



Intergenerational

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Intergenerational relationships between middle-aged offspring and their elderly parents have received increased research attention in recent times as the proportion of elderly persons in industrialised countries has risen, and the care of the frail elderly has become more problematic. Australian research on elderly parents, for example, shows that parents want independence (Day 1985), as do their offspring (de Vaus 1994). At the same time both generations want to maintain contact in the form of visits and exchange of services. As Millward (1994) points out, intergenerational ties can form part of a social support network, but generational ties can also be troublesome.

In 1989, a research study was undertaken in Finland which looked at three general questions: What do the generations perceive as the most important intergenerational exchange? What motivates the exchanges? Does perception of exchange vary by gender or by generation?

Like Australia, Finland, a small Nordic country in northern Europe, has an ageing population. AIFS Visiting Fellow, CAROL HARVEY, reports on a recent study of intergenerational expectations between elderly parents and their adult sons and daughters in Finland.

Theories of Attachment and Generational Solidarity

Two theories that explain how families maintain ties between generations guided the research: first, psychological attachment theory; and second, sociological generational solidarity theory.

Attachment theory explains the bonds of affection between parents and offspring. Originally designed to show how mothers and infants are involved with one another, Cicirelli (1981) extended attachment theory beyond childhood to explain helping behaviours of adult offspring toward their parents. Middle-aged offspring were observed to

have feelings of filial obligation and to provide support to parents.

Sociologists Bengtson and Kuypers (1971) developed the notion of 'developmental stake' to explain why adolescent and parent generations have a need to maintain their own values. Elders want to see continuity with their children and ensure that their lives are not wasted; on the other hand, the next generation wants to maintain autonomy and show how they differ from their parents.

The ties between generations are multifaceted. Five facets, called solidarity, are as follows: associational solidarity, which is the extent to which generations contact one

another; functional solidarity, which refers to the exchange of services between generations; consensual solidarity, which is the extent of agreement and openness between generations; normative solidarity, which refers to similarity of ideals and values; and affectional solidarity, which is feelings of closeness and warmth between generations.

Research on Intergenerational Interaction

Research in the area has been extensive. In North America, Europe and Australia, researchers have been interested in the amount and quality of intergenerational interaction, and have been stimulated by both attachment and solidarity theory.

It has been found that the sex of the parent and of the offspring affects the type and quality of interaction. Women are socialised to have the closest ties with family members. The mother–daughter bond has been variously identified as strong, but at times conflictive. The relationship between elderly fathers and sons has been greatly ignored, largely because the tendency for women to outlive their partners increases the likelihood of mother–offspring bonds to be more enduring.

Geographic proximity influences the type and frequency of intergenerational interaction, with more instrumental help being exchanged by generations who live within close proximity to each other. Marital status is another key variable, with widowed or single people across the generations needing and giving more help than married

depression and war from first-hand experience, they were also the builders of modern Finland. The third cohort, born during World War II, were part of the great migration from the Finnish countryside to cities in the 1960s and 1970s; a late urbanisation in comparison

their mothers at least once a month in shopping or cooking, and 28 per cent helped with household chores. Filial obligation was a strong norm, with daughters saying they should 'help their parents when they needed help, whether they like them or not' (Hurme

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to other Nordic countries. These people remembered rural roots, but now resided in high-rise apartments and worked in industrialised and high-tech jobs. The fourth cohort, born from 1950–1969, was a suburban generation born into city life (Roos 1985).

For each of these generations, family interaction with elderly people is different in both content and scope. Whereas the people who are old now remember living with or near elderly relatives, those currently middle-aged may live far from their parents. For these people, helping a frail parent may now involve dealing with bureaucrats to obtain the services that, in the past, were directly provided.

In addition to migration and cohort effects, demographers have shown a greater male–female differential in death rates when comparing Finland to other Nordic countries (Valkonen and Nikander 1987). The implication here is that Finnish women frequently

1988:116). Grandmothers felt that the State, rather than offspring, should provide for them; however, 91 per cent felt their daughters were ready to make sacrifices for them (Hurme 1988).

The Study Sample

The study took place in the Savo district of central Finland, a Nordic country in Northern Europe with a population of five million and a small geographic area, in 1989. The Savo district had a great influx of Karelian resettles after World War II, and had been the previous focus of a study by staff at the Department of Sociology, University of Jyväskylä which looked at the effectiveness of governmental resettlement policies, and cohorts from a life history approach (Laitinen 1989).

