



“My nest is full:” Intergenerational relationships at midlife

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ABSTRACT

Incorporating a life course perspective, this qualitative study used focus groups to explore the experiences of midlife adults who were simultaneously providing support to emerging adult children and aging parents. Results indicated that adults situated in middle generations held beliefs that endorsed family-based responsibility to both younger and older members. Parents gladly supported children despite their longer transition to adulthood. Often unanticipated but accepted, provisions of care to aging parents were experienced with ambivalence — a joy and a burden. The transition of their parents to greater dependence helped participants gain insights into the terrain of late life and encouraged reflections about the intersection of aging, independence, and family responsibility. Participants expressed intentions to preserve their own independence and spare their children of caregiving burdens through self-directed actions. Implications focused on negotiations of family relationships around issues of independence and family responsibilities as a way to reduce intergenerational ambivalence.

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Introduction

The legendary *empty nest* of midlife is not so empty. Those in the middle generation, the *pivots* (Attias-Donfut & Arber, 2000), may be involved in caregiving to their aging parents while helping their emerging adult children transition into adulthood (Arnett, 2000). This variant of the “sandwich generation” (Miller, 1981) involves simultaneous assistance at

a time in life when those at mid-life might have hoped to focus on personal interests. Demographic changes (Lesthaeghe, 2010) may challenge cultural directives of individual growth and self-fulfillment for those in midlife (Roberts & Helson, 1997; van de Kaa, 2004). Increased longevity has produced more three- and four-generation family structures (Grundy & Henretta, 2006) and caregiving to parents can be a result. Approximately 25% of adult children currently provide personal care and/or financial help to a parent (MetLife, 2011). At the same time, socioeconomic shifts have lengthened the time it takes for emerging adults to gain independence due in part to an increased need for higher education and economic downturns (Arnett, 2000; Settersten & Ray, 2010; Stein et al., 2011).

In this study, we explored the experiences of individuals in the middle generation as they navigated multiple intergenerational transitions. In particular, we were interested in the perceptions of midlife parents of emerging adult children who also provided care to aging parents, and how this position shaped their view of their lives. We employed a life course perspective because of its multigenerational approach that links changing times with lives (Elder & Johnson, 2003). The life course precepts of historical time, linked lives, and human agency provided a framework for our exploration.

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Changing times

“The life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime” (Elder & Johnson, 2003, p. 62). Several sociohistorical factors have shaped the current contexts for the middle generation including the global economic crisis of 2008 (International Monetary Fund, 2009), the slower transition to adulthood of their emerging adult children (Settersten & Ray, 2010), and the increased life expectancy of their parents (Rice & Fineman, 2004). The economic events of 2008 culminated in the deepest global recession since the Great Depression (International Monetary Fund, 2009). This recession has impacted people differentially, yet few were untouched by the economic downturn that included record unemployment rates, substantial stock market losses, and reduced home values. Young adults and their parents have acknowledged that gaining a foothold in life has become more difficult. Most parents (59%) have provided financial support to non-student children ages 18–39 (National Endowment for Financial Education, 2011). The recession added momentum to already changing social norms of emerging adults and altered the outlook of retirement. According to a recent survey, many emerging adults reported living with parents, as well as delaying marriage, parenthood, and careers (Pew Research Center, Social and Demographic Trends, 2012). In 2012, 67% of parents said that their children should be financially independent by age 22 compared with 80% of parents in 1993 and adjusted their expectations of financial independence upwards to age 25 (Pew Research Center, Social and Demographic Trends, 2012). Social timetables have loosened, but major life transitions such as marriage, parenthood, and independent living have continued to influence how we mark progress in life (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Greater economic instability and social change may influence the middle generation’s perspective on how they support emerging adult children, aging parents, and personal life goals.

Linked lives: intergenerational relationships

Our lives and timetables are interconnected where the needs and circumstances of others in the family network influence the individual and experiences of family (Hagestad, 2003; Settersten, 2009). Because family members go through various life transitions in the intergenerational company of others, these linkages have the potential to shape the middle generation’s choices and personal biographies, just as historical times provide a context for this experience.

Recent studies have highlighted simultaneous support exchanges from midlife adults to aging parents and adult children. In a cross-sectional study of midlife women in the United States and Great Britain, Grundy and Henretta (2006) found that those who helped an adult child were more likely to help an elderly parent, and vice versa, regardless of sociodemographic characteristics such as social class and income. Similarly, Fingerman et al. (2010) found that midlife adults provided support to both generations, with midlife parents on average giving more help to their children than giving help to their aging parents. This downward flow of resources also has been shown in studies on intergenerational exchanges of support between parents and their adult children

(Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, & Zarit, 2012). Some studies found that adult children with problems received more support from parents (Pillemer & Suitor, 2006), although others found that successful adult children also received help (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009). Regardless, parents provide an array of assistance including emotional support, financial assistance, financial help with education, and career exploration (Aquilino, 2006; Fingerman et al., 2009) due to parents’ greater value of continuity and closeness (Giarrusso, Stallings, & Bengtson, 1995; Shapiro, 2004). The intergenerational stake phenomenon is consistent with studies that found that parents want to advantage their children in a competitive world (Furstenberg, 2010), value parenthood as a central identity at midlife (Levitzi, 2009), and experience greater well-being when children are successful (Fingerman et al., 2012; Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994). This concept of downward attention was also supported by a study of African American parents who expressed a desire to avoid familial sources of care if needed in later life (Anderson & Turner, 2010). Participants came from communities with traditional family care ethics, yet they hoped to spare their children the disruption of caregiving because they valued their children’s successes and the sacrifices that had already been made to advantage the younger generation. In difficult economic times, tension may emerge from directing resources to adult children when the longer road to independence might strain resources of time, money, and emotional energy.

A shift to this pattern of downward generational focus for midlife adults can occur when older parents experience declines in health or a life crisis that requires urgent attention. Increased life expectancy does not guarantee continued good health at advanced ages and may result in greater needs for assistance (Olshansky, Rudberg, Carnes, Cassel, & Brody, 1991). When health statuses decline for older adults, relationship patterns between adult children and parents are altered (Fingerman, Hay, KampDush, Cichy, & Hosterman, 2007; Sands, Ferreira, Stewart, Brod, & Yaffe, 2004). Greater parental needs may stimulate increased involvement by the adult child as suggested by the contingent exchange perspective (Eggebeen & Davey, 1998). Regardless of what elder parents expected, the number of “bad things” experienced by parents predicted assistance by adult children (Eggebeen & Davey, 1998, p. 947). Adult children tend to be there for parents in times of crisis or need even if parents do not hold expectations for their involvement. This suggests that norms of family commitment are activated in times of trouble, similar to Hagestad’s (1996) concept of a “family national guard”. Adult children find themselves faced with new responsibilities when crisis triggers intergenerational flows of support up to parents.

This transition to greater dependence by parents is complex for both adult children and elder parents (Brody, 1981; Funk, 2010; Qualls, 1999). When anticipating the potential care needs of older parents, adult children experience mixed feelings, or ambivalence (Cicirelli, 1988), with increased tension when parents are frail and require more caregiving (Gaugler, Zarit, & Perlin, 2003; Willson, Shuey, Elder, & Jr, 2003). A source of tension in this transition may stem from adult children who want to support autonomy in their aging parents yet feel uncertain about how to provide care without taking control in the relationship (Funk, 2010). Older parents may desire both independence and connection with adult children (Spitze & Gallant, 2004) and experience

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