Chapter 11
Intergenerational Relations in Later-Life Families

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Relations between the generations have been a central feature in literature and popular culture throughout recorded history. The dramatic increase in life expectancy across the last century, combined with more recent changes in divorce, child-bearing, and women's employment, has challenged old assumptions and created new inquiries into intergenerational relations in later life. Thus, it is not surprising that the study of these relations in the later years has grown exponentially across the last three decades as scholars have rushed to identify and explain these new patterns of relations and their consequences on family members.

In reviewing the study of families in later life across the past 30 years, this chapter has three major goals. First, we highlight the major theoretical developments of this period. We then review the empirical research on intergenerational relationships in the family, including relations between parents and adult children and between grandparents and grandchildren. Because the literature on these topics is so extensive, we will focus our review in the following ways. First, we will concentrate primarily on interpersonal relationships among family members, referring when appropriate to related chapters in this volume that address other dimensions of intergenerational relations (e.g., caregiving, coresidence, diversity in later-life families, and demographic changes). Second, we will devote the most space to parent–adult child relations; this choice reflects the importance of this topic in the literature on later-life families. Third, we focus on later-life families in the United States; given the large body of work on cross-national differences in families, placing them in an appropriate historical and cultural context is beyond the scope of this review. Finally, consistent with the focus of the volume, we emphasize advances in the sociological study of later-life families across the past three decades, although research from other disciplines is noted where relevant.

Theoretical Roots and Conceptual Advances

The 1980s saw the emergence of an important body of theoretical work that influenced the study of relations between parents and their adult children, including Bengtson and colleagues' extension of the family solidarity model (Bengtson and Schrader 1982); Riley's (1987) essays on the significance of age in sociology; and Hagestad's (1986) and Nydegger's (1986) discussions of off-time transitions, optimum timing preferences, and filial maturity. This scholarship played a key

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role in expanding the range of approaches to studying parent–adult child relations, including new theoretical frameworks that emphasized dissensus rather than consensus and empirical studies that focused on life course transitions and within-family variations in parent–adult child relations.

Intergenerational Solidarity

Bengtson's intergenerational solidarity model was introduced just prior to the period on which we are focusing in this review, quickly becoming the dominant theoretical framework in the study of the intergenerational relations. Not only has Bengtson and colleagues' own body of work had a major impact on the field (cf. Bengtson et al. 2002), their framework has been incorporated in almost all of the major programs of research on intergenerational relations across this period (Rossi and Rossi 1990; Silverstein and Giarrusso in press).

Bengtson and colleagues posited that family solidarity is comprised of several interrelated components: (1) contact, (2) exchange of support, (3) norms of obligation, (4) value similarity, (5) relationship quality, and (6) opportunity structure. Empirical research framed by this model has been developed in three increasing complex directions. The first of these directions focused on single concepts, such as affect and support, emphasizing how they develop within the family (Rossi and Rossi 1990) and influence outcomes for parents and children (Silverstein, Chen, and Heller 1996; Giarrusso et al. 2001). In the second direction, individual concepts have been combined into a broader single measure of family solidarity. In these studies, solidarity is often the outcome, rather than the predictor (Silverstein and Bengtson 1997). In the third, most complex direction, scholars have explored the interdependence among concepts (Bengtson and Roberts 1991; Rossi and Rossi 1990), in the theoretical tradition of Homans (1950).

Most of the research drawing upon the solidarity model has explored parent–adult child relationships. However, there is evidence of the utility of this model for other intergenerational relations, particularly relations between grandparents and grandchildren (Giarrusso et al. 2001). In the early 1990s, Bengtson and colleagues (Bengtson et al. 2002) also expanded the model to incorporate negative affect. This development may have helped to fuel new theoretical developments on aging families across the past decade which have, paradoxically, challenged Bengtson's assumption that solidarity is the central factor shaping intergenerational relations.

The Life Course Perspective in Later-Life Family Relationships

Across the past three decades, the life course perspective has been one of the most influential approaches in the social sciences. Marshall and Bengtson's chapter in this volume provides a comprehensive discussion of the life course perspective; therefore, we will focus specifically on the way in which life course theories have shaped the study of intergenerational relations in recent decades.

As discussed in greater detail in Marshall and Bengtson's chapter, the life course perspective draws from both sociological theories of social change and psychological theories of individual and family development. This perspective highlights the importance of historical and social contexts and individual time and development on family relationships (Settersten 2003); further, it addresses individual change within the family context as well as how these changes are linked to other family members (Elder 1994). This perspective is complementary to Bengtson's solidarity model in that they both emphasize the importance of time and generation in explaining the relationships between members of all dyads within the family at any point in the life course.

Empirical studies of intergenerational relations across the past three decades have typically drawn upon the life course perspective to address two issues. First, studies have examined continuity in family relations across the life course, reporting that closer and more harmonious relationships

between parents and children in early life were associated with higher relationship quality and exchange of support across the life course (Rossi and Rossi 1990).

