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## **Intergenerational Ambivalence**

### **A New Approach to the Study of Parent-Child Relations in Later Life\***

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## **Abstract**

Social scientific interest in intergenerational relationships between adults has increased in recent years. However, there is a lack of theoretical work that allows for the integration of research findings. Further, there has been a tendency to interpret intergenerational relationships within limited frameworks that emphasize either intergenerational solidarity or conflict. In contrast, we propose that ambivalence is a more useful organizing concept for understanding intergenerational relations. In this article, we argue that relationships between the generations in families are structured such that they generate various types of ambivalence. We then present three propositions regarding ambivalence in intergenerational relations, with illustrations from several exemplary studies. Implications of this conceptualization of intergenerational relations are discussed.

## **Zusammenfassung**

In den letzten Jahren ist ein wachsendes Interesse an den familiären Generationenbeziehungen festzustellen. Dabei zeigt sich, daß diese Beziehungen entweder unter dem Gesichtspunkt von Solidarität oder demjenigen von Konflikt analysiert werden. Demgegenüber schlagen wir vor, dies unter der allgemeinen Hypothese von "Ambivalenz" zu tun, und wir erläutern dies anhand einer Diskussion exemplarischer Studien. (Das Papier ist eine Überarbeitung und Weiterführung der im Arbeitspapier Nr. 22 dargestellten Überlegungen.)

## **1. Introduction**

Interest in intergenerational relations among adults within the family has grown dramatically over the past three decades, as demonstrated by research reviews and edited volumes from both sides of the Atlantic, all of which contain extensive bibliographies of recent publications (Attias-Donfut, 1995; Hareven, 1994; Lüscher & Schultheis, 1993; Sutor, Pillemer, Bohannon, & Robison, 1995). Indeed, the amount of empirical work on this topic has made it one of the more vigorous research areas in contemporary sociology and psychology. The development of theory to integrate the host of findings, however, has not kept up with empirical productivity. Research on aging and the family has tended to respond to obvious social problems (such as caregiving for impaired relatives, housing, grandparents raising grandchildren), rather than considering theoretical issues (Lye, 1996).

Perhaps the most popular organizing framework for understanding family relationships in later life is that which highlights intergenerational solidarity. A number of prominent researchers responded to Talcott Parsons's (1942; 1949) concern about the isolation of the nuclear family by proposing that extensive family solidarity actually existed (Shanas et al., 1968; Litwak, 1965; Sussman, 1959). Since the early 1970s, Bengtson and colleagues have continued and expanded this tradition in an influential series of articles and books (cf., Roberts, Richards, & Bengtson, 1991; Bengtson & Harootyan, 1994; Treas & Bengtson, 1988). The solidarity perspective has been taken up by other researchers in the United States (Rein, 1994; Rossi & Rossi, 1990), and is also a reference point for European authors, although not without critical overtones (Attias-Donfut, 1995b; Bawin-Legros, Gauthier, & Strassen, 1995; Coenen-Huther, Kellerhals, & von Allmen, 1994; Donati, 1995; Finch & Mason, 1993).

Some scholars have criticized the overly positive and consensual bias of the solidarity perspective. Research within the solidarity framework typically assumes that individuals' personal feelings - such as affection, attraction, and warmth - serve to maintain cohesion in the family system (Sprey, 1991). Marshall, Matthews, & Rosenthal (1993) note that even the term "solidarity" indicates an emphasis on consensus. European writers have echoed this sentiment, noting the value-laden origins of the term in proletarian movements and in religious social doctrine (Kleine, 1992; Lüscher, 1997). As Roberts et al. (1991) themselves point

out, solidarity "has been treated as the engine driving the pursuit of the common good within families" (12). Negative aspects of family life typically are interpreted in this view as an absence of solidarity. Research in this tradition has tended to emphasize shared values across generations, normative obligations to provide help, and enduring ties between parents and children.

However, at the same time scholars in the solidarity tradition have emphasized mutual support and value consensus, another line of research has focused on isolation, caregiver stress, family problems, conflict, and abuse (Marshall et al., 1993). The perception of weakened family ties and abandonment of the elderly also remains strong in popular opinion, and in portrayals of the family in contemporary fiction and theater. Thus, some scholars, as well as the general public, appear to be unwilling to accept that intergenerational relationships are solidary and characterized by shared values and reciprocal help. As Marshall et al. (1993) have succinctly put it, "the substantive preoccupations in gerontology over the past 30 years point to a love-hate relationship with the family" (p. 47).

We will argue in the present article that the study of parent-child relations in later life must move beyond this "love-hate relationship." The vacillation between images of mistreatment and abandonment on the one hand, and comforting images of solidarity on the other, are not two sides of an academic argument that will ultimately be resolved in favor of one viewpoint. Rather, we hold that societies, and the individuals within them, are ambivalent about relationships between parents and children in adulthood.

We therefore propose ambivalence as an alternative to both the solidarity and conflict perspectives as a model for orienting sociological research on intergenerational relations. We can sum up the fundamental point of the present article in the following axiom: Intergenerational relations generate ambivalences. That is, the observable forms of intergenerational relations among adults can be social scientifically interpreted as the expression of ambivalences, and as efforts to manage and negotiate these fundamental ambivalences.

