test.

Differences in frequency of types of support—We expected parents to provide nontangible support more often than financial or practical support because time and money are finite. We used the PROC Mixed procedure in SAS (Littell, Milliken, Stroup, & Wolfinger, 1996) to estimate multilevel models to test this hypothesis. We included six types of support nested within each child, and children nested within parents. The model included two random coefficients to account for correlations for types of support within each child and children within each parent. The predictor variable, type of support, was entered as a categorical variable for each type of support. Pairwise comparisons of means with a Tukey-Kramer adjustment evaluated differences in the six types of support.

The model and the post-hoc tests (not shown) revealed differences in the frequency with which parents provided each type of support, with the exception of financial and practical assistance. In other words, parents listened to talk about daily events more often than they provided emotional support. They provided emotional support more often than they offered advice and so forth (see Table 2). Thus, as expected, parents offered nontangible forms of help (e.g., listening, advice) more often than they provided finite resources (e.g., practical, financial).

Offspring Factors Underlying Parental Support

To examine the second aim concerning whether support varied by offspring characteristics, we estimated multilevel models for total support, followed by models for each type of support. Lower level units in these models pertained to offspring characteristics and included: number of problems offspring experienced in the past year, offspring age, and parental ratings of offspring achievement. Upper level units in the models pertained to the parent characteristic and included: income, work status, number of adult children, and children under age 18.

Because inclusion of control variables not associated with the dependent variable may generate spurious associations between independent and dependent variables (Rovine, von Eye, & Wood, 1988), we first examined bivariate associations between potential control variables and support provided or received. Child characteristics in the models included: gender, marital status, having children of his/her own, student status, and coresidence. Parent control variables were: gender (1 = *father*, 0 = *mother*), self-rated health, marriage to child's other parent, number of children over age 18, and presence of a child under age 18.

Before examining our models, we estimated the intraclass correlation to ascertain whether parental help to offspring varied within families. We calculated a null model with help to child as the outcome, and divided the covariance parameter by the total variance (Singer & Willett, 2003). Of the total variance in help, 40% was due to between parent differences, whereas 60% was due to variance within parent. Thus, parents distinguished between different children within the same family in the help they provided.

Table 3 presents findings from the multilevel models. To establish an index of model fit, we compared the $-2 \log$ likelihoods of the null model (model without predictors) to the model with predictors. The difference score was significant on the chi square distribution, $\chi^2(15) = 1405, p < .001$, indicating the model had a good fit. Parents reported more support to children who had greater needs, were younger, or whom they perceived as achieving more. Parental competing demands from other children also were significant. That is, parents who had more children over 18 and children under 18 provided less support to any grown child.

The model predicting help parents received also had a good fit compared to the null model, $\chi^2(15) = 1174, p < .001$. Higher achieving and younger offspring provided more frequent support to parents than lower achieving or older offspring.

We then examined each of the six types of support in a separate model, using a significance level $p < .01$ to reduce likelihood of type 1 error. Specifically, we were interested in whether parents provided different types of support to “needy” (problematic) and “deserving” (high achieving) offspring. Similar to the model predicting total support, parents provided more emotional support and advice to children who had either more problems or greater achievement. Parents provided more financial and practical support to children who had more problems (but not to higher achieving children). Parents listened more to talk about daily events and gave more companionship to children who were higher achieving (but not to children who had more problems). For all types of support, younger offspring received more support than older offspring. Finally, we considered offspring who were both “needy” and “deserving” by estimating models with the interaction of problems and success (variables were grand mean centered). The interaction coefficient was not significant.

Post hoc tests—We conducted post-hoc analyses to assure stability of findings. We compared models for variables available for all grown children (i.e., support, parent variables, problems, age, gender, marital status, coresidence) estimated with the full set of 1,384 children to the same models estimated with 1,251 offspring included in detailed assessments. The pattern of findings was nearly identical.

To assure findings for age did not reflect a bifurcation in support (i.e., a drop in support after age 30), we examined the models with offspring aged 18 to 30. Age remained significant and findings stable. Age also may be associated with student status. The pattern of findings was identical when models were estimated without students, however. Finally, normative statuses may interact with age in eliciting support. It is normal to be unemployed and require parental support at age 21, but less so at age 35. We estimated models with interactions between age of offspring and: student or not, working or not, higher vs. lower education (grand mean centered) and parental status (has children or not). Significant interactions were evident for age X marital status and age X parental status. Younger offspring who were single and had children received more support than younger offspring who were married or had no children. Older offspring received comparable (less) support, regardless of marital or parental status.