The names of the entire population of the villages and towns involved in the 1980 study by Jyrkilä were available to researchers in the 1989 study; each person on the list of 45 people who had a middle-aged offspring at the time of the initial study was recontacted,

resulting in an 85 per cent response rate. The researchers found it difficult to solicit replies from sons, however, after an initial mailing, a follow-up letter and a re-mailing to non-respondents, a total of 31 responses from sons and daughters were received. Of these, only one was from a country other than Finland (Sweden). Refusals were largely because of poor health, and only two people did not wish to be interviewed.

Interviews with 40 elderly parents were undertaken in their homes by trained student interviewers from the University of Jyväskylä. In addition to the interviews, a mailed questionnaire with similar questions was sent to one offspring of each parent. The parent generation involved in this study had twice the number of children, half the income, and half the number of years of education of their children. Their average age was 71 while that of their offspring was 41 years of age. These data are presented in Table 1.

Interaction Expectations of Parent–Offspring Pairs

In light of attachment theory, we were interested in how close Finnish parents felt to their offspring and vice-versa. Following

ones. Employment status does not seem to affect interactions between parents and offspring; employed or homemaker offspring are equally likely to contact parents.

Finnish intergenerational research has been influenced by attachment theory, as shown in Hurme's (1988) work on three generations of Finns: school-age daughters; their mothers; and their grandmothers. She found that guilt on the part of offspring who were unable to be physically close to their parents was not as great in Finland as in the United States. Evidently, Finnish daughters were more able to accept the fact that they could not contact their elderly mothers as often as they would like to.

Finnish research is also likely to employ a life history approach to studying generations. Roos (1985) collected autobiographies of Finnish citizens and found there to be distinct age cohorts in modern Finland. The first of these, born between 1900 and 1920, was a generation whose lives had been characterised by hunger, poor housing, war and depression. The second, born between 1920 and 1935, was a generation characterised by reconstruction and growth. While people in this second cohort remembered economic

outlive their husbands. This is significant in that widows, compared with women still married, have been shown to have a greater need for their children.

Another factor is that Finnish women have a much higher full-time labour force participation rate than those of other Nordic countries. The farm wife who, in the past, was available to visit with elders and care for frail ones, is no longer there. Today, one-third of elderly Finnish people live alone, particularly women; one-third live with their spouse; one-third live with others at home or in institutions (Marin 1988).

In expectations of intergenerational interaction, Finnish data suggest that it is children who are expected to visit their parents, rather than the other way around. Reasons for such visits include: support and contact (31 per cent); visit parents for practical matters and help (15 per cent); visit the institution in which the parent resides (14 per cent); live with parents (5 per cent); provide financial support (4 per cent); care for parents in their homes (2 per cent) (Haavio-Mannila 1983).

Daughters appear to make more contact with their parents than do sons (Haavio-Mannila 1983; Hurme 1988). Hurme (1988) found that 16 per cent of daughters helped

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solidarity theory we wanted to assess generational differences and to see the types of solidarity reported.

Generational comparisons

In an open-ended question on the most important service received (asked of parents) or given (asked of offspring), a generational difference emerged. Parents mentioned, 'we enjoy one another' most frequently (34 per cent), followed by 'help' (23 per cent). Offspring replies were more varied, with 'help' (including household help) mentioned most frequently (23 per cent), followed by 'mental support' (17 per cent) and 'visits' (17 per cent). The 'enjoy one another' term their parents used did not emerge.

Sons and daughters saw the motivation for their own behaviour towards their parents as 'natural' (42 per cent), 'needed' (33 per cent) and/or 'reciprocal' (50 per cent). Offspring did not mention closeness specifically, although it could have been on the minds of those who said it was 'natural' to be motivated to care for parents.

When asked, 'What changes, if any, would you like to make in the relationship with your child/parent?', half of the elderly parents and 37 per cent of their offspring wanted to change 'nothing'. Parents who sought changes wanted their offspring to act differently – for example, quit drinking or be more open. Children who wanted changes sought to spend more time with their parents, but did not seem to want to reform them.