The major goal of this article is a straightforward one: We wish to make the case for ambivalence as a theoretically and empirically useful approach to the study of intergenerational relations. We should be clear that it is not our intention to provide a comprehensive theoretical formulation of intergenerational ambivalence;

indeed, such a formulation would not be appropriate at this point, given the state of knowledge. Instead, following Aldous (1990), we propose ambivalence as a "general orientation" to the subject of intergenerational relationships, rather than as a formal theory. We suggest the types of variables researchers should consider, and demonstrate the potential insights that result from this more complex view of parent-child relations.

We begin with a discussion of the concept of intergenerational ambivalence, and review its theoretical antecedents in several related sociological and psychological literatures. Following this discussion of various dimensions of ambivalence, we propose a working definition of the term. Next, we offer three illustrations, each of which treats a different aspect of intergenerational ambivalence. In each of these three cases, we provide a detailed analysis of one or more exemplary studies from the social sciences, that demonstrate a particular type of ambivalence in parent-child relations. We conclude with suggestions for future work on this topic.

## **2. Dimensions of Intergenerational Ambivalence**

The term "ambivalence" is almost absent in the social science literature on parent-child relations in later life (for example, a search of the SocioFile and PsychLit databases uncovered no articles on this topic with the keyword "ambivalence"). A few scholars, however, have applied the term to other social relations. In addition, several theoretical approaches in family studies have employed closely related concepts. These literatures suggest that there are two dimensions of ambivalence that are highly relevant to the study of intergenerational relations: sociological ambivalence, which is evident in social structural positions; and psychological ambivalence, which is experienced on the individual level. We believe that both of these dimensions are important to the study of parent-child relations in adulthood.

Sociological ambivalence was given its classic formulation in an article by Merton & Barber (1963) and in Coser's (1966) expansion of their argument. In Merton and Barber's view, sociological ambivalence focuses on "incompatible normative expectations of attitudes, beliefs, and behavior" (pp. 94-95). These incompatible expectations may be assigned to or incorporated into a particular status (or set of statuses) within a society, or even within a single role of a single

status. In this way, "the core-case of sociological ambivalence puts contradictory demands upon the occupants of a status in a particular relation" (p. 96). Sociological ambivalence in their perspective refers to "opposing normative tendencies in the social definition of a role" (p. 99). Thus, sociological ambivalence is "built into the structure of statuses and roles" (Cosser, 1966, p. 175).

Merton and Barber encourage social scientists to examine social roles not only in terms of their dominant attributes (which, we would note, has been the case in the study of intergenerational relations), but rather as a dynamic organization of norms and counter-norms that in combination produce ambivalence. Ambivalence results when these norms require contradictory attitudes and actions. Merton and Barber use the role of the physician as an example: a doctor is called on to be both professionally detached as well as compassionate and concerned for the patient. More recent sociological work has continued to emphasize conflicting commitments within individual's role-systems, examining contradictions in the objective demands of roles (O'Neil & Greenberger, 1994; see also the interchange with Marks, 1994).

Two increasingly influential theoretical orientations also have highlighted the potential for sociological ambivalence (although they do not typically use the term itself). These are: what has come to be known as "postmodernist" theory, and feminist theory of the family. Both of these views have influenced our thinking about intergenerational ambivalence, in that they share a distrust of dualistic thinking, and instead deal explicitly with contradiction and paradox in social relations.

An overarching theme of the postmodern perspective is that in contemporary society, fixed relationships have weakened, and societal guidance about how these relationships should be carried out has nearly disappeared. The condition of postmodernity is characterized by a dramatically accelerated pace of change, and the enormous scale on which it occurs. These developments have had a major impact on human relationships, resulting in a sense of fragmentation and discontinuity, and of confusion and uncertainty regarding how social relations should be conducted (Denzin, 1991; Gergen, 1991).

This analysis of contemporary social conditions suggests that more complex theoretical models are needed to understand the family, including intergenera-

tional relations. In the post-modernist view, family life is now characterized by plurality (Baber & Allen, 1992; Gubrium & Holstein, 1994) and by a multiplicity of forms, as divorce, remarriage, "blended" families, same-sex partnerships, and other phenomena have become increasingly common. In Stacey's (1990) explicitly postmodernist perspective, "contemporary family relationships are diverse, fluid, and unresolved" (p. 17). Sociological work is needed that can interpret "today's deeply polarized discourse on American family life" (p.19). Thus, the postmodernist emphasis on heterogeneity and paradox, and its rejection of reductionistic theories and dualistic thinking, suggest that ambivalence can be a useful tool to analyze intergenerational relations.

Most relevant to our discussion here is the postmodernist emphasis on the intensification of internal contradictions in society. Indeed, analysts of postmodernity agree that a hallmark of contemporary social life is that individuals are confronted with directly countervailing ideas and pressures on a wider scale than ever before. The work of van der Loo & van Reijen (1992) has dealt most clearly with this issue, noting that in contemporary society, fundamental contradictions have appeared between personal autonomy and the demands of community, and between a desire for freedom of action and a simultaneous desire for support from institutions. Families are clearly not exempt from such "multiple reality claims" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; see Stacey [1990] for numerous empirical examples).