We examined models separately by parental income level (e.g., income $< \$40,000$, income $> \$40,001$ per year). The pattern of findings was consistent regarding needs and achievement at all income levels.

Finally, we reestimated our model with parental provision of help as the dependent variable, controlling for parental receipt of help. The model (not shown here) was consistent with the prior models. That is, parents provided help based on offspring needs and achievement, after controlling for support offspring provided to them.

In sum, post-hoc test indicated the findings were stable and consistent with the hypotheses. Overall, parents provided more frequent nontangible support than financial or material support. They provided more support to offspring with needs (due to problems or younger age) or whom they perceived as higher achieving. Further, they differentiated types of support they provided to different children based on those needs or perceived success. Younger offspring received more of every type of support than older offspring. Children with problems received greater material and practical support, perhaps in an effort to mitigate those problems. The post-hoc tests revealed greater elaboration of those findings, indicating the offspring who were young, single, and had children of their own (those who had greatest needs) received more of each type of support than offspring who were older or married. By contrast, parents listened to and offered companionship to children they perceived as more successful, perhaps because doing so was personally rewarding. Parents also received more support from offspring they deemed more successful.

Discussion

Popular media seem correct: Parents provide frequent support to grown children. This study is provocative because we garnered information regarding a wide range of support, and also examined offspring characteristics that elicit support. On average, parents provided an array of support to each of their grown children on a frequent basis (i.e., once a month). Nonetheless, parents provided more support to some children (i.e., those with needs or perceived as higher achievers). These findings are novel in two respects. First, we found that parents respond not only to crises and problems, but to normative needs, such as younger age. Moreover, we found that parental support is not solely dependent on contingencies, but also may involve self serving motives. Parents gave more to grown children perceived as more successful, which may benefit themselves via reflected glory or reciprocated support.

Frequency of Different Types of Support

This study allowed us to track a wide range of support middle-aged parents provided to each offspring and to consider what types occurred most frequently in this relationship. Prior studies, such as the Health and Retirement Survey (HRS; Soldo & Hill, 1995) and Asset and Health Dynamics (AHEAD; McGarry & Schoeni, 1997), restricted thresholds of financial and practical support (e.g., more than \$500, more than 100 hours). Surveys such as the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) focused on only one child (Eggebeen, 1992). We examined a range of support for *each* child in the family. Moreover, we focused specifically on support of young adult children, a topic that receives considerable attention in the media.

Past research documented high rates of financial assistance from parents to grown children (Schoeni & Ross, 2005), but speculated that nontangible support occurs even more frequently. We found that parents offered multiple forms of support to each child at least once a month on average, but as expected, parents offered nontangible support (e.g., listening, advice) more often than they provided practical or financial assistance. Moreover, as we discuss, they provided different types of support to different types of grown children.

Reasons for Providing Assistance

This study provided insights into within-family differentiation of support not evident in prior research. Here, we examined offspring needs and perceived achievements. Parents

differentiated the types of support they provided to children based on needs or perceived success. Younger offspring received more of every type of support than older offspring did. Children with problems received greater material and practical support, perhaps in an effort to mitigate those problems. By contrast, parents listened to and offered companionship to children they perceived as more successful, perhaps because doing so was personally rewarding.

Offspring needs—Findings are consistent with altruism or contingency theories (Eggebeen & Davey, 1998). Offspring with a greater number of problems received more support overall, particularly material and practical support. Individuals suffering crises elicit help even from strangers (Davidio et al., 2006), and parental support of offspring suffering problems is consistent with other family research (e.g., Sutor et al., 2006). Moreover, assistance due to needs may have been established earlier in life, fostering an ongoing pattern.

We also examined the premise of “normative” needs in young adulthood. The linear trend for less help with increasing age suggests parents respond with more help to offspring as they transition into adulthood, due to demands they face establishing themselves (Aquilino, 2006). Moreover, this age-associated finding is not simply an artifact of young adults being students; student status was not associated with help from parents when controlling for other factors.

Offspring achievements—This study adds important information concerning parents’ perceptions of offspring’s achievements. When parents viewed their children as more successful, they offered more nontangible help (emotional, advice, listening, companionship). Although endogeneity of measurement is always a risk in cross-sectional designs, it would not fully account for the patterns observed here. Parents who give more to their children may be more highly motivated to view their children as successful, but in this study, parents also gave a great deal to offspring who suffered problems and whom they did not deem successful. Moreover, analyses showed that perceptions of success were highly indicative of actual success in older offspring (who have fully attained their achievements).

Rather, the findings regarding successful offspring are consistent with the generational stake; parents may invest in their offspring as their future (Giarrusso, Stallings, & Bengtson, 1995; Shapiro, 2004). Parents also may derive satisfaction from grown children’s success because they view those children as an extension of themselves. It is possible, too, that this pattern of support was established early in life, perhaps in recognition of special talents or motivation, and contributed to higher levels of achievement.

Parents’ perceptions of offspring achievement were associated with parental *receipt* of support, but offspring problems were not. These findings suggest that parents support successful children in the context of exchanges, but dispense support to children with needs regardless of help returned. Alternately, the patterns observed here might reflect global affection in the relationship; parents may rate children whom they love more as more successful. Nonetheless, prior research has found parents harbored comparable feelings of affection for problem-ridden and successful offspring (Birditt, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2009). Moreover, findings for older offspring indicated parents’ ratings of success reflected offspring’s actual achievements, rather than simply love of the child.

Parental resources and demands—Parental factors also help explain support patterns. Findings are consistent with resource depletion theory (Blake, 1981; Downey, 1995). Parents with a greater number of children provided less help to each grown child. Resource depletion theory was developed with observations of baby boomer families, when sibships were large and each additional child was an additional burden. Here, we note that in today’s relatively small sibships of 2 or 3 children, parents still made smaller allocations when they had a greater

number of children to support. Because fertility is higher in lower SES families in recent cohorts, the findings also may partially reflect the overall resources available to the parent.

Interestingly, however, parental income and education were not associated with support to any given child, despite findings elsewhere that parents of higher income provide more help (e.g., Henretta et al., 2002; Schoeni & Ross, 2005). Findings here may reflect measurement of social support that included nonmaterial assistance (e.g., advice).

Future Directions and Conclusions

Additionally, the study provides many potential directions for future research. Over a third of the sample identified as ethnic minorities, which surpasses ethnic minority representation in other studies of intergenerational support. Race was not associated with support in bivariate associations, and was not included in models. Other studies have found African American and European American families provide comparable support (Suito et al., 2007b). Research has documented cultural aspects of social support among Asian Americans (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008) and Hispanic Americans may show distinct patterns of family exchanges. Future studies should examine parental support in other ethnic groups.

This study relied on a regional sample, representative of the Philadelphia area. Several major studies of intergenerational relationships have relied on limited geographic areas (e.g., Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Silverstein et al., 2002; Suito et al., 2006). Moreover, a recent study of regional variability revealed that contact and closeness between parents and offspring were similar throughout the U.S., except in the South, where contact is more frequent (Sechrist, Suito, Henderson, Cline, & Steinhour, 2007).

Other limitations warrant comment. We obtained reports of support, age, and problems on all offspring. But, offspring from larger families were underrepresented in assessments of achievement. Nonetheless, prior studies have selected one child in the family (e.g., Eggebeen, 1992), and this study included full information on all offspring for 88% of the sample.

In sum, this study provides new information regarding parental support to grown children. Parents reported providing support frequently, offering six types of support on average monthly to each grown child. Parents offered nontangible support such as listening and advice more often than they provided practical assistance or money. They differentiated among their children and gave some children more help than others. Child factors (more than parental resources) were associated with level of support. Further, parents provided different types of support to different types of children. Children in need received material and financial support that might mitigate their problems, and children perceived as more successful received nontangible support. Although middle-aged parents received infrequent support from their children, they received greater support from children they deemed more successful. Findings suggest that contingencies drive support to grown children in need. This study also presents a new perspective on motivations to assist grown children; parents may invest in children as a way of improving their own self image and securing potential future support.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Parents (N = 633)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	50.60	(4.99)
Household income ^a	4.40	(1.45)
Years of education	14.18	(2.02)
Self reported health ^b	3.48	(1.07)
<i>Proportions</i>		
Women	.52	
Ethnicity		
African American	.31	
European American	.63	
Hispanic	.01	
Multiracial	.06	
Marital status		
Married or remarried	.70	
Widowed	.02	
Divorced	.13	
Separated	.04	
Cohabiting	.03	
Single/never married	.07	
Work status		
Employed full time	.65	
Employed part time	.11	
Unemployed seeking work	.04	
Homemaker	.05	
Retired	.04	
Disabled	.09	
Other	.03	

^aHousehold income in 2007: 1 = *less than \$10,000*, 2 = *\$10,001–\$25,000*, 3 = *\$25,001–\$40,000*, 4 = *\$40,001–\$75,000*, 5 = *\$75,001–\$100,000*, 6 = *more than \$100,000*.

^bSelf reported health rated from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*).

Table 2
Frequency of Types of Support Parents Provide and Receive (*N* = 633 parents, 1384 offspring)

Type of Support	Frequency provide to offspring ^a		% offspring who receive help ^b	Frequency receive from offspring ^a	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Listening to him/her talk about daily events	5.72	2.06	93.1	5.32	2.12
Emotional support	5.43	2.17	92.8	3.98	2.19
Advice	5.01	1.95	94.5	3.42	1.96
Socializing	4.33	1.91	91.2	4.33	1.91
Instrumental support	3.79	2.20	76.5	3.17	1.96
Financial support	3.78	2.19	79.3	1.57	1.28
Average total support	4.68	1.68	—	3.49	1.49

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

^b Percent of offspring receiving parental help at least once a year.

Note: Differences between providing and receiving support were significant at *p* < .001 for all forms of support, except socializing (where giving and receiving is reciprocal).

Table 3

Mixed Models Predicting Assistance To and From Offspring (N = 633 parents)

Predictors	Help Parent Provides		Help Parent Receives	
	Unstandardized Coefficient	SE	Unstandardized Coefficient	SE
Intercept	7.17***	0.38	4.45***	0.36
Offspring Achievement & Needs				
Offspring achievement ^a	0.08***	0.02	0.17***	0.02
Number of problems ^b	0.10**	0.03	0.03	0.03
Offspring age	-0.10***	0.01	-0.03***	0.01
Parental Resources & Demands				
Parent household income ^c	-0.04	0.04	-0.11**	0.04
Working vs. not working ^d	-0.04	0.10	0.10	0.10
Number of adult children	-0.17***	0.04	-0.07*	0.04
Presence of children under age 18 ^e	-0.21*	0.10	-0.20*	0.10
Lower Level Control Variables				
Offspring gender ^f	-0.42***	0.07	-0.33***	0.06
Married vs. not married ^g	-0.15	0.11	-0.08	0.11
Has children of their own ^h	0.22*	0.10	-0.03	0.09
Student status ⁱ	0.28*	0.10	0.02	0.10
Coresidence ^j	1.43***	0.09	1.23***	0.08
Upper Level Control Variables				
Parent gender ^f	-0.39***	0.09	-0.56***	0.09
Parent marital status ^g	0.19	0.11	0.17	0.10
Parent health ^k	-0.00	0.05	-0.13*	0.05
Family variance component	$z = 9.02$ ***		$z = 9.58$ ***	
Residual	$z = 17.19$ ***		$z = 17.28$ ***	
Deviance	3776.9		3668.9	
χ^2 ^l	1405***		1174***	
df	15		15	

^aSum of two items rated from 1 (*less successful*) to 5 (*more successful*).^bSum of 10 items rated 1 = *did have occurrence of problem*, 0 = *did not*.^c1 = *less than \$10,000*, 2 = *\$10,001–\$25,000*, 3 = *\$25,001–\$40,000*, 4 = *\$40,001–\$75,000*, 5 = *\$75,001–\$100,000*, 6 = *more than \$100,000*.^d1 = *works full time*, 0 = *does not*.^e1 = *children under age 18*, 0 = *all children are 18 or older*.^f1 = *male*, 0 = *female*.^g1 = *married*, 0 = *not married*.

h_1 = has children, 0 = *does not have children*.

i_1 = *student status*, 0 = *other*.

j_1 = *coresides*, 0 = *independent household*.

k Rated from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*).

l The chi-square test compares model fit between the current models and the unconditional models where the deviance statistics were 5181.9 for help parent provides and 4842.9 for help parent receives.

*
 $p < .05$.

**
 $p < .01$.

***
 $p < .001$.