The second line of inquiry framed by the life course perspective addresses the notion of "linked lives," focusing on the ways in which life events experienced by family members shape their intergenerational relations. In some cases, the effects of transitions appear to be consistent, such as in the case of parental divorce, which almost variably lowers the quality of relations between fathers and their adult children (Connidis 2003; Wethington and Dush 2007). However, in many cases, the direction and extent of the effects are conditional. For example, adult children's divorce generally does not affect relations between the generations (Kaufman and Uhlenberg 1998), but it does when the event leads offspring to return to their parents' homes needing of high levels of support (Aquilino and Supple 1991). Further, consistent with Hagestad's classic work on timing (Hagestad 1986), the same transition may improve parent–child relations when the timing fits with normative life course expectations, but may have deleterious effects when it does not. For example, children's completion of higher education may improve relations with parents (Aquilino 1997), but not necessarily when an adult daughter returns to school while raising her own family (Suitor 1987).

In sum, the life course perspective has become an important conceptual tool in understanding relations between and within generations in later-life families. Thus far, much of the research that has drawn upon this framework has been cross-sectional, despite the obvious longitudinal character of its basic tenets; its influence is likely to become even stronger when more studies of intergenerational relations follow families across longer periods.

Ambivalence in Later-Life Family Relationships

A more recent theoretical development in the study of later-life families is intergenerational ambivalence. The concept of ambivalence has roots in classic theories in both sociology and psychology beginning in the early 1900s (Freud 1913; Merton and Barber 1963; Coser 1966); however, only since the late 1990s (Luescher and Pillemer 1998) has this concept come to play a central role in the study of intergenerational relations. Although this framework has been applied predominantly in the area of parent–adult child relations, it has also been used to shed light on other relationships in middle and later life such as those between grandparents and grandchildren.

In contrast to theoretical perspectives that focus heavily on positive aspects of intergenerational relationships, the ambivalence framework is based on the assumption that family relationships are characterized by both positive and negative feelings or attitudes. This perspective posits that family roles are often contradictory, thus producing ambivalent feelings (Pillemer and Suitor 2005, 2008). The majority of empirical work on intergenerational ambivalence has focused on parent–adult child relations, exploring the prevalence of ambivalence and identifying characteristics of parents, children, and dyads which predict this dimension of relationship quality (Pillemer et al. 2007; Wilson et al. 2006). A variety of direct and indirect measures of ambivalence have been used across these studies. Recent research comparing the most commonly used direct and indirect measures has shown that although they are moderately strongly associated, the association is not sufficiently strong to demonstrate that they capture the same underlying construct; further, the findings suggest that direct and indirect measures have different meanings for particular subgroups of parents and adult children (Suitor, Gilligan, and Pillemer 2009).

Taken together, this developing line of scholarship suggests that ambivalence is an important line of inquiry for understanding later-life families, primarily because it captures many complexities and nuances in later-life family relationships that previous research has not. Nevertheless, it is important to note that it complements both the solidarity and life course perspectives in its focus on understanding how current ambivalence is shaped by the complexity in role relationships across the life course.

Substantive Advances

Parent–Adult Child Relations

The early 1980s were a pivotal time in the study of parent–adult child relations. For much of the three previous decades, research on intergenerational relations was concerned with exploring patterns of contact and the provision of support to parents in need of care (Albrecht 1953; Winch 1970). This line of work was fueled by concern regarding the broad social changes occurring across that period, including the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and the women's movement. These societal upheavals led to skyrocketing increases in both women's employment and divorce, both were viewed to be particularly threatening to later-life families. However, by the early 1980s, research had demonstrated that parents and children continued to stay in regular contact and children, particularly daughters, continued to provide care to older parents in need. Thus, concerns about the demise of traditional intergenerational relations declined (Bengtson and DeTerre 1980), allowing scholars to turn to new questions regarding exchanges and other dimensions of parent–adult child relations.

Exchanges Between the Generations

From the 1980s through the first decade of the century, scholars of later-life families continued to monitor children's care to parents and also turned from asking merely *whether* children provide support to their parents to what factors lead particular children to provide support to particular parents and the consequences of parent care on adult children's physical, psychological, and social well-being. Research also turned to exploring the flow of support between the generations, as opposed to only from children to parents. In this section, we will focus primarily on instrumental exchanges with parents, including our discussion of expressive support in the section on relationship quality between parents and adult children.

Support from Parents to Adult Children. One of the patterns shown most consistently in this line of work is that, despite the concern that adult children will become overburdened with elder care, parents typically give more support than they receive until their 70s or 80s (Cooney and Uhlenberg 1992; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Umberson 2006). In fact, the flow of support generally does not change until parents' health begins to decline (Eggebeen and Hogan 1990; Rossi and Rossi 1990). The type of assistance that parents provide to their adult children varies as a function of the children's point in the life course, moving from assistance with childcare and routine housekeeping and maintenance tasks when children are raising young families to financial assistance as adult children move into later middle age (Cooney and Uhlenberg, 1992; Swartz 2009). However, it is important to remember that the support provided to adult children in the form of childcare and household tasks can also be considered to be financial assistance, in that they reduce the financial resources that children would otherwise have to direct toward these tasks. This point is best made by Silverstein and colleagues' calculation that the childcare provided by grandparents saves parents between 17 and 29 billion dollars (Gans and Silverstein 2006).