The second body of theory is that developed by feminist scholars to analyze family life. Feminist theory challenges the assumption that a harmony of interests exists among all members of a family. Thus, feminist scholars' treatment of a variety of issues, from reproductive control, to household division of labor, to parenthood, have alerted us to fundamental (and not entirely resolvable) conflicts within contemporary families (Thorne, 1992). Ferree (1990) notes that the feminist approach to the family involves a critique of the concept of solidarity, by which is meant "the conventional conceptualization of 'the family' as a unitary whole" (p. 867). By challenging the notion of an undifferentiated "family interest," and the conventional view of family unity, internal contradictions can take center stage.

For example, evidence of sociological ambivalence comes from the feminist literature on household labor, or what many have termed the "politics of house-

work." Feminist scholars have identified a contradiction built into women's family roles, in which domestic labor is both exhausting and resented, but also viewed as an expression of love and caring (Thorne, 1992). As Devault (1991) has noted, a central characteristic of feminist writing on the family "results from potentially contradictory insights about family work: family work is burdensome and oppressive, but also meaningful because it serves as a means for connecting with others" (p. 232).

Feminist scholars have also highlighted contradictions involved in women's caring activities. In this context, Abel & Nelson (1990) have highlighted the interconnected themes of autonomy and nurturance. They note that providing care for children or for impaired relatives can be seen as leading to maturity and self-development, and providing a sense of self-integrity and connectedness. Providing care is humanizing, meaningful, and fulfilling. Simultaneously, however, the fact that caregiving is part of the structure of women's roles is seen as potentially oppressive. Women can be overwhelmed by caregiving responsibilities, and become isolated from the larger society, including the world of work. The caregiving role, in this view, forces women into boring and repetitive tasks (Abel & Nelson, 1990). Thus, feminist research on the family suggests that sociological ambivalence permeates family relations, in particular with regard to women.

Moving from the sociological level, ambivalence also has been used to describe the psychological experience of individuals, particularly in the clinical psychological literature on human development. For Bleuler (1911), who apparently originated the term, Freud (1913), and later psychoanalysts (see Eidelberg, 1968; Rycroft, 1973), ambivalence is generally viewed as simultaneous feelings of love and hate toward the same individual (typically a parent). Erikson's (1994) influential epigenetic theory of psychosocial development also has ambivalence at its core. Conflicts between two countervailing tendencies (for example, autonomy versus shame in young children) lead to the next stage of development, and are shaped by relations between parents and children.

Within recent sociology, ambivalence on the individual level has received some attention in the literature on the sociology of emotions. A detailed discussion is offered by Weigert (1991), who expands the definition of the term to "the experience of contradictory emotions toward the same object" (p. 21). Ambivalence can also be observed in individual motivations: that is, "simultaneous attraction to



and repulsion from pursuing a particular line of action" (p. 19). In everyday speech, the term also has this connotation of holding two contradictory emotions, motivations, or values at the same time. Although empirical examples of psychological ambivalence are scarce in research on the family, a notable exception is Dressel & Clark's (1990) discussion of "emotive dissonance" regarding caring activities (primarily for children and spouses). Respondents reported mixed emotions regarding care provision, as warmth, tenderness, and delight co-existed with frustration, disappointment, and resentment.

Based on this review, we have derived a "working definition" of ambivalence for the purposes of the discussion that follows. This is a relatively inclusive definition, that includes both ambivalence at the social structural level, as well as the contradictory perceptions and subjective experiences of individuals.

As a general concept, the term "intergenerational ambivalence" is used to designate contradictions in relationships between parents and adult offspring that cannot be reconciled with one another. The concept has two dimensions: 1) contradictions at the level of social structure, as evidenced in institutional resources and requirements, such as statuses, roles, and norms; and 2) contradictions at the subjective level, in terms of cognitions, emotions, and motivations.

This definition distinguishes ambivalence from two other related concepts. First, we differentiate our approach from the focus on intergenerational conflict. Simply emphasizing negative perceptions in intergenerational relationships does not constitute an analysis of ambivalence. Instead, the critical component is the presence of both positive and negative perceptions by an individual. Thus, an individual who experiences the relationship with a parent as incorporating both affection and resentment would be identified as ambivalent. We also distinguish the concept of ambivalence from that of ambiguity. This term connotes uncertainty and unclarity in a family situation, where the family system is not secure or well-defined, and in which family members cannot get the facts required to take appropriate action (Boss, 1988). It is possible that ambiguity contributes to ambivalence, but it does not necessarily imply opposed perceptions or emotions. Indeed, in close relationships, it has been argued that it is when a relationship is well-defined that the coexistence of positive and negative feelings begins to play a larger role (Thompson & Holmes, 1996).

