

family

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Record

210

File Number

10184

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Title: Cycles of care: Support and care between generations

Original source: Family Matters Number 30

Resource type: Written

Publication Date: 01/12/91

Publisher Info: Aust. Institute of Family Studies

Abstract

This article examines the strength of family links between generations and how family members are supporting each other financially, practically and emotionally. It shows how strong family links do exist between generations and that the extended family also exists though not always under the same roof.

Keyword: Families

Cycles of care

Support and care between generations

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As in most countries, one of the major demographic changes affecting our society in the next two decades is the ageing of the population. In Australia we have a ratio of one retired person to every five workers, and over the next 20 years we can expect this to become one to three.

With the ratification of ILO Convention 156 concerning workers with family responsibilities, the issue of caregiving and family responsibilities has become an industrial issue. While data are readily available on childcare need, little is known about other caregiving responsibilities within families.

The Institute's Australian Family Formation Project provides insights into the way families of Australians born after the second world war are involved with caregiving, and the values they hold about family support and care.

The age range of the 1488 respondents was 27-44 years. At these ages the support between generations is likely to be from parents to adult children, especially in the areas of financial help and assistance with child care (Ochiltree and Greenblat 1991; Glezer 1991). However, 20 per cent of the sample were over 40. People in this older end of the sample were beginning to confront the problems of aged parents requiring assistance. Seven per cent of respondents lived with their parents or parents-in-law. Higher proportions of those not living with partners lived with parents. Of those living with a partner (whether married or de facto), about 3 per cent shared a house with the older generation, an arrangement usually made to save housing costs for the younger couple or to meet the needs of the older generation.

The majority of people in the study had extended family living nearby: 70 per cent of couples had at least one parent or parent-in-law living in the same city; 30 per cent had parents or in-laws living some distance away that is, not living in the same city, or living in the country, interstate or overseas.

Who Cares for Whom?

Nine per cent of respondents were giving care and 6 per cent were receiving care. Those who defined themselves as caregivers tended to be older of those over 35 years, 12 per cent were involved in caring for someone. In the study caregiving was defined as 'providing help to anyone for example, a close relative or friend with a long-term disability or illness'.

Traditionally it has been middle-aged women who have borne the responsibility of caring both for their children and their elderly parents. They are Brody's (1991) 'women in the middle': having almost completed one cycle of care with children they move into the next, the care of the elderly and the grandchildren. In the United States, Marton (1991) found that the age of people usually women caring for parents peaks at around 45 years, and the usual period of care for parents by daughters is 34 years.

But the increasing participation of married women in the workforce is likely to change traditional patterns of family support between generations. Employed women may be unable to make radical economic and lifestyle changes to their households by leaving work to care for elderly parents, nor may they want to. In general, women in mid-life may feel very ambivalent about making personal sacrifices to shoulder the burden of informal caregiving. A question for the 1990s will be who will take on the task of caregiving if this pattern changes?

Most of those defining themselves as caregivers in the Institute study were caring for close relatives. Many were caring for parents or parents-in-law with chronic illnesses such as Alzheimers disease or a stroke or cancer. Often they were not providing full-time care but were helping out in emergencies: 'I stay with my father-in-law to give him a break when he needs it nursing my mother-in-law'; 'Mum needs help nursing Dad, she can't manage on her own'. Some were helping parents or siblings deal with other members of the family with psychiatric problems such as schizophrenia or manic depression; one respondent was helping an aunt nurse a nephew dying of AIDS. Others had children with special needs such as intellectual disability and terminal illness. Ten per cent had taken on caring responsibilities for friends, such as a depressed suicidal friend who needed support, a neighbour dying of cancer. The kinds of care provided included nursing help for the chronically ill and helping out financially when parents were incapacitated and unable to work. Many spoke of providing emotional support to friends and family coping with pressures related to caregiving. Some helped with shopping, taking relatives to and from medical appointments or on outings when they were permanently incapacitated. Others had elderly or chronically ill relatives move in with them, or they moved back home to help with the caring. The main problems dealt with were mental and physical illness and the chronic problems of elder care.

Values about Family Responsibilities

While values do not necessarily predict behaviour, the attitudes of people in their thirties and forties to inter-generational family responsibilities provides some insight into likely future behaviour.

Table 1: Values held about family exchanges between generations

	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree
	%	%	%
Parents should help their adult children financially when the children are having financial difficulty	45	39	13
Children should provide financial help to ageing parents when their parents are having financial difficulty	75	19	5
Parents should let their adult children live with them when the children are in trouble	52	32	16
Children should let ageing parents live with them when the parents can no longer live by themselves	43	35	21
<i>Source: AIFS Family Formation Project 1991</i>			

As Table 1 shows, most respondents (75 per cent) believed that children should support parents financially when they are elderly and have financial difficulties; 19 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 5 per cent disagreed. There was less support for

the idea that parents help children who are having financial difficulties: only 47 per cent believed they should assist, although 39 per cent were unsure.

About half believed those parents should let adult children in difficulty live with them if necessary; a third were ambivalent about this. Only around four out of ten thought that children should have ageing parents living with them when parents had problems living independently. On this question, 35 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed and a fifth definitely disagreed they should have elderly parents living with them.

There was support for assisting parents financially, but reluctance to share accommodation with them. There is no doubt that sharing accommodation can cause stress and family pressures, and this may be the reason. Also, Australia provides subsidised special accommodation, nursing homes and domiciliary services for the aged, and many people may feel that caring for parents in one's own home is not necessary.

Family Exchanges between Generations

Generally, families provide all kinds of assistance to one another parents help adult children, adult children help parents. Respondents were asked whether they provided any of the following for their parents or in-laws: financial assistance, emotional support, care during illness, practical help such as doing the shopping, organising paperwork and doing things around the house.

Table 2: Assistance provided to parents or parents-in-law

	per cent
Financial assistance	16
Emotional support	84
Care during illness	59
Doing things around the house	63
Practical help (eg, transport, shopping, organising paperwork)	43
<i>Source: AIFS Australian Family Formation Project 1991</i>	

As Table 2 shows, most adult children (84 per cent) provided emotional support for parents. Six out of ten helped parents do things around the house; 59 per cent cared for ill parents when necessary; four out of ten gave practical assistance to parents with shopping, organising insurance, fixing the car. Few, however, provided financial assistance.

Generally, the older generation was more likely to provide assistance to the younger generation, the exception being with elder care when the parent/child roles were often reversed. As shown in Table 3, parents were turned to for emotional support (69 per cent) and childcare (82 per cent). Fifty-five per cent provided care during illness. In a third of cases they helped out with renovating. In 30-40 per cent of families, parents assisted financially with deposits for houses and helped out with major purchases. Other forms of help provided by parents were offering no-interest loans for housing, helping out when a minor cash flow problem occurred in the family, and providing temporary accommodation when needed; young couples often moved in with parents or lived in caravans in their parents' backyards when saving for a home or building a home.

Table 3: Assistance provided by parents and parents-in-law when respondent was getting established

	per cent
<i>Financial help</i>	
Help with deposit for flat/house	33
Major purchases (eg, car, refrigerator)	37
<i>Other kinds of help</i>	
Help with renovating	36
Care when sick	35
Minding the children	82
Emotional support in a crisis	69
<i>Source: AIFS Australian Family Formation Project 1991</i>	

To gain some notion of how central the family was in a crisis, respondents were asked who (excluding their partners) they would first turn to if they needed to borrow money in an emergency, if they had a problem and were depressed, and if there was an emergency in the middle of the night.

Table 4: Who respondents turned to for help

	Friends/ neighbours	Parents	Other relative	None of these
	%	%	%	%
If they had to borrow \$200 in an emergency	10	63	15	13
If they had a problem and were feeling depressed and confused about what to do	36	35	16	12
If there was an emergency in the middle of night and help was needed	51	31	12	6
<i>Source: AIFS Australian Family Formation Project 1991</i>				

It is clear that family is more important than friends are when such support is needed. As Table 4 shows, 78 per cent of respondents were likely to turn to relatives in times of financial emergency 63 per cent to parents and 15 per cent to another relative. Friends (36 per cent) or parents (35 per cent) were equally likely to be sought out when people were depressed, although when parents and other relatives (16 per cent) are combined, kin is turned to (51 per cent) more often than outsiders. People were most likely to rely on friends and neighbours (51 per cent) for help in middle of the night emergencies.

The Institute study shows that, according to family members born after the Second World War, strong family links do exist between the generations within Australian families. The older and younger generations take responsibility for one another, and there is reciprocity between the generations. Families are supporting one another financially, practically and emotionally. The extended family still exists, but now they are less likely to live under the same roof.

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