It might appear that parents provide more assistance to married adult children raising families; however, children who are not married are often in greater need, and therefore receive more support (Spitze et al. 1994; Suitor, Pillemer, and Sechrist 2006). Other life events and conditions that increase adult children's needs also lead to more parental support. For example, adult children who experience serious physical and mental health problems also receive greater support from parents (Seltzer et al. 2008; Suitor et al. 2006a, b), as do children who are divorced (Spitze et al. 1994), unemployed (Suitor, Sechrist, and Pillemer 2007), or who have engaged in deviant behaviors as adults

(Suitor et al. 2006a, b). It is also important to note that the support given to children in need is, in a sense, more costly to parents because the children's needs often render them unable to reciprocate in either the short-term or long-term (Pillemer and Suitor 1991; Greenfield and Marks 2006), which becomes more problematic as parents age and their needs increase while their ability to provide support to needy children declines (Seltzer et al. 2008).

Another way in which older parents may provide support for adult children is housing. Several studies during the 1980s highlighted the continued coresidence or return of adult children to their parents' homes not related to care for the older parent, but to the financial or emotional status of the adult child (Mancini and Blieszner 1985). Although coresidence may be beneficial for both generations, it is most often fueled by children's rather than the parents' needs and circumstances (Choi 2003; Ward, Logan, and Spitze 1992).

Some scholars argued that such coresidence would have detrimental effects on parents' marital quality and well-being (Clemens and Axelson 1985); however, findings from most large-scale surveys reported that such negative effects appeared primarily in the presence of high levels of conflict between parents and coresident children (Suitor and Pillemer 1988) and when children's coresidence resulted from problems in their own lives (Aquilino and Supple 1991; Pudrovska 2009). However, these findings suggest that the current economic crisis, involving the highest level of unemployment and home loss in nearly three decades and leading to increased coresidence (Fleck 2009), may be setting the stage for increased intergenerational coresidence and accompanying interpersonal and psychological stress resulting from the stressful circumstances that led to this arrangement.

In summary, research from the past three decades has shown that parents continue to assist their adult children, providing both routine support and support in times of particular need from the point when children enter adulthood until the parents' health or financial resources require that the flow of support begins to reverse toward the older generation. It is also worth noting that under normal circumstances, the provision of support to their children has few negative effects on parents' well-being, unless that support is needed due to children's serious problems, as discussed above, or when parents are experiencing their own stressful transitions, such as widowhood or retirement (Davey and Eggebeen 1998).

Support from Children to Parents. As noted earlier, one of the issues of greatest concern to sociologists studying older families across the past several decades has been whether adult children provide adequate support to their parents, and more recently, the effects of providing that support on children's physical, psychological, and social well-being. Both scholarly and popular interests in this subject have been so great that family caregiving has become one of the most rapidly growing bodies of literature in the social sciences since the early 1980s.

One reason for the rapidly growing interest in support to parents is the increasing number of adult children in their 40s, 50s, and 60s who have living parents (US Bureau of the Census 2010), relative to earlier decades. However, that does not mean that all of these parents are in need of care. As discussed earlier, the flow of support is disproportionately from parents to children typically until parents are in their 70s, at which point it begins to reverse. However, recent data on the health and activity of adults can be used to suggest that studies may soon find either that the flow continues toward children for a longer period than in earlier decades, or that there is an interlude in which there is little flow in either direction.

The phenomenon of "better aging" has found its way into popular culture as well as scholarly research, as illustrated by a recent cartoon in *The New Yorker* (2009) magazine which shows a wife saying to her husband with great enthusiasm, "70 is the new 50." Although that may be an oversimplification, the trends are certainly moving in that direction. First, data on chronic conditions and disability indicate that individuals are aging with fewer limitations, and thus are less likely to need care from their adult children. In fact, by 2007, only about 3% of persons ages 65–74 and

slightly more than 10% of those 75 and older in the United States had limitations in their Activities of Daily Living (ADLs); only about 6% of those 65–74 and less than 20% of those 75 or older had limitations in their Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADLS) (US Bureau of the Census 2010). Second, due to better health, individuals who are 65 and over have become increasingly likely to remain active and independent. For example, in the past three decades, there has been a substantial increase in the percent of individuals in this age group in the labor force, and the projections are that this trend will continue, particularly among women. Between 1980 and 2008, men 65 and over had a 13% increase in labor force participation, compared to a 64% increase for women in that age group (US Bureau of the Census 2010). By 2016, it is projected that more than one quarter of men in this age group will remain in the labor force, as will nearly one in five women.

