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Autonomy in an ascribed relationship: the case of adult children and elderly parents.

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Abstract

Demographic and cultural changes have given rise to the question of whether adult children will continue to provide support to their elderly parents. In a qualitative study among selected respondents from a large representative sample, we investigated the motivations of adult children to provide support to their elderly parents. Five major themes emerged: Individual choice, obligation, reciprocity, quality of the relationship and genetic relatedness. Respondents rejected general norms of filial obligations, were reluctant to impose behavioral rules on others, but nevertheless expressed strong personal obligations to care. Individualization is often equated with withdrawing from providing care. Our findings suggest otherwise. Filial obligations tend to be strong, but personalized. Social prescriptions have given way to personal motives to provide care.

Keywords

Filial obligations, perceptions, interviews, The Netherlands, elderly, support, adult children

Introduction

Demographic and cultural changes have prompted many scholars to ask the question whether enough informal support will be available for elderly in the future (Hagestad, 2000). In the Netherlands, it is expected that in 2040, almost 24 per cent of the population will be 65 years and over, against 14 per cent now (CBS, 2006). More than one-third of the population aged 75 and older needs some form of support, and more than two-thirds of this group needs support if they are living alone. (Alders & Esveldt, 2004). Next to partners, children have been the most important providers of help to older parents over the last decades, especially those parents who live alone or who have a spouse unable to provide help ((Cantor, 1979; Dooghe, 1992; Shanas, 1979; Wolