

## Intergenerational Ambivalence: A New Approach to the Study of Parent-Child Relations in Later Life

*Social scientific interest in intergenerational relationships between adults has increased in recent years. However, there is a lack of theoretical work that allows for the integration of research findings. Further, there has been a tendency to interpret intergenerational relationships within limited frameworks that emphasize either intergenerational solidarity or conflict. In contrast, we propose that ambivalence is a more useful organizing concept for understanding intergenerational relations. In this article, we argue that relationships between the generations in families are structured such that they generate various types of ambivalence. We then discuss three aspects of intergenerational relationships that are likely to be ambivalent and propose an agenda for future research.*

Interest in intergenerational relations among adults within the family has grown dramatically over the past three decades, as demonstrated by research reviews and edited volumes from both

sides of the Atlantic, all of which contain extensive bibliographies of recent publications (Attias-Donfut, 1995a; Finch & Mason, 1993; Hareven, 1996; Lye, 1996; Lüscher & Schultheis, 1993; Suito, Pillemer, Bohannon, & Robison, 1995). Indeed, the amount of empirical work on this topic has made it one of the more vigorous research areas in contemporary sociology and psychology. The development of theory to integrate the host of findings, however, has not kept up with empirical productivity. Research on aging and the family has tended to respond to obvious social problems (such as caregiving for impaired relatives, housing, grandparents raising grandchildren), rather than consider theoretical issues (Lye, 1996).

Perhaps the most popular organizing framework for understanding family relationships in later life is that which highlights intergenerational solidarity. A number of prominent researchers responded to Talcott Parsons's (1942, 1944) concern about the isolation of the nuclear family by proposing that extensive family solidarity actually existed (Litwak, 1965; Shanas et al., 1968; Sussman, 1959). Since the early 1970s, Bengtson and colleagues have continued and expanded this tradition in an influential series of articles and books (cf. Bengtson & Harootyan, 1994; Roberts, Richards, & Bengtson, 1991; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Treas & Bengtson, 1988). The solidarity perspective has been taken up by other researchers in the United States (Rein, 1994; Rossi & Rossi, 1990) and is also a reference point for

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European authors, although not without critical overtones (Attias-Donfut, 1995b; Bawin-Legros, Gauthier, & Strassen, 1995; Coenen-Huther, Kellerhals, & von Allmen, 1994; Donati, 1995; Finch & Mason, 1993).

Some scholars have criticized the overly positive and consensual bias of the solidarity perspective. Research within the solidarity framework typically assumes that individuals' personal feelings—such as affection, attraction, and warmth—serve to maintain cohesion in the family system (Sprey, 1991). Marshall, Matthews, and Rosenthal (1993) state that even the term "solidarity" indicates an emphasis on consensus. European writers have pointed out the value-laden origins of the term in proletarian movements and in religious social doctrine (Kleine, 1992; Luescher, 1997). As Roberts et al. (1991) themselves note, solidarity "has been treated as the engine driving the pursuit of the common good within families" (p. 12). Negative aspects of family life typically are interpreted in this view as an absence of solidarity. Research in this tradition has tended to emphasize shared values across generations, normative obligations to provide help, and enduring ties between parents and children.

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

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

Therefore, we propose ambivalence as an alternative to both the solidarity and conflict per-

spectives models for orienting sociological research on intergenerational relations. We can sum up our fundamental point in the following axiom: Intergenerational relations generate ambivalences. That is, the observable forms of intergenerational relations among adults can be social-scientifically interpreted as the expression of ambivalences and as efforts to manage and negotiate these fundamental ambivalences.

The major goal of this article is a straightforward one: We wish to make the case for ambivalence as a theoretically and empirically useful approach to the study of intergenerational relations. We should be clear that it is not our intention to provide a comprehensive theoretical formulation of intergenerational ambivalence. Indeed, such a formulation would not be appropriate at this point, given the state of knowledge. Instead, following Aldous (1990), we propose ambivalence as a "general orientation" to the subject of intergenerational relationships, rather than as a formal theory. We suggest the types of variables that researchers should consider, and we demonstrate the potential insights that result from this more complex view of parent-child relations.