Gender differences

Both mothers and fathers desired good quality, frequent contact with their children, and a small percentage of fathers (9 per cent) but no mothers mentioned 'financial help, if needed' as the most important inter-generational exchange. Clearly finances, mentioned by neither sons nor daughters, were not an important consideration for either generation.

Mothers (47 per cent) more than fathers (19 per cent) appreciated help with tasks, while fathers (38 per cent) more than mothers (21 per cent) liked visits, good times and mental support. Similar proportions of mothers (11 per cent) and fathers (14 per cent) saw transportation as the most valuable service their children provided.

Sons (28 per cent) more than daughters (17 per cent) saw household help as the most important service or support given to their parents; in that way, sons agreed with their mothers. Daughters (42 per cent) more than sons (28 per cent) thought general availability, mental support and visits were most important; in that respect, daughters more often agreed with their fathers.

Both mothers and fathers primarily appreciated warm, good relationships (32 per cent of mothers; 38 per cent of fathers); mothers (37 per cent) more than fathers (14 per cent) appreciated help and particular services. When asked, 'What do you think motivates your child to provide caregiving services?', parents clearly saw what psychologists label as 'attachment'. In the reasons given by parents, 18 per cent mentioned 'closeness originating in childhood', 21 per cent identified 'wanting to care', and 15 per cent thought it was 'their responsibility'.

Table 1. *Description of Finnish sample, by generation*

Variable	Parent (N = 40)		Offspring (N = 31)	
	Range	M	Range	M
Age	59–82	71.00	27–55	41.00
Education (in years)	1–12	5.37	7–18	2.93
Number of children	1–13	2.08	1–4	0.98
Marital status	mode=widowed		mode=married	
Income/month	under 2000FIM=1 over 9000FIM=9	2.89	under 2000FIM=2 over 16000FIM=7	4.90

Intergenerational Solidarity

Five types of solidarity were measured. These were consensual solidarity, functional solidarity, affectional solidarity and associational solidarity. Associational solidarity had two subscales – dependence and proximity – which comprised the fourth and fifth elements, respectively.

Consensual solidarity was measured by responses to two items: one, whether parents and offspring 'agree on ideals and opinions you consider to be important'; and two, 'Do you feel you can discuss things openly?' Both were rated on a four-point scale.

Functional solidarity was measured according to two subscales (Lopata 1979). One, frequency of help, measured help in five areas including frequency of transportation, home repairs, housekeeping, shopping and yard work. Each was measured on a nine-point scale from 'never' to 'more than daily'. The second functional solidarity measure was five aspects of general help which included: caring for the other generation when sick, help with decisions, providing financial assistance, providing emotional support, and helping with business.

Affectional solidarity was ascertained by two questions: 'Emotionally, how close do you feel toward him/her?' and 'How would you rate your overall relationship?' Five responses were possible for each item.

Associational solidarity had two subscales. One, dependence, was constructed from three questions: 'Would you say that the amount of service that you provide for your parent/offspring has decreased, stayed the

same, or increased from last year?' 'How much do you feel your parent/offspring depends on you for help when s/he needs it?' 'How much do you feel that your parent/offspring depends on you for companionship or emotional support?' Four responses, from 0 to 3, were possible.

A second associational sub-scale, proximity, was developed from responses to three questions. The first asked for a distance in kilometres that each generation lived from the other, ranging from over 50 km (scored as 1) to within 1 km (scored as 6). The second question asked for frequency of contact, ranging from daily (scored as 5) to less than once a month (scored as 1). The third, asked people to rate the time spent per week doing things for the other generation. Responses ranged from less than three hours per week (scored as 1) to more than 30 hours per week (scored as 6).

Normative solidarity was measured on a seven-item scale with a Likert-type five item response category system. Items on the scale developed by Heller (1976) included whether or not an adult should 'be willing to share a home with a parent', 'live close', 'be with parents in times of serious illness', 'share as many activities as possible', 'talk over important decisions', and 'have as much responsibility for parents as for their own children'.

For all scales, the responses for each item were summed and that score divided by the number of items. Low scale scores indicated less of the characteristic than high ones.