To summarize, a variety of theoretical perspectives suggest that ambivalence, as we have defined it, is a useful concept, and that it is very relevant to an analysis of family relationships. To date, however, ambivalence has never been proposed as a general approach to the study of intergenerational relationships. We now turn to the question: Why focus on ambivalence in the study of parent-child relations in later life? Ultimately, the question is an empirical one: What does the research show about the dynamics of actual intergenerational relationships among adults? Are they essentially positive, supportive, or harmonious, such that solidarity can be fundamentally assumed in intergenerational relations? Or is there evidence that parent-child relations in later life are characterized by ambivalence, and by attempts to manage such ambivalence?

Our reading of the literature on parent-child relations in later life suggests three aspects of parent-child relations in later life that are especially likely to generate ambivalence. These are:

1. Ambivalence between dependence and autonomy.
2. Ambivalence resulting from conflicting norms regarding intergenerational relations.
3. Ambivalence resulting from solidarity.

These examples are aimed at clarifying the concept of ambivalence in the context of intergenerational relations and at making a case for its usefulness for empirical research. In each of example, we provide a detailed reinterpretation of one empirical study that illustrates the type of ambivalence in question. We would note that this is not meant to be a comprehensive list of types of intergenerational ambivalence; in fact, a high priority for future investigations is the identification of types of intergenerational ambivalence.

## **2.1 Dependence Versus Autonomy**

There is a sound basis upon which to argue that ambivalence between the two poles of autonomy and dependence characterizes intergenerational relations in contemporary society. Indeed, this dilemma appears to be built into the structure of the paired statuses of parent and adult child. Specifically, in adulthood, ambivalence exists between the desire of parents and children for help, support, and

nurturance; and countervailing pressures for freedom from the parent-child relationship (cf., Cohler, 1983; Cohler & Altergott, 1995; Moss & Moss, 1992). Cohler & Grunebaum (1981) describe this ambivalence succinctly:

There is a paradox in contemporary society where, on the one hand, it is believed that adults will strive to become both psychologically and economically autonomous and self-reliant, while, on the other, findings from systematic investigations of family life show that dependence across the generations is the typical mode of intergenerational relations, including the interdependence of very old parents on their middle-aged offspring (p. 10).

An empirical study by Cohler & Grunebaum (1981) has convincingly documented ambivalence over dependence and autonomy. Cohler and Grunebaum conducted a detailed, naturalistic study of four Italian-American families living in an urban area, focusing on the mother-daughter relationship. Adult daughters in their study desired closeness to their mothers. This lack of separateness was fostered by women's "kin-keeping" functions within families, and by the shared status of mother by both generations, as daughters looked to mothers for socialization to the parent role. However, the daughters' desire for support and care from their mothers conflicted with the mothers' developmental stage. The older women were coming to terms with their own aging, and were trying out new roles as workers or volunteers. They simultaneously wished to help their daughters, to feel "solidarity" with them, but also greatly resented incursions on their autonomy.

Thus, there is a fundamental ambivalence in relations between adult daughters and their mothers. As daughters themselves have children (at least in the urban settings studied by Cohler & Grunebaum) they come into closer contact with their mothers, and their bond with mothers deepens. This increased closeness, however, carries with it the seeds of tension and conflict. Mothers in the study at times attempted to dominate the daughters' lives, especially in the realm of child-rearing. Much more common, however, was the "feeling among members of the grandparental generation that their young adult offspring expect advice and assistance which they are unwilling to provide and the feeling of young adult offspring that their need for help and advice is rebuffed by their parents" (p. 38).

One example must suffice here to illustrate the inability of a simple focus on solidarity to account for family dynamics in this study. Two of the mothers appear to have very close relationships with their daughters. They live near one another, they call each other every day, they engage in a wide range of mutual assistance, and report high emotional closeness and similar values. However, the relationships are also a source of tremendous stress to both women:

"Mrs. Limpari and Mrs. Giorgio view their daughters' proffered help as a means by which their daughters can control their mothers' lives. Rather than enjoying the help and attention their daughters wish to bestow on them, these grandmothers make considerable effort to avoid such help. It is probable that each of these grandmothers is aware of the motive underlying this desire to be of greater help, for each of the two daughters...seeks to have her unfulfilled dependency needs met through a continuing close relationship with her own mother. Given both the strength of the daughters' needs, and the nature of their own mothers' personalities, disappointment and frustration are likely to be the only result for both generations" (p. 197).

It is of interest to observe the contrast between this study and those that have used solidarity as an general approach. All four of the families in the Cohler & Grunebaum study would have scored high on most or all of the Bengtson and the Rossi & Rossi solidarity measures. However, the relationships were actually characterized by conflict and anxiety, as well as solidarity. As opposed to a relationship that is phenomenologically experienced entirely as "solidary," Cohler & Grunebaum's mothers are caught between daughters' needs for closeness and support, and their own desires for self-fulfillment and independence. Daughters, in turn, struggle with their ambivalent desires to be "still daughters," but also to be independent wives and mothers.

Cohler & Grunebaum's respondents share two special characteristics: they are mother-daughter dyads, and they are in very close, regular contact with one another. It is worth noting that Nydegger & Mitteness (1991) found considerable ambivalence in close father-son relationships in later life. Fathers and sons show solidarity, but also "inherent, sustained tensions" (p. 257) as fathers simultaneously push sons toward independence, but also resist relinquishing authority. Further, Eisenhandler (1992) studied parent-child relationships in which the degree of mutual involvement was considerably less intense than those described by

Cohler & Grunebaum. Nevertheless, in those situations, there was ambivalence over issues of visiting, advice-giving, and help during crises.