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

#### DIMENSIONS OF INTERGENERATIONAL AMBIVALENCE

The term "ambivalence" is almost absent in the social science literature on parent-child relations in later life. For example, a search of the Socio-File and PsychLit databases uncovered no articles on this topic with the key word "ambivalence." A few scholars, however, have applied the term to other social relations. In addition, several theoretical approaches in family studies have employed closely related concepts. These literatures suggest that there are two dimensions of ambivalence that are relevant to the study of intergenerational relations: sociological ambivalence, which is evident

in social-structural positions, and psychological ambivalence, which is experienced on the individual level. We believe that both of these dimensions are important to the study of parent-child relations in adulthood.

Sociological ambivalence was given its classic formulation in an article by Merton and Barber (1963) and in Coser's (1966) expansion of their argument. In Merton and Barber's view, sociological ambivalence focuses on "incompatible normative expectations of attitudes, beliefs, and behavior" (pp. 94-95). These incompatible expectations may be assigned to or incorporated into a particular status (or set of statuses) within a society or even within a single role of a single status. In this way, "the core-case of sociological ambivalence puts contradictory demands upon the occupants of a status in a particular relation" (p. 96). Sociological ambivalence in their perspective refers to "opposing normative tendencies in the social definition of a role" (p. 99). Thus, as Coser notes, sociological ambivalence is "built into the structure of statuses and roles" (p. 175).

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

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

An overarching theme of the postmodern perspective is that, in contemporary society, fixed relationships have weakened, and societal guidance about how these relationships should be carried out has nearly disappeared. The condition of post-

modernity is characterized by a dramatically accelerated pace of change and the enormous scale on which it occurs. These developments have had a major impact on human relationships, resulting in a sense of fragmentation and discontinuity, of confusion and uncertainty regarding how social relations should be conducted (Denzin, 1991; Gergen, 1991).

This analysis of contemporary social conditions suggests that more complex theoretical models are needed to understand the family, including intergenerational relations. In the postmodernist view, family life is now characterized by plurality (Baber & Allen, 1992; Gubrium & Holstein, 1994) and by a multiplicity of forms, such as divorce, remarriage, "blended" families, and same-sex partnerships. In Stacey's (1990) explicitly postmodern perspective, "contemporary family relationships are diverse, fluid, and unresolved" (p. 17). Sociological work is needed that can interpret "today's deeply polarized discourse on American family life" (p. 19). Thus, the postmodern emphasis on heterogeneity and paradox and its rejection of reductionistic theories and dualistic thinking suggest that ambivalence can be a useful tool to analyze intergenerational relations.

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

The second body of theory was developed by feminist scholars to analyze family life. Feminist theory challenges the assumption that a harmony of interests exists among all members of a family. Thus, feminist scholars' treatment of a variety of issues, from reproductive control to the household division of labor and parenthood, has alerted us to fundamental (and not entirely resolvable) conflicts within contemporary families (Thorne, 1992). Ferree (1990) notes that the feminist approach to the family involves a critique of the concept of solidarity, by which is meant "the con-

ventional conceptualization of 'the family' as a unitary whole" (p. 867). When the notion of an undifferentiated "family interest" and the conventional view of family unity are challenged, internal contradictions can take center stage.

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

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

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

Within recent sociological thought, ambivalence on the individual level has received some attention in literature on the sociology of emotions. A detailed discussion is offered by Weigert (1991), who expands the definition of the term to "the experience of contradictory emotions toward the same object" (p. 21). According to Weigert, ambivalence also can be observed in individual motivations: that is, "simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from pursuing a particular line of action" (p. 19). In everyday speech, the term has this connotation of holding two contradictory emotions, motivations, or values at the same time. An example of research in this area is Dressel and Clark's (1990) work on "emotive dissonance" regarding caring activities (primarily for children and spouses). Respondents reported mixed emotions about care provision, when warmth, tenderness, and delight coexisted with frustration, disappointment, and resentment.