Results of the five types of solidarity showed that offspring reported slightly

Table 2. *Pairwise comparisons of solidarity scales within Finnish sample, by generation and gender*

Scale	Parent (N = 40)	Offspring (N = 31)	Males (N = 36)	Females (N = 35)	Range
Normative	17.50	15.19	17.00	15.79	0–9
Associational					
a. Dependency	9.76	4.14**	6.98	6.96	0–22
b. Proximity	7.84	7.00	8.32	6.43	0–17
Consensual					
a. Agree on ideas	1.54	1.55*	2.18	1.47	0–3
d. Discuss openly	0.48	0.97*	0.69	0.68	0–2
Functional					
a. Freq. of help	11.19	13.88	13.14	11.43	0–31
b. General help	10.57	10.37	9.48	11.07	0–45
Affectional	4.77	5.06	4.37	5.47*	7–34

* pr. of t < .05 ** pr. of t < .01

higher amounts of conflict than did parents, less associational solidarity, more affectional solidarity, more frequent helping behaviours, less general help, and less normative solidarity. Comparisons of scale values by generation and gender are shown in Table 2.

From Table 2, it can be seen that a significant difference was found on the dependency subscale in measuring associational solidarity; namely, that parents reported more dependency on offspring than vice versa. Conversely, on the consensual subscale, offspring were significantly more likely than parents to say they discussed things openly.

In comparing the results of fathers and sons (males) to mothers and daughters (females), it can be seen that only one scale showed statistically significant differences; namely, that women showed more affectional solidarity than men.

What Do These Results Mean?

It is evident that intergenerational relationships in Finland are similar to those found through research in other industrialised countries. Family members exchanged much support and many services across the generations, and were perceived to be the appropriate caregivers for the frail elderly.

The qualitative results showed a clear difference between the roles of men and

affectional solidarity did males show less solidarity than females.

When these results were compared to what had been previously observed in Manitoba, Canada, we found that intergenerational consensus, as measured by the items on the scale, was similar in the two cultures with offspring reporting more conflict than parents (Bond and Harvey 1988). In both Canada and Finland, the parent generation scored higher for normative and associational solidarity than did their offspring (Bond and Harvey 1988).

In reflecting on the reasons for generational and gender results within the Finnish sample, two points come to mind. Firstly, the interviewers found that because the elders lived in rural areas, they tended to think in specific, concrete terms rather than global ones. Therefore, questions that asked them to distinguish between 'in general' and 'with your child' were difficult to answer. Secondly, differences between groups were observed more in the open-ended questions than in the scales. Perhaps qualitative questions tap subtle aspects that the scales do not address.

Implications for Further Research

In generalising to a broader perspective, it seems that both sociological theory of generational solidarity and psychological attachment are supported in this study. In Finland, family members are perceived as appropriate caregivers for their elderly members and, indeed, the generations exchange much support (Hurme 1988). However Finns, more than Americans, see the State as the more appropriate provider of help (Hurme 1988), and other cross-national comparisons would be useful. Policy makers should keep in mind the roles and perceptions of family members when establishing

services for older people. These services must be conducted in a culturally sensitive manner, a factor particularly important in multicultural societies like Australia and Canada. Since generations differ in what they perceive to be important, policy makers should be aware of these differences and take into account the changing nature of cohorts for older people as they age.

Family help is likely to progressively decline in the future. Fewer offspring, in combination with increased geographic mobility and high labour force participation rates for sons and daughters, will result in further shrinkage of the family pool, and with higher death rates for men than for women (Valkonen and Nikander 1987), Finnish women are particularly at risk of having no family supports in their old age.

Finally, in multicultural societies with high immigration rates, the pressure on middle-aged offspring with elderly parents living overseas, is likely to be enormous. Attempting to relocate closer to provide support for an elderly parent may be impossible,

and pressuring service providers to do so from afar, may be nearly so.

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Picture: Rhonda Milner

women in intergenerational interaction. In order to form a comparative base, it would therefore be useful for researchers to look at both genders in all research of this type.

It is also important to look at cross-generational ties, remembering that mother-son pairs were found to have a different flow of contact than father-daughter ones. Whereas mothers in our sample depended on sons for instrumental help (using the tractor, for example), fathers tended to depend on their daughters for emotional help.

The scales developed in North America to measure aspects of generational solidarity can be used in different cultural settings. In this research, the scales used had a Cronbach's alpha reliability rating of .76 or greater. Although reliable, none of these measures showed consistent generational or gender differences. While parents showed greater dependency than offspring and were less likely to discuss things openly, these were the only measures of solidarity to show generational differences. Only in

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