## **2.2 Conflicting Norms Regarding Intergenerational Relationships**

Norms entail widely-accepted rules that specify appropriate behavior in particular circumstances. These rules state how individuals in particular social positions are obligated to think or act. Further, norms imply a degree of social consensus about the content of the norm and the degree of adherence to it that is required (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). To the extent that social scientists concerned with intergenerational relations have examined norms, they have tended to document dominant normative structures, such as filial responsibility, commitment to assist members of another generation, or obligation to kin. The intergenerational ambivalence approach, however, encourages the investigation of conflict among norms, the way in which such normative conflict is managed, and the effects of resulting ambivalence on individuals. The study of family caregiving we will review here clearly shows the existence of conflicting norms, as well as the resulting ambivalence on the part of both parents and children.

George's (1986) analysis is one of the few that explicitly focuses on normative conflict involved in the provision of care to disabled elderly persons. She focuses in particular on two conflicting, powerful normative structures: the norm of reciprocity, which suggests that profit and loss should be equitable between relationship partners; and the norm of solidarity, which implies that individuals should give close family members whatever help they need, without concern for a "return on investment." In George's view, "Providing care to a chronically ill older adult...leads to a long-term imbalance in adherence to these norms and creates personal discomfort and the conclusion that one has behaved badly -- regardless of which norm is adhered to most strongly" (p. 68). Because the norms are incompatible in a long-term caregiving situation to a chronically ill person, the caregiver is likely to feel inadequate in the performance of one of the two norms.

George's research indicates that although they experience feelings of solidarity, caregivers become distressed as previously established exchange relationships are disrupted. However, despite the distress, the caregivers cannot simply give up, for in so doing, they would violate the norm of solidarity. This dynamic leads to a classically ambivalent situation. The care recipients are also likely to feel am-

bivalent; although they have expectations for support from children, based on the norm of solidarity, they also feel guilt and helplessness about their inability to reciprocate.

In a study of persons caring for relatives with Alzheimer's disease, George found much greater normative conflict on the part of adult children than among persons caring for their spouses. Children were forced into the dilemma of when to stop providing care, and often longed for the time when rewards were more equally distributed. They also reported conflicts between loyalty toward the parent, on the one hand, and to spouse and children on the other. Many felt that there was no way to resolve the contradiction between the demands of solidarity and the desire for reciprocity, and were left with profound feelings of guilt. A quote from one of George's respondents illustrates the resulting ambivalence:

"I want to take care of my dad, but I have my own family too. My husband doesn't say much, but I know he wonders when it will end. My kids are coming to hate old people. They don't understand why Grandpa screams and won't call them by their names. If I put Dad in a nursing home, I'll be miserable. But I'm miserable now too" (p. 84).

Thus, rather than a simple relationship between the effort of caregiving and distress, George's study shows a highly complex and ambivalent situation. Indeed, one can posit conflicting feelings here between: (1) biologically-based factors (parent-child attachment); (2) socialization factors (the fact that most caregivers are women who have been socialized into nurturing and supportive roles); (3) competing roles (daughter versus wife and mother); and (4) countervailing social norms (solidarity versus reciprocity). It is perhaps no wonder that caregivers experience elevated rates of psychological distress (Schulz et al., 1990).

George's research provides compelling evidence in support of normative ambivalence in intergenerational relations. The question arises, however: is such normative conflict inherent only in caregiving relationships, or is it also apparent in parent-child relationships more generally? Farber's (1989) study of conflicting norms provides an example of a quantitative study that found striking normative ambivalence in intergenerational relations. Farber did not focus only on parents and children, but also on other kin; however the findings are quite relevant here.

Like George, Farber posits the existence of a norm that "one should act in ways that enhance the welfare of one's family and kin." This rule of "prescriptive altruism" and generosity to kin, which seems to us identical to George's norm of solidarity, Farber terms "amity." Farber suggests that this norm is to be found across societies, and is probably universal.

Two large-scale surveys in the United States and Hungary, however, revealed a surprising finding. Although a norm of amity was indeed present, it existed independently beside a contradictory norm: that of distrust of kin. Factor analyses demonstrated that amity and distrust of kin are two separate factors, which exist as a duality in the minds of the respondents. That is, in assessing the items on the amity scales, Farber suggests that the respondents used two different reference points, with the norm of amity as one basis for evaluating certain items, but with the norm of distrust as the basis for evaluating others.

Farber's theoretical explanation for these ambivalent attitudes is relevant to normative intergenerational ambivalence. He suggests that if people took the axiom of amity literally, everyone would distribute all of their resources to kin. However, this would be dysfunctional, since it would exhaust some relatives, and allow other kin to contribute nothing and live off the generosity of others. For this reason, the axiom of distrust serves as a "brake for limiting the extent of redistribution" (p. 320). There is thus a dynamic relationship, in which the axiom of amity generates altruistic acts, while the norm of distrust limits the scope of such acts.

