

Intergenerational Family Support

H e l p o r H i n d r a n c e ?

Current debate about the place of public versus private supports for families brings into question the role of inter-household and intergenerational family support. If various tiers of government wish to promote the idea of government and family as 'partners' in caring for individuals, then some understanding of the inhibiting factors affecting private resources available to families and individuals is needed.

While it may be popularly assumed that some family support is always available for individual members both within and across a family's households, some research has shown that this is not always the case – even when family members are living nearby. Lehr (1984) found that the

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discusses a recently published book by David de Vaus which examines the dynamics of adult child–parent relationships, and asks can we assume that close involvement with family necessarily assists in mutual support and exchange?

quantity of contact with family members was not necessarily correlated with quality of activities or relationships: 'the quantity

of intergenerational contacts need not have a positive correlation with perceived quality of those family role activities.'



Picture: Howard Birnstift

Lehr also stresses that 'intimacy at a distance' and independence often made for better intergenerational family relationships and reduced conflict. Marsden and Abrams (1987) also found that close proximity and high levels of contact between family members are not necessarily a good thing for family relationships.

The implication of these findings is that help might be forthcoming between family members and between generations, but that apparent availability of family members is moderated by the quality of relationships between them. For example, Finch (1989) quotes British research showing that more than one third of employed women had their children looked after by a grandmother while they

worked. However, Finch also cautions that frequency of contact with extended family members is not necessarily synonymous with intimacy and confidence in relationships, so such assistance cannot be taken for granted.

However, if intergenerational support and exchange is an important private resource, the question arises as to the nature and value of relationships between adults and their parents.

Adult Child-Parent Relationships

In his recently published book, *Letting Go*, David de Vaus (1994) reports on the dynamics of relationships between adults and their parents. He found that the majority

of adults had continuing involvement with their parents and that women had more frequent contact and generally more involvement with their parents than did men. However, according to de Vaus, the nature of such involvement is not necessarily helpful to the adult child and her household. In fact, the majority of the 100 adults interviewed in-depth by de Vaus experienced problems in their relationships with their parents.

De Vaus classified the adult child-parent relationships into four types. The first was 'parent-centred', where the parents expect their children's lives to revolve around them; the second was 'child-centred', where the parents' lives seem to revolve around their children. According to de Vaus, most problems were due to these two types of relationship, which he characterised as a failure to 'let go'. In some cases this tendency to 'hold on' was so extreme that it caused almost complete dysfunction in the nuclear family unit of the adult child. The third type of relationship was described as 'remote', and the fourth, the most functional and supportive, as 'attached'.

Parent-centred relationships, which comprised 25 per cent, were the most troubled. They were one-sided, intrusive, manipulative and not supportive. The relationship was centred so much on the parent's life and wishes that the adult child felt rejected. However, de Vaus found that the adult children, while trying always to please the parent as a way of trying to win acceptance, were reluctant to ask for help in return for fear of criticism. For example, one woman tended not to ask her mother for help with child care:

'I didn't ever find it easy to ask her to look after the kids. I was scared that the kids would do something that would upset her - that would make her say "Oh you are a rotten mother"' (p.17).

When these parents gave help it caused tensions and was used to create a sense of obligation in adult children. This resulted in these parents making even greater demands for attention. When gifts were given they were either not suitable or not desired by the adult child and her family.

Child-centred types of relationships comprised a further 15 per cent of respondents. Although often providing much practical help and support to the nuclear family, they could also be very intrusive and suffocating. De Vaus found that often these parents not only wanted to be very involved but also wanted to manage their adult children's lives. Although they were very generous and pleased to help with child care, domestic work, goods and money, the exchange was again unbalanced - this time in favour of the adult child, who often felt uncomfortable about always receiving but rarely being allowed to return favours. Many also found the constant intrusion into their private lives difficult to deal with:

'My mother cooks special things for me that [wife] doesn't cook and brings them up for us to eat. That really does put me in a very difficult position. Mum offers to come up and help with the house but [wife] feels that she is criticising how we look after it.' (p.43)

Some of the people de Vaus interviewed felt that their parents did not trust them to be independent in running their own households and making their own decisions. He found that both parent-centred and child-centred relationships could cause marital stress for adult children.

The third type, remote relationships, pertained to 28 per cent of those interviewed and did not involve exchange and support. These relationships were neither intrusive nor demanding, but they were also largely unhelpful and not supportive. De Vaus found that remote parents rarely gave or asked for help. Some help was given in lending tools, but child minding was rare and not willingly given, as was financial assistance or help during illness. Lack of interest in grandchildren was a source of distress, as was lack of emotional support:

'What would be lovely would be for her to walk in the door and pick up the children and kiss them. It would be lovely if she would praise the kids . . . I really needed my mother emotionally. I've always needed her approval but I've suddenly realised [since they moved away] that I will never get it. But as I've needed less from her that has made her more comfortable.' (p.82).

Finally, nearly a third of the adults interviewed by de Vaus had attached relationships with their parents. These typified the ideal image of the adult-parent relationship, with both sides respecting each other's privacy and independence while maintaining a caring and supportive relationship with mutually helpful, practical and emotional exchanges. De Vaus explains that while some of these relationships involved more contact and more intimacy than others, they generally avoided the 'over-involvement', 'over-investment' or 'exaggerated detachment' of the other three relationship types. Helping was balanced and, although there was much exchange, there was no pressure either to give it or accept it. For example, one woman's father and mother helped out, but in a non-controlling and non-intrusive way:

'My father said, "how about if [daughter] makes my bread on Saturday and I come up and do the garden as a repayment?" . . . I had a broken shoulder seven years ago and Mum came up every day and did the washing and ironing . . . I'm sure it makes her feel so much better to be able to come and do all that. She doesn't impose herself though. She would never think of intruding at all.' (p.93).

Relationships According to Gender

All of these types of relationships differed according to the gender of the adult child. Other research has demonstrated that

women, as 'kinkeepers', maintain family networks and are more involved with relatives on a daily basis than are men (Finch 1989; Lehr 1984; Hagemann-White 1984; Fischer 1986). De Vaus found that daughter-mother relationships were generally closer, more intense and more demanding than relationships between parents and sons:

'More has always been expected of me than of my brothers. Even as a child I was the responsible one . . . I still do much more for my mother.' (p.120)

Similar gender differences in levels of filial responsibility were also identified by Wilkinson (1988): 'Current data indicate that adult daughters are primarily responsi-



ble for providing emotional, financial and supplemental health care to elderly parents, especially their mothers' (p.189).

But given gender differences in levels of filial responsibility, the closeness and involvement of some of the adult daughter-mother relationships discussed by de Vaus lead us to ask at what cost this closeness is maintained. Indeed, high levels of involvement had negative consequences for those women who had troubled relationships with their mothers. For example, some women felt that no matter how much they did for mother, she was always dominating, critical and unaccepting:

'She has ways that she insists on and if you don't conform there'll be an argument. She's very critical . . . I want my mother to accept me as a person but I know she never will.' (p.124)

'Nothing I do can ever be right. I'm trying to please. I am really trying, but she's never thanked me. Not once.' (p.125)

Apart from de Vaus, a number of other studies have identified stresses for women due to the intensity of the daughter-mother (or mother-in-law) relationship. For example, Marsden and Abrams (1987) report that adult daughters clearly resented their cohabiting mothers when no reciprocity of help existed – that is, when elderly mothers became a burden upon daughters. Lehr (1984) describes the problem for women in the 'middle generation' – mother (and perhaps grandmother) of the younger generation, while still daughter of the older one – as a double burden of 'family care', applying both to children/spouse and to aged parents. The resulting 'relationship stress' is seen by Lehr as deleterious to the adult daughter's physical and emotional health, as well as

to her social and career opportunities. Regarding daughters-in-law, Fischer (1986) reports wives' resentment of interference by mothers-in-law who sought to be involved in – or even to control – the lives of their sons, causing both intergenerational and spousal stress.

Why is there a particular problem with the intensity of mother-child, and more specifically, mother-daughter, relationships? De Vaus contends that it is harder for mothers to 'let go' their children because of the imbalance in child rearing responsibilities between mothers and fathers. He says the identity of mothers is much more exclusively bound up with child rearing and the maternal role and this results in a distinctively female pattern of relationships. Because female ego development means that daughters identify with their mother and imitate her role as they grow up, they too internalise this care-centred female role. This can result in overly involved or over-intense daughter-mother relationships (Eichenbaum and Orbach 1982; de Vaus 1994).

Social Roles

In the broader context of family networks, Eichenbaum and Orbach (1982) maintain that in order to be considered feminine a woman is expected to carry on the role which her own mother performed. She must serve the physical and emotional needs of not only her partner and children, if she has them, but also of other members of the wider family. She must 'deal with the emotional realm of family life, keeping contacts with and having knowledge of the various branches of her own and her husband's extended family' (Eichenbaum and Orbach 1982:28).

In our westernised society, are women still mainly associated with the domestic, family sphere, and men with the public

sarily be assumed that grandmothers would assist with child care even when they lived nearby. This may be partly related to the rising number of older women who are themselves in the paid workforce (ABS 1993) but it could also be related to reluctance on the part of parents to ask for, or grandparents to offer, assistance with child care due to troublesome intergenerational relationships.

Hagemann-White (1984) sees society as socially constructed such that women are still thought of as a reserve of primarily unpaid domestic labour to be called upon by family members in need. She argues that this results in inappropriate expectations in modern times, when there are so many women in the paid workforce (ABS 1993). Help to and from the extended family is obviously a very valuable commodity, but note needs to be taken of who benefits from this support and at what physical and emotional cost it is maintained.

Whose Responsibility?

We can measure the level of contact between extended family and the nuclear family, and even perceptions of help available – in an article elsewhere in this issue, Sandra Rezac (1994) discusses the types of intergenerational support found in a large American study of young, mostly unmarried adults.

However, we must be careful not to interpret such involvement solely in terms of positive experiences and constructive assistance for the nuclear family. Funder (1989) found that children did not necessarily welcome the involvement of grandparents, with more than half the adolescents in this Institute study of post-divorce families preferring less contact with grandparents whom they saw at least monthly. Funder suggests that these grandparents may make greater demands on the grandchildren and their parents or be more intrusive in their lives than was desired: this is in accordance with the work of de Vaus.

Therefore, it should not be assumed that because there is extended family available, or even because there is frequent contact between family members, that the nuclear family unit is served or supported by relatives. Services supplied by community or government for care of the aged or child care, for example, may be essential to the nuclear family unit, even when there is apparently an extended family network available. Furthermore, the disruption caused by difficult circumstances, such as when dealing with violence or chronic illness, could mean that the availability, or suitability, of help from various family members becomes a problem, necessitating more public than private support. For, as David de Vaus and others have shown, extended family members, if you have them, can be very supportive and helpful, but they can also be indifferent, intrusive or a hindrance.

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