These trends call into question whether the picture of care to aging parents is in transition. Despite recent interest in the "sandwich generation" of women caring simultaneously for parents and minor children (Spitze and Logan 1990), it is more likely that over the next few decades, parental caregivers will be well beyond raising minor children; in fact, many of these "children" will themselves be in their late 50s or early 60s when they begin parent care. Further, it may be important that adult children do not begin zealously providing support to parents who are not yet in need. In fact, several studies using data collected since the late 1980s, when the health of individuals over 65 had improved from earlier decades, have found that high levels of support from adult children had negative effects on psychological well-being (Silverstein et al. 1996), even when controlling on current health and previous depression. Perhaps, this is because many of those parents were not in need, yet received high levels of helping; such an interpretation would be consistent with Davey and Eggebeen's (1998) finding that adult children's support had positive effects on parents' well-being only when the support was warranted by the parents' circumstances.

The patterns we have just discussed raise an interesting question: When should children's support to parents be characterized as "caregiving" as opposed to part of an exchange relationship? When do parents' become sufficiently "old" to render the support they receive "caregiving" or "elder support?" The difficulty that scholars face when drawing these distinctions can best be illustrated by the age distributions of subsamples used in some of the investigations of intergenerational exchange and caregiving. In many studies, the "adult children" range well into their 60s (e.g., Cooney and Uhlenberg 1992); in fact, sometimes up to age 70 (Wakabayashi and Donato 2006). In other studies, however, the range of care *recipients* begins well below the upper limit in studies of caregivers. In fact, Davey and Eggebeen used a subsample from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) with an age range beginning at 50 to study the effects of exchanges on "older adults' psychological well-being" (1998:92). Thus, there continues to be confusion about when parents become "care recipients" as opposed to exchange partners. This issue is likely to become more common as the trend toward healthy aging continues and the "sandwich generation" becomes the cohort of women 55–75 who are providing care *to* their older parents while beginning to receive care from their adult children.

Despite these changes in older parents' health and activity levels, the focus of studies of support to parents has changed remarkably little across the past three decades, continuing throughout the period to emphasize describing and explaining the flow of exchanges between parents and their adult children. This body of work has revealed several consistent patterns that we believe are worthy of note.

First, gender of both parents and children continues to play the greatest role in the study of support to the older generation. Mothers receive more support from their adult children than do fathers (Silverstein et al. 2002), and daughters are more likely than sons to be the source of that support (Spitze and Logan 1990; Chesley and Poppie 2009). On one hand, this pattern is not surprising, based on classic feminist arguments regarding women's greater investment in relationships and sensitivity to others' needs (Gilligan 1982; Chodorow 1978). On the other hand, it might be expected

that this pattern would become less pronounced as a consequence of changes in gender-role attitudes among Americans across the past three decades (Powers et al. 2004). However, this does not appear to be the case. Recent studies are equally as likely as older studies to report that both mothers and daughters are the most likely to provide and receive support than are fathers and sons (Suitor et al. 2006a, b; Chesley and Poppie 2009). Further, not only do daughters provide more support than do sons, but daughters are also typically both mothers' and fathers' preferred source of emotional support and help during illness (Suitor and Pillemer 2006; in press).

Because of daughters' prominent role in providing support to parents, one area of concern has been whether women's increasing labor force participation would reduce their ability to provide care. However, studies across the past three decades have shown that women's employment has fewer effects than was feared (Pavalko and Artis 1997; Pavalko, Chap. 37), despite the fact that women have become increasingly committed to the labor force.

Another demographic change that has been feared would shape patterns of support to parents is divorce. Most of this concern has centered on whether divorced daughters would continue to provide support to their parents; however, evidence from throughout the past three decades has shown that this is not the case (Cicirelli 1986; Spitze et al. 1994). In contrast, parents' marital instability does affect patterns of support. In earlier generations, almost all marriages ended with the death of one partner; however, for the first time in American history, the skyrocketing divorce rate of the 1970s created a notable population of older divorced parents. The consequences of parental divorce fall far more heavily on fathers than mothers. Most studies find little difference in support to older mothers (Lye 1996); however divorced fathers are far less likely to receive support than are their counterparts who remain married to their children's mothers (Lye 1996). Even if these divorced fathers remarry, support is less likely to be provided by their children (Lin 2008), although this is less pronounced when children have a long and close relationship with the stepparent (Ganong et al. 2009). Although no studies to date have followed divorced families from childhood through the later years, it is likely that the lower support to fathers follows a pattern of less closeness and contact in the early years following parents' marital disruption (Aquilino 2006; Scott et al. 2007).

The other demographic trend across the past three decades that may have greater consequences for support to parents in future decades is the increasing level of educational attainment, particularly among women. In 1970, only 8% of women had completed college, a figure that increased to only 13% by 1980; however by 2008, that figure had increased to 29% (US Bureau of the Census 2010). Although adult children who are better educated likely have greater resources to provide support to parents, college graduates are substantially more likely to be geographically mobile, thus reducing residential proximity to parents. This pattern is particularly consequential because, following gender, proximity is typically found to be the best predictor of intergenerational support, despite the greater ease of travel and communication in recent decades. It is likely to be another decade or two before we can assess the effects of women's increasing educational attainment on support to parents through changes in proximity.

Costs of Caring on Adult Children's Well-Being. Beginning in the 1980s, Pearlin and colleagues' groundbreaking theoretical work on caregiving provided a basis for viewing parental caregiving as a life course transition with much in common with other status transitions and life events studied by family scholars. One component of Pearlin's conceptualization of the stress processes that is particularly relevant to adult children's caregiving is that life events often intensify preexisting strains while also bringing older problems to the forefront (Pearlin 1989). One way in which to conceptualize the transition to caregiving is as a process that involves adhering to the norms of providing physical and emotional support to the care recipient (George 1986; Suitor and Pillemer 1990). Further, it has been recognized that successful adoption of this role includes some role renegotiation with the parent (Brody 2004). However, an aspect of the transition that is seldom considered involves the changes in role relationships with siblings, spouses, other kin, and even friends.

New caregivers must negotiate the expectations of their new role with all of these role partners, typically leading to changes in their relationships with the core of their preexisting social support networks (Litvin et al. 1995; Suitor and Pillemer 1987), a process that often rekindles conflict and ambivalence from earlier points in the relationship.

For example, the parent may serve as a source of expressive support early in the caregiving career (Walker, Pratt, Oppy 1992); however, as the parent's physical or cognitive health declines and the balance of exchange changes, the role relationship with the parent may well become a source of stress (Kramer 1997; Aquilino 1998), particularly in the case of dementia. Relationships with other role partners who were previously sources of support may also become sources of stress. In the case of siblings, caregiving often ignites tension in the relationship often stemming from earlier points in their relationship (Suitor and Pillemer 1987; Ingersoll-Dayton et al. 2003; Merrill 1996); in the case of spouses, the responsibilities of caregiving often interfere with the performance of marital and parenting roles (Suitor and Pillemer 1994; Spitze and Logan 1990). Whether preexisting role partners serve as a source of support or stress is shaped to a great extent by whether they have had direct experience themselves in the role of caregiver; consistent with studies of other status transitions, experientially similar role partners are much more likely to have a positive impact on caregivers' lives (Suitor, Pillemer, and Keeton 1995a; Umberson 2006).

Quality of Relations Between Parents and Adult Children

Have Parents and Children Remained Close? One question that has been investigated throughout the past three decades is whether parents and adult children have continued to have the high levels of closeness that was found in earlier studies (Adams 1968; Troll 1971). The answer to this question has been remarkably consistent: Dozens of studies across this period have found that most members of both generations report the relationship as very close (cf. Silverstein and Bengtson 1997; Kaufman and Uhlenberg 1998; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Sechrist et al. 2007) and relatively free of conflict (Szydik 2008; Umberson 1992). The consistency of this finding is of practical as well as scholarly significance, given that close and harmonious relations between the generations have salutary effects on both parents and children, whereas conflict and the absence of closeness have deleterious effects (Koropeckj-Cox 2002).

The Generational Stake in The Twenty-First Century. A second question enduring across the past three decades involved the generational stake proposed by Bengtson and Kuypers in the early 1970s (Bengtson and Kuypers 1971). Family scholars in the 1960s and 1970s (cf. Neugarten 1970; Hill 1970) identified differences between the behaviors and attitudes of parents and their adult children – differences that many were concerned might erode affect and support between the generations. Bengtson and Kuypers proposed that parents' and children's perceptions of one another might be as important, if not more important, in predicting relationship quality than actual differences in attitudes and behaviors. Using data from a study of students and their parents, they found that parents perceived their relations with their offspring as closer and more harmonious than did the students, and parents viewed greater similarity between the generations than did their young adult children. Bengtson and Kuypers argued that the explanation for these patterns lay in parents' stake in continuity and stability in their relations with their children, as opposed to their children's stake in individuation and change (Bengtson and Kuypers 1971:258).

Their argument, albeit compelling, was developed in a historical context in which such divisions between the generations were evident to all Americans, regardless of their political stance. Not only did the 1960s and early 1970s see divisions between parents and adult children – they also saw the

divisions that were a part of the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, and the Anti-War Movement. Perhaps neither the theory nor the data would apply to later cohorts who were not struggling so intensely with these issues. With this in mind, many studies, including several by Bengtson and his colleagues, have reinvestigated the generational stake, or as it was later renamed, the "intergenerational stake," across the past three decades. Each of these studies, regardless of whether they have relied upon data from the USC Longitudinal Study of Generations (Giarrusso et al. 1995), the NFSH (Shapiro 2004), or other sets (Rossi and Rossi 1990) have revealed the same general pattern, suggesting that the intergenerational stake is as relevant a concept as it was when first introduced nearly 40 years ago.

Explaining Affectional Closeness in Parent–Child Relations. A third question that has continued to be asked across the past three decades is how to best predict which parents and adult children have high levels of positive sentiment toward one another. The factor found to predict the quality of affective relations between parents and children most consistently is gender. Closest ties have almost always been found between mothers and adult children, beginning with the earliest studies of parent–child affect in the later years (cf. Adams 1968; Suitor et al. 1995b). Further, the preponderance of studies have reported stronger affectional ties and greater confiding between mothers and daughters than mothers and sons (for example, Rossi and Rossi 1990; Spitze et al. 1994; Suitor and Pillemer 2006).

Research on other structural characteristics of children has yielded much less consistent results. Classic theories of similarity and interpersonal relationships (Homans 1950; Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954) would lead to the expectation that parents and children would be closer when they share structural characteristics, such as education, parental status, marital status, and religion. Further, sharing parents' sociodemographic characteristics often indicates that adult children have achieved normative benchmarks in development that are highly valued by parents. However, the literature across the past three decades does not support this hypothesis. Whereas some studies have found greater closeness and harmony when adult children become parents themselves (Fischer 1986; Spitze, et al. 1994; Umberson, 1992), other studies found either no positive effects of parenthood (Suitor and Pillemer 2006) or effects specific only to particular parent–child combinations (Kaufman and Uhlenberg 1998; Rossi and Rossi 1990), some of which were negative (Kaufman and Uhlenberg 1998). Findings regarding the effects of other dimensions of status similarity, such as marital status, occupational status, and educational attainment, provide an equally inconsistent picture.

We believe that there are two reasons why similarity of normative adult social statuses is less predictive of relationship quality for parents and adult children than expected based on homophily theory. First, achieving some of these social statuses that increase their similarity to parents, such as marriage and parenthood, produces responsibilities that make them less available to their parents and may sometimes create tension, for example, conflict over child-rearing, or between parents and children-in-law (Fischer 1983; Merrill 2007).

Second, as Suitor and colleagues' (Suitor, Pillemer, and Keeton 1995a) research on support and conflict with kin and nonkin has shown, the reason that status similarity leads to better relationship quality is because such similarity increases the likelihood that associates will have similar experiences, leading to shared values and perspectives. Such similarity of values and experiences has been shown to be associated with greater closeness and less conflict and ambivalence (Rossi and Rossi 1990; Pillemer et al. 2007; Suitor and Pillemer 2006); further, it is substantially more important than is similarity of social statuses (Suitor and Pillemer 2006). Not surprisingly, studies of parent–child relations that take into consideration only structural similarity do not produce the consistent findings that might be expected based on theories of homophily.

Ambivalence in Parent–Adult Child Relations. As noted earlier in this chapter, over the past decade there has been increasing interest in examining the prevalence and predictors of ambivalence in

parent–adult child relations. Because this line of research has developed only since the publication of Luescher and Pillemer's essay on intergenerational ambivalence in 1998, there have been relatively few studies to date. This set of studies has shown that ambivalence is very common in later-life families, regardless of whether the reports are provided by mothers or their offspring (Pillemer et al. 2007; Wilson et al. 2006). Further, consistent with findings discussed above regarding the intergenerational stake, mothers report less ambivalence than do their adult children (Wilson et al. 2006).

In some cases, the findings from this line of research mirror those of studies of other dimensions of parent–adult child relationships quality. For example, higher levels of ambivalence have been found when either adult children experience problems that increase dependence or concerns about possible dependence, such as when they engage in deviant behaviors (Pillemer et al. 2007) or require financial assistance (Pillemer and Suitor 2002; Wilson et al. 2006). However, in some cases, the findings diverge from the broader literature; for example, parents have been found to express less ambivalence regarding relationships with adult children who are married, whereas marital status is an inconsistent predictor of closeness or conflict. In other cases, the findings from the extant set of ambivalence studies mirrors the broader literature in the degree of inconsistency across studies with similar methodologies. For example, Willson and colleagues (2006) found greater ambivalence between dyads of women, whereas gender did not predict ambivalence in either of Pillemer and colleagues' studies (Pillemer and Suitor 2002; Pillemer et al. 2007). There are also inconsistencies in the findings for both mothers' and children's health and several demographic characteristics of parents and children.

In sum, the study of ambivalence is greatly expanding our understanding of the complexity of parent–adult child relations, a topic that was greatly ignored in research prior to the late 1990s. However, the inconsistency found across studies suggests that we must wait for further study before we can draw many firm conclusions about how to explain this intriguing aspect of later-life family relations.

Diversity and Parent–Child Relations

The study of race differences in family relations has been of great interest among scholars for several decades. Given this level of attention, it is perplexing that there are so few consistent patterns by race. Although it has become standard to include race as a predictor in studies of parent–adult child relations, there has been almost no attempt to examine whether the same set of factors explain intergenerational relations across racial and ethnic subgroups. Instead, most studies have focused on whether there are differences in affect, support, and coresidence among these groups.

Many early studies showed strong ties and large kin support networks among minority families (Stack 1974; Taylor 1986), implying that minority families had stronger ties and support systems than White families (Hofferth 1984; Mutran 1985). Most studies making direct *comparisons* in parent–adult child relations among subgroups did not appear until the 1990s. This research has provided compelling evidence that race differences in intergenerational support are fueled primarily by structural differences between Blacks and Whites (Sarkisian and Gerstel 2004). For instance, White parents may provide higher levels of financial assistance to their adult children compared to minority groups (Berry 2006), yet multigenerational households (Choi 2003) and childcare provided by grandparents (Berry 2006) are more common among minority families. Thus, structural differences such as socioeconomic status and family structure influence the type of support exchanged, but exchanges of support are still common in most parent–adult child relationships regardless of race or ethnicity.

In contrast to findings regarding differences in intergenerational support among subgroups, studies of race differences in affect have found greater closeness between mothers and adult children

in Black than White families even after controlling on structural characteristics (Aquilino 1997; Kaufman and Uhlenberg 1998; Umberson 1992). However, there do not appear to be consistent race variations in mothers' feelings of ambivalence toward their adult children (Pillemer et al. 2007), and Black and White mothers are equally likely to differentiate among children in terms of positive affect (Suitor et al. 2007; Ward, Spitze, and Deane 2009).

Grandparent–Grandchild Relations

Research on grandparenting has experienced increasing attention in recent decades, primarily as the result of three sociodemographic trends that shaped the experience of grandparenting, and thus research on this topic. First and most important, increasing life expectancy meant that by the 1980s, most adults would occupy the role of grandparent for nearly one third of their lives. Second, high rates of divorce beginning in the 1970s and continuing through the first decade of this century affected ties between grandparents and grandchildren as well as parents and children. Third, skyrocketing rates of birth to single mothers across the past 30 years, particularly to African–American women, led many grandmothers to return to the role of primary caretaker in their middle and later years. In response to these sociodemographic patterns, research on grandparenting in the 1980s began by documenting and explaining patterns of contact, closeness, and support, followed by studies of the effects of marital instability on these patterns, and later turning to grandparents raising grandchildren. Interestingly, scholars studying grandparenting gave greater attention to race and ethnicity than was typical in the broader literature on American families across this period, thus shedding important and unique light on diversity in family relations.

The first large-scale sociological survey of grandparenting was conducted by Cherlin and Furstenberg in the early 1980s and published in 1986. This work provided a comprehensive picture of variations in contemporary grandparent–grandchild relationships and the ways in which these patterns were shaped by grandchildren's age, proximity, race, and the parents' marital status. More recent studies have corroborated these findings (Hodgson 1992; Silverstein and Marenco 2001), suggesting that these patterns have continued across the intervening years. Further, consistent with the pattern that has predominated throughout this chapter, gender played an important role in grandparent–grandchild relations, with almost uniformly greater contact and positive affect from grandchildren toward grandmothers (Eisenberg 1988; Hodgson 1992), particularly maternal grandparents in families in which parents divorced (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1986; Gladstone 1988; Matthews and Sprey 1985).

Grandparents have traditionally participated in the informal care of grandchildren, particularly when mothers were employed full-time (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1986; Jendrek 1994; US Bureau of the Census 2010); however, in recent years there has been a sharp increase in the practice of grandparents taking primary responsibility for raising grandchildren. Data from the US Bureau of the Census show instances of grandchildren living in a grandparent-maintained household have increased from 3.6% in 1980 to about 6% in 2008 (US Bureau of the Census 2010). This trend coincides with the percent of births to unmarried mothers, which has increased steadily from 18% in 1980 to 52% in 2007 (Ventura 2009). Although coresidence does not necessarily indicate that grandparents take on sole or even shared responsibility for the raising of grandchildren, of those children living in a grandparent's home in 2008, 35% did not have any parents present (US Bureau of the Census 2010) Taking on sole responsibility of grandchildren, with or without the presence of the parent, continues to occur in large part due to parents' emotional problems, substance abuse, or the need for greater support because of the absence of a partner (Jendrek 1994; Pruchno 1999; Sands and Goldberg-Glen 2000). Grandparents who provide primary care differ from those who do not by gender, economic status, and race. Most of the grandparent caregivers are women, Black or Native

American, and have low incomes and educational attainment (Fuller-Thompson, Minkler, and Driver 1997; Minkler and Fuller-Thompson 2000).

Although many grandparents report positive outcomes from raising grandchildren (Hayslip et al. 1998), this role often has negative consequences on caregivers' physical, social, and psychological well-being (Giarrusso et al. 2001), particularly when grandchildren have behavioral or emotional problems (Hayslip et al. 1998; Sands and Goldberg-Glen 2000). Further, many minority grandparent caregivers are at an even greater disadvantage because they are more at risk for being single, living below the poverty-line, and having health limitations (Burnette 1999; Pruchno 1999). Paradoxically, some studies have found that minority caregiving grandparents report less burden than do White caregiving grandparents (Pruchno 1999; Pruchno and McKenney 2002); this pattern can be accounted for by the fact that minority grandparents are more likely to have stronger family networks, family histories of grandparent coresidence, and peers within their social networks who also experience this role (Burnette 1999; Pruchno 1999).

Next Steps: Capturing the Complexity of Intergenerational Relations

The past three decades have seen cohorts of researchers turning their attention to relations between the generations in midlife and beyond. As noted at the outset of this chapter, genuinely new demographic realities have spurred this extraordinary growth in scientific interest. Because of the increased life span, in contemporary society we experience both the benefits and challenges of the lengthened shared lifetimes of generations. Indeed, many of us can look forward to continued relationships with our parents until well into late middle age, a historically unprecedented situation. Looking to the future, we anticipate that attention to the nature and dynamics of intergenerational relations will continue to expand in sociology, as well as in related disciplines such as psychology and economics.

What direction should the field take to build on the solid foundations created over the past three decades? More than a half century ago, in a classic article Weaver argued that all scientific fields engage in a predictable progression from simpler models to more complex ones. In the early stages of a scientific discipline, concern is with questions of categorization, description, and relatively simple hypotheses. As the field progresses, however, the "organized complexity" of systems is acknowledged and investigations increasingly take such complexity into account (Weaver 1948).

It is clear that such a movement is underway in the scientific study of intergenerational relations among adults (Pillemer and Suitor 2008). Scholars from a variety of disciplines are looking beyond simple models of older parent–adult child relationships to orientations and approaches that recognize the complex and sometimes contradictory world of the family in later life. Thus, over time, scholarship on this topic has moved from concerns about the weakening of intergenerational ties commonly expressed in the 1960s to an emphasis on the continued importance and influence of these linkages. Similarly, research has progressed from describing the amount and type of contact, interaction, and exchanges between the generations to more complex conceptual and empirical approaches.

What kind of research is needed over the coming years to capture the complexity of intergenerational relations? We offer a few suggestions here, but we note that our goal is to be provocative rather than definitive. One pressing need is for studies that recognize and exploit powerful within-family designs in studying intergenerational relations. Until very recently, most research in intergenerational relations involved between-family studies involving one parent and one target child or children in the aggregate. A growing body of research suggests that it is fundamentally necessary to collect data from both generations and from multiple members of each generation to fully understand intergenerational relations in later life (Davey et al. 2009; Suitor et al. 2006a, b; Ward et al. 2009).

With the knowledge that there is a great deal of variation within the family concerning most aspects of intergenerational relations, it is important to revisit past investigations with an eye to refining our understanding of these processes in light of within-family differences. Along these lines, researchers should revisit life course analyses concerning status transitions and parent–child relations; for example, by identifying how status transitions of adult children can influence changes in parental differentiation and favoritism across time. Further, current theoretical frameworks concerning dyadic processes across generations should be revisited to incorporate the complex influences of individual relationships on other relationships within the family; for example, how parental differentiation among adult children impacts grandparent–grandchild relations. Inquiries such as these can build a greater understanding of individuals' and dyads' roles within the family as well as the family as a whole.

A second tendency of past research has been to conceptualize and measure parent–adult child relations in a unidimensional manner focusing on either closeness *or* conflict. This work has been very valuable and has provided the foundation for much of our understanding of intergenerational relations. However, given what is now known about the interplay of positive and negative feelings, attitudes, and behaviors that are embodied in intergenerational relationships, future research must take such complexity into account. To be sure, longitudinal research designs that include multiple family members and assessments of positive and negative components of multiple relationships are likely to be resource-intensive. However, to advance scientific knowledge about intergenerational relations in twenty-first century families, such designs are likely to be required.

Further, just as research across the past thirty years responded to the major demographic, social, and economic changes of that time, future research must pay particular attention to current shifting trends. For instance, the characteristics of the older cohorts on which previous research is based differ considerably from those of the baby boomer cohort which is currently in late middle age and entering old age. Unlike their predecessors, the baby boom cohort has fewer children and is more likely to have experienced divorce, giving them fewer resources for support in later life. Given the projected increase in the older population overall, a shortage of caregiving resources in both the formal and the informal sectors is likely to result. Further, the baby boom cohort is experiencing their 60s and 70s in far better health than did earlier cohorts, raising new issues about the timing and meaning of caregiving, as well as about intergenerational relations more generally. The outcomes of these demographic changes as well as other social and economic changes are likely to present fertile grounds for scholarship over the coming three decades.

Finally, researchers in the field of intergenerational relations work in an area that is of considerable interest to policy makers and to the general public and is likely to increase given the growth in the older population. Throughout the social and behavioral sciences, there is an emerging movement to link progress in basic research to advances in application, described by the term "translational research." Translational research models emphasize the systematic translation of basic social science findings into rigorously tested interventions, the results of which in turn inform basic science (Pillemer, Suitor, and Wethington 2003). We suggest that translational research models are particularly appropriate for the field of intergenerational relations, and that such models can enhance both fundamental science and the development of interventions to improve family relationships in later life. Although it is typical for sociological articles on intergenerational relations to touch on policy or practice implications, there is in fact a substantial gap between research and application; in particular, interventions to improve family relations in later life are often not based on research evidence. We would argue that translational research models could be applied very productively to this field, bridging the gap between research themes discussed in this chapter and evidence-based intervention.

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