This generalization helps explain the contradictions caregivers experience. Given unlimited adherence to solidarity, adult children would exhaust themselves in care of their parents, and neglect responsibilities to the family of procreation and to other social roles. It is possible that the competing norms serve a useful function in routine family interactions, but become problematic in specific situations that involve chronic stress. That is, the norms of amity and distrust may coexist in a way that allow for family ties without dangerous over-commitment, but which lead to distress in situations where an excess of help is demanded. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the careful reconstruction of the processes of negotiation by Finch & Mason (1993), who emphasize the relativistic character of moral obligations.

### **2.3 Solidarity and Ambivalence**

As the Cohler & Grunebaum (1991) and George (1986) studies demonstrated, those families where solidarity of all kinds (for example, co-residence or close proximity; extensive mutual dependency for help; very frequent interaction) exists are especially likely to contain their opposites: deep dissatisfaction about the relationship, struggles for independence, and serious conflict. These findings are supported by the literature on romantic relationships, which suggests that interdependence tends to increase the likelihood of conflict (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). The gerontological literature, however, typically has not considered this possibility. We review here a set of studies on the abuse of elderly persons that illustrates this tendency toward conflict resulting from solidarity itself.

The concept of violence against the elderly appears at first consideration to be at odds with the solidarity perspective. Indeed, physical abuse of the elderly might be thought to be inversely related to solidarity. It might have more in common with crime by strangers: a relatively unattached child (who may also be neglectful), who has few scruples in attacking the aged parent. In fact, however, research on violence against the elderly does not support this view. Studies have shown a "web of mutual dependency" between parents and children in elder abuse situations (Wolf & Pillemer, 1989). Most investigations show that parents who experience violence from their children typically have some degree of physical impairment, and receive at least occasional help from the abusive child.

More striking, however, is the dependence of the violent child on the parent. In two separate studies, Pillemer conducted case-comparison analyses of elderly parent-adult child dyads in which violence had and had not occurred (Pillemer, 1985; 1993). In both studies, he found that the abusive children were heavily dependent on the parent they were victimizing. Abusers, in contrast to a non-abuse comparison group, were found to be substantially more dependent on their parents for housing (most lived as dependents in their parents' homes), for financial assistance, and for help with instrumental activities such as transportation.

Extensive qualitative data were collected in both studies, which were consistent with the quantitative findings. In the majority of cases, the data showed that mutual dependency of the adult child and the parent was a key dynamic in the abuse situation, with the victims heavily supporting children who maltreated them. The children often were individuals who had difficulty separating from their parents



and establishing an independent life. Indeed, Pillemer (1985; 1993) found that the physical abuse stemmed directly from the sense of dependency and powerlessness experienced by the abuser.

Parents were caught up in ambivalence as they tried to resolve the situation. Most of the parents felt trapped by a sense of family obligation, and therefore did not leave the situation or eject the abuser. Some parents stressed the formal relationship, justifying exposing themselves to the risk of abuse because of normative obligations to help their children. Equally common were feelings of love and affection for the child, despite the abuse. Many parents explicitly referred to feeling "torn," or "of two minds," regarding the intensely positive and negative aspects of the relationship with the child.

We have selected these research findings, which have been confirmed in European studies (cf., Ogg, 1993) to highlight the limitations of the solidarity model in representing the actual experience of families. As in the Cohler & Grunebaum study, many of the abusive families would have scored high on the measures of solidarity (as indeed they did on comparable measures that were used in the study). However, these were in fact fundamentally ambivalent family situations, which contained a complex mix of elements of solidarity, serious conflict over power and resources, and violence.

### **3. Future Prospects for the Study of Intergenerational Ambivalence**

We began this article by pointing out that the study of intergenerational relations has been dominated by a paradigm that emphasizes intergenerational solidarity, and a less well articulated focus that highlights conflict and abandonment. We proposed ambivalence as an alternative general approach to understanding intergenerational relations among adults. We provided evidence for the value of this approach, both from theoretical work in the social sciences, as well as in detailed examples from research on contemporary society that point to ambivalent, rather than solidary, relationships between the generations. These studies provide a clear argument against the dualistic solidarity-versus-conflict view, demonstrating instead that countervailing positive and negative forces characterize intergenerational relationships, and that the focal point of interest is the way in which such ambivalence is mediated and managed.

The question then arises: What type of research should be conducted to explore intergenerational ambivalence? While a detailed answer to this question is beyond the scope of the present article, the ambivalence approach suggests a number of important steps for future researchers.

### **3.1 Measurement**

The ambivalence perspective raises the need for new and more sensitive measures of intergenerational relations. Specifically, the types of measures employed by researchers in the solidarity tradition are not adequate to address the more complex nature of the questions raised by intergenerational ambivalence. The most commonly used measures in such studies make it impossible to explore contradictory feelings within the same relationship. In the research by Bengtson and colleagues, for example, "affectual solidarity" is measured by scales of "the type and degree of positive sentiments held about family members" (Roberts, Richards, & Bengtson, 1991). In a recent study, Bengtson & Harootyan (1994) took an even more minimalist approach, operationalizing affectual solidarity using the single measure "In general, how close do you feel to your [relative]?" with three response categories ("very close," somewhat close," and "not at all close")." Such measures are not likely to reflect the range of members' contradictory feelings about one another.