We propose a working definition of ambivalence for the purposes of the discussion that follows. This definition includes both ambivalence at the social structural level, as well as the contradictory perceptions and subjective experiences of individuals. As a general concept, we use the term "intergenerational ambivalence" to designate contradictions in relationships between parents and adult offspring that cannot be reconciled. The concept has two dimensions: (a) contradictions at the level of social structure, evidenced in institutional resources and requirements, such as statuses, roles, and norms and (b) contradictions at the subjective level, in terms of cognitions, emotions, and motivations.

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

posed perceptions or emotions. Indeed, in close relationships, it has been argued that when a relationship becomes well defined, the coexistence of positive and negative feelings begins to play a larger role (Thompson & Holmes, 1996).

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

Our reading of the literature suggests three aspects of parent-child relations in later life that are especially likely to generate ambivalence. These are: (a) ambivalence between dependence and autonomy, (b) ambivalence resulting from conflicting norms regarding intergenerational relations, and (c) ambivalence resulting from solidarity.

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

#### DEPENDENCE VERSUS AUTONOMY

There is a sound basis on which to argue that ambivalence between the two poles of autonomy and dependence characterizes intergenerational relations in contemporary society. Indeed, this dilemma appears to be built into the structure of the paired statuses of parent and adult child. Specifically, in adulthood, ambivalence exists between the desire of parents and children for help, support, and nurturance and the countervailing pressures for freedom from the parent-child relationship (cf. Cohler, 1983; Cohler & Altergott, 1995; Moss & Moss, 1992). Cohler and Grunebaum (1981) describe this ambivalence succinctly:

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

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

Thus, there is fundamental ambivalence in relations between adult daughters and their mothers. When daughters have children, they come into closer contact with their mothers, and their bond with mothers deepens. This increased closeness, however, carries with it the seeds of tension and conflict. At times, mothers in the study attempted to dominate their daughters' lives, especially in the realm of childrearing. More common, however, was the "feeling among members of the grandparental generation that their young adult offspring expect advice and assistance, which they are unwilling to provide, and the feeling of young adult offspring that their need for help and advice is rebuffed by their parents" (p. 38).

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

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

It is of interest to observe the contrast between this study and those that have used solidarity as a general approach. All four of the families in the Cohler and Grunebaum study would have scored high on most or all of the solidarity measures used by Bengtson (1994) and Rossi and Rossi (1990). However, the relationships actually were characterized by conflict and anxiety. In contrast to a relationship that phenomenologically is experienced as "solidarity," Cohler and Grunebaum's mothers are caught between daughters' needs for closeness and support and their own desires for self-fulfillment and independence. Daughters, in turn, struggle with their ambivalent desire to remain daughters, but also to be independent wives and mothers.

Cohler and Grunebaum's respondents share two special characteristics: They are mother-daughter dyads, and they are in close, regular contact with one another. Researchers have found similar themes in other family constellations. Nydegger and Mitteness (1991) found considerable ambivalence in close father-son relationships in later life. Fathers and sons show solidarity but also "inherent, sustained tensions" (p. 257) as fathers simultaneously push sons toward independence, but also resist relinquishing authority. Further, Eisenhandler (1992) studied parent-child relationships in which the degree of mutual involvement was considerably less intense than in those described by Cohler and Grunebaum. Nevertheless, Eisenhandler found that there was ambivalence over issues of visiting, advice giving, and helping during crises.

#### CONFLICTING NORMS REGARDING INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Norms entail widely accepted rules that specify appropriate behavior in particular circumstances.

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

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

George's research indicates that, although caregivers experience feelings of solidarity, they become distressed when previously established exchange relationships are disrupted. However, despite the distress, the caregivers cannot simply give up, for in so doing, they would violate the norm of solidarity. This dynamic leads to a classically ambivalent situation. The care recipients are also likely to feel ambivalent. Although they expect support from children, based on the norm of solidarity, they also feel guilty and helpless about their inability to reciprocate.

In a study of persons caring for relatives with Alzheimer's disease, George found greater normative conflict on the part of adult children than among persons caring for their spouses. Children

were forced into the dilemma of when to stop providing care, and they often longed for the time when rewards were more equally distributed. They also reported conflicts between loyalty to the parent, on the one hand, and to their spouse and children, on the other. Many felt that there was no way to resolve the contradiction between the demands of solidarity and the desire for reciprocity, and they were left with profound feelings of guilt. A quote from one of George's respondents illustrates the resulting ambivalence:

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

Thus, rather than a simple relationship between the effort of caregiving and distress, George's study shows a complex and ambivalent situation. Indeed, one can posit conflicting feelings here among (a) biologically based factors (parent-child attachment), (b) socialization factors (the fact that most caregivers are women who have been socialized into nurturing and supportive roles), (c) competing roles (daughter vs. wife and mother), and (d) countervailing social norms (solidarity vs. reciprocity). It is perhaps no wonder that caregivers experience elevated rates of psychological distress (Schulz, Williamson, Morcyz, & Biegel, 1990).

George's research provides compelling evidence in support of normative ambivalence in intergenerational relations. Is such normative conflict, however, inherent only in caregiving relationships, or is it also apparent in parent-child relationships more generally? Farber's (1989) study of conflicting norms provides an example of a quantitative study that found striking ambivalence in kin relations. Although Farber focused not only on parents and children, but also on other family relationships, the findings are relevant here. Farber posits the existence of a norm of "amity," which specifies that individuals should act in ways that promote the welfare of their family members. This rule of "prescriptive altruism" is analogous to George's norm of solidarity. Farber suggests that this norm is found across societies and is probably universal.

Two large-scale surveys in the U.S. and Hungary, however, revealed a surprising finding. Although a norm of amity was, indeed, present, it

existed independently beside a contradictory norm: that of distrust of kin. Factor analyses demonstrated that amity and distrust of kin are two separate factors, which exist as a duality in the minds of the respondents. That is, in assessing the items on the amity scales, Farber suggests that the respondents used two different reference points, with the norm of amity as one basis for evaluating certain items, but with the norm of distrust as the basis for evaluating others.

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

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

#### SOLIDARITY AND AMBIVALENCE

As the studies by Cohler and Grunebaum (1981) and George (1986) demonstrated, families in which solidarity of all kinds exists (for example, coresidence or close proximity, extensive mutual dependency for help, frequent interaction) are especially likely to contain solidarity's opposites: deep dissatisfaction about the relationship, struggles for independence, and serious conflict. These findings are supported by the literature on romantic relationships, which suggests that interdepen-

dence tends to increase the likelihood of conflict (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). The gerontological literature, however, typically has not considered this possibility. We review here a set of studies on the abuse of older persons that illustrates this tendency toward conflict resulting from solidarity itself.

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

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

Extensive qualitative data, collected in both studies, were consistent with the quantitative findings. In the majority of cases, the data showed that the mutual dependency of the adult child and the parent was a key dynamic in the abuse. The victims heavily supported children who maltreated them. The children often were individuals who had difficulty separating from their parents and establishing an independent life. Indeed, Pillemer (1985, 1993) found that the physical abuse stemmed directly from the sense of dependency and powerlessness experienced by the abuser.

Parents were caught up in ambivalence when they tried to resolve the situation. Most of the parents felt trapped by a sense of family obligation and, therefore, did not leave the situation or eject the abuser. Some parents stressed the formal relationship and justified exposing themselves to the risk of abuse because of normative obligations to

help their children. Equally common were feelings of love and affection for the child, despite the abuse. Many parents explicitly referred to feeling "torn" or "of two minds" about the positive and negative aspects of the relationship with the child.

We have selected these research findings, which have been confirmed in European studies (cf. Ogg, 1993), to highlight the limitations of the solidarity model in representing the actual experience of families. As in the Cöhler and Grunebaum study (1981), many of the abusive families would have scored high on the measures of solidarity (as, indeed, they did on comparable measures used in the study). However, these were fundamentally ambivalent family situations that contained a complex mix of elements of solidarity, conflict over power and resources, and violence.

#### FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR THE STUDY OF INTERGENERATIONAL AMBIVALENCE

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

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

#### *Measurement*

The ambivalence perspective reveals the need for new and more sensitive measures of intergenerational relations. Specifically, the types of measures employed by researchers in the solidarity



tradition are not adequate to address the more complex nature of the questions raised by intergenerational ambivalence. The most commonly used measures make it impossible to explore contradictory feelings within the same relationship. In the research by Bengtson and colleagues, for example, "affectual solidarity" is measured by scales of "the type and degree of positive sentiments held about family members" (Roberts et al., 1991). In a recent study, Silverstein and Bengtson (1997) took an even more minimalist approach and operationalized affectual solidarity using the single measure: "In general, how close do you feel to your [relative]?" with three response categories ("very close," somewhat close," and "not at all close"). Such measures are not likely to reflect the range of family members' contradictory feelings about one another.

Similarly, Rossi and Rossi (1990) employed a scale to measure affectual solidarity that asks respondents to rate relationships on a scale from 1 to 7. The low end of the scale represents relationships that are *tense and strained*, and the high end those that are *close and intimate*. This measure, of course, does not allow the study to capture persons who feel both ways (Marshall et al., 1993). As Mangen (1995) notes, the positive bias in measures like these cannot account for families who score high on both positive and negative dimensions. To address such shortcomings, researchers should begin to include measures of conflicting attitudes, motivations, or emotions. The Farber (1989) study is a good example. Rather than measuring only solidarity, items about distrust of kin also were included. Similarly, George (1986) obtained information about competing normative structures, rather than only one. Analytic strategies then can be employed to explore patterns of dilemmas and conflicting factors.

In the early stages of studying intergenerational ambivalence, triangulation of various methods appears to be a sound strategy. For example, Cohler and Grunebaum (1981) used methods that could be applied to the study of ambivalence: repeated in-depth interviews over time, semistructured questionnaires, observation of parents and children, and clinical techniques such as projective tests. The four families in the study were selected from a larger survey, which allowed for comparisons between the case studies and a more representative group. The families also were selected according to theoretically defined criteria: joint versus separate living arrangements and high or low scores on a measure of the appropriateness

of the mother's attitude toward closeness to the adult child. This type of approach is likely to uncover the complexity of family life implied by the intergenerational ambivalence perspective.

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

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

For example, using the Thompson et al. method, one could ask an adult child: "Focus only on the best aspects of helping your mother. To what extent do you believe helping her is beneficial to your relationship?" The paired negative question would substitute "worst" for "best" and "harmful" for "beneficial." It is possible to compare the degree to which the situation is seen as both positive and negative, using one of several computational formulae. (See Thompson et al., 1995, for a review of estimation methods.) Whether or not this approach will be effective in studying intergenerational ambivalence remains to be tested. Most important is that such a precedent exists in the literature on close relationships and can point the way toward measurement strategies.

two domains indicate that conflicts may occur between norms and social-structural positions.

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

#### Mechanisms

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

#### Life Course Approach

The study of intergenerational ambivalence requires a dynamic, life course focus. Coser (1966) proposes that ambivalence will be particularly strong during status transitions because in "changing from one status position to another, conformity with the requirements of one of these positions implies nonconformity with the requirements of another" (p. 144). The literature on close relationships supports this view. For example, research indicates that ambivalence may characterize the early stages of a romantic relationship but then subside later on (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). Boss (1988) notes that major family transitions over the life course have an ambivalent quality; they typically involve losses and gains. For example, when a child is launched from the parental home,

"the family *loses* a dependent child, but *gains* an independent young adult" (p. 79).

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

In conclusion, we have attempted to establish ambivalence as a theoretically and empirically useful approach to the study of intergenerational relations. Developing innovative qualitative and quantitative strategies for understanding the causes and consequences of ambivalence will prove an exciting challenge for future researchers. As methods and measures are developed and refined, ambivalence is likely to become an even more powerful general approach to research on parent-child relations in later life.

#### NOTE

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