Similarly, Rossi & Rossi (1990) employ a scale to measure affectual solidarity that asks respondents to rate relationships on a 1-7 scale. The low end of the scale represents relationships that are "tense and strained," and the high end those that are "close and intimate." This measure, of course, does not allow the study to capture those persons who feel both ways (Marshall, et al., 1993). As Mangen (1995) notes, the positive bias in measures like these cannot account for families who score high on both positive and negative dimensions. To address such shortcomings, researchers should begin to include measures of conflicting attitudes, motivations, or emotions. The Farber study described earlier is a good example: rather than measuring only solidarity, items regarding distrust of kin were also included. Similarly, George obtained information about competing normative structures, rather than only one. Analytic strategies can then employ such measures to examine dilemmas and conflicting factors.

In the early stages of studying intergenerational ambivalence, triangulation of various methods appears to be a sound strategy. For example, the Cohler & Grunebaum study used methods which could be applied to the study of ambivalence: repeated in-depth interviews over time, semi-structured questionnaires, observation of parents and children, and clinical techniques such as projective tests. The four families were purposively selected from a larger survey, which allowed for comparisons between the case studies and a more representative group. The families were also selected according to theoretically-defined criteria: joint versus separate living arrangements, and high or low scores on a measure of the appropriateness of the mother's attitude toward closeness to the adult child. This type of approach is likely to show the complexity of family life implied by the intergenerational ambivalence perspective.

Specific quantitative measures of intergenerational ambivalence should also be developed, and possible adaptation of existing measures explored. One of the few direct measures of ambivalence in close relationships was developed by Braiker & Kelley (1979). They asked respondents involved in romantic relationships general questions such as "How confused were you about your feelings toward [the other person]?" and "How ambivalent or unsure were you about continuing the relationship with [the other person]?" As a first step, such general questions could be used to describe the parameters of intergenerational ambivalence. However, this type of approach may not be meaningful to some respondents, in that it requires them to be consciously aware of the ambivalence.

An improvement on this method has been developed by Thompson & Holmes (1996), using measures developed in the study of ambivalent attitudes (Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995). To study ambivalence in romantic relationships, they ask respondents to carry out separate assessments of positive and negative components of attitudes toward the partner. Respondents are asked first to focus only on the positive aspects of an attribute of the partner, and to rate it on a scale from "not at all" to "extremely positive." They then ask the respondent to focus only on the negative aspects of the same attribute, and rate the degree of negativity.

To provide a single example, using the Thompson et al. method, one could ask of an adult child: "Focus only on the best aspects of helping your mother. To what extent do you believe helping her is beneficial to your relationship?" The paired

negative question would substitute "harmful" for "beneficial." It is then possible to compare the degree to which the situation is seen as both positive and negative, using one of several computational formulae (see Thompson et al., 1995, for a review of estimation methods). Whether or not this approach is effective in studying intergenerational ambivalence remains to be tested; most important is that such a precedent exists in the close relationships literature, which can point the way toward measurement strategies.

### **3.2 Ambivalence as Dependent or Independent Variable**

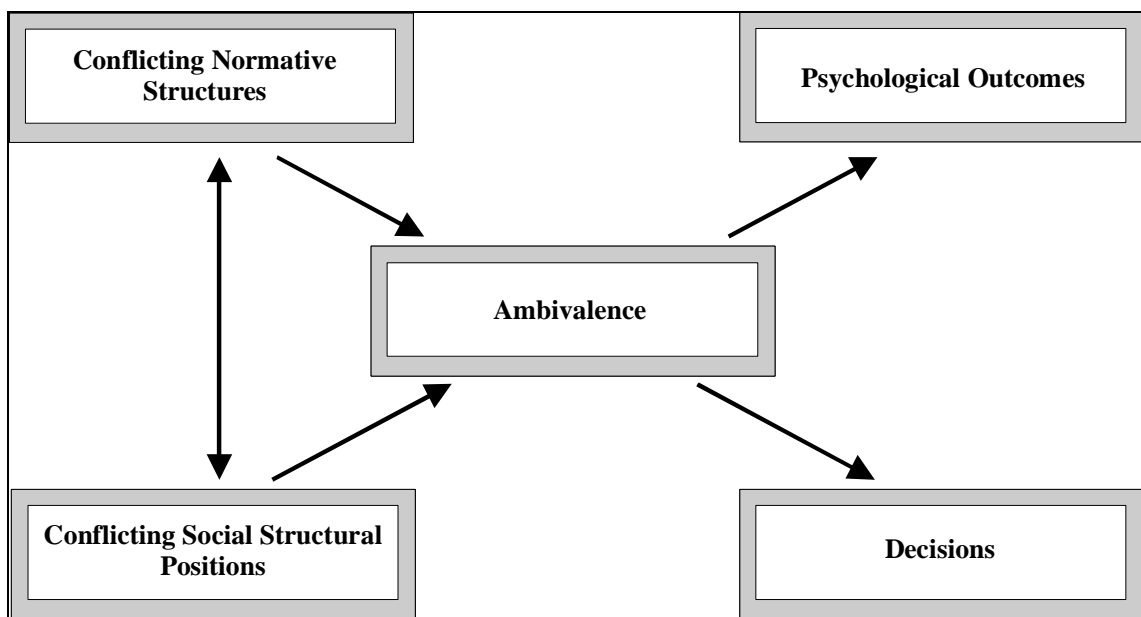
In the studies we reviewed, ambivalence was fruitfully investigated as both an independent and a dependent variable. Cohler & Grunebaum's work focused on ambivalence as a dependent variable, examining such factors as family history and shared living arrangements as sources of ambivalence. George treated normative ambivalence as an independent variable, and explored the role of ambivalence as a source of negative affect among caregivers. Similarly, Pillemer & Wolf identified ambivalence over dependency as a predictor of elder abuse.

In considering intergenerational ambivalence as a dependent variable, researchers can explore its antecedents in earlier phases of the relationship. For example, some investigators have linked ambivalence in close relationships to early patterns of parent-child attachment (cf., Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Further, it would be useful to determine the degree to which subgroups of the population are differentially likely to experience ambivalence. As a beginning step, studies of variations in ambivalence according to gender, race, and socioeconomic status should be conducted.

The effects of intergenerational ambivalence should also be investigated. It might be assumed that ambivalence is invariably a negative experience, leading to psychological distress. However, Thompson & Holmes (1996), in an analysis of romantic relationships, suggest that having both positive and negative attitudes toward another person may not always indicate personal disturbance. Instead, they suggest, "a moderate level of ambivalence may be indicative of a balanced, realistic assessment of a partner" (p. 502). Such a view is consistent with Farber's study, discussed earlier: up to a certain point, a degree of ambivalence may serve a protective function. The impact of ambivalence both on psychological well-being and on behavior would be a fruitful area for study.

It is too early in our understanding of intergenerational ambivalence to attempt a formal conceptual model of its causes and consequences. However, Figure 1 presents a simple illustrative model. As Figure 1 indicates, conflicts within norms or within positions in social structure are seen as resulting in feelings of ambivalence, which in turn have an impact on psychological well-being, as well as on decisions made to relieve the ambivalence. Further, the arrows between the first two domains indicate that conflicts may occur between norms and social structural positions.

FIGURE 1: ILLUSTRATIVE MODEL FOR RESEARCH ON AMBIVALENCE



To provide a simple example, consider a researcher who is interested in the impact of late-life divorce on intergenerational relationships. The researcher could hypothesize that elderly women who remarry will be likely to experience a conflict between the social positions of parent and that of new wife. Children may feel it is inappropriate for their mother to remarry, may worry that they will lose her attention, and may be concerned about the safety of their inheritance. The new husband, on the other hand, may make traditional demands on his wife's attention, and expect her to separate from her adult children. The resulting ambivalence might lead to psychological distress, and to a decision to reduce contact with children.

### **3.3 Mechanisms**

Mechanisms for managing intergenerational ambivalence merit attention. One possible mechanism identified in the historical literature is separation: divided spheres of life are allowed to develop between old and young, reinforced by residential segregation (see for example Graff, 1995; Stearns, 1986). When segmentation by place and time is impossible, Coser (1966) and others (Boehm, 1989; Foner, 1984; Marshall et al., 1993) point to the importance of ritual and etiquette as tension-reducing mechanisms. In contemporary society, the absence of some of the segregating and insulating mechanisms, as well as the rites of passage, of traditional societies may serve to increase ambivalence (Coser, 1966; see also Baumann, 1995).

### **3.4 Life Course Approach**

The study of intergenerational ambivalence requires a dynamic, life-course focus. Coser (1966) proposes that ambivalence will be particularly strong during status transitions, because in "changing from one status position to another, conformity with the requirements of one of these positions implies non-conformity with the requirements of another" (p. 144). The close relationships literature supports this view; for example, research indicates that ambivalence may characterize the early stages of a romantic relationship, but then subside later on (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). Boss (1998) notes that major family transitions over the life course have an ambivalent quality, in that they typically involve losses and gains; for example, when a child is launched from the parental home, "the family loses a dependent child, but gains an independent young adult" (p. 79).

Therefore, we would predict heightened ambivalence around the time of status transitions (for example, retirement or widowhood), and lower levels in periods of stability. Studies of the relationships between mid-life women who returned to college and their mothers (Suitor, 1987), and of adult children shortly after they became family caregivers (Pillemer & Suitor, 1996), provide evidence to support this view. Status transitions provide perhaps the best laboratory for the study of intergenerational ambivalence.

In this article, we have attempted to establish ambivalence as a theoretically and empirically useful approach to the study of intergenerational relations. Based on three examples, we elaborated on dimensions of the concept using examples from

available studies. Developing innovative qualitative and quantitative strategies for understanding the causes and consequences of ambivalence will prove an exciting challenge for future researchers. As methods and measures are developed and refined, ambivalence is likely to become an even more powerful general approach to research on parent-child relations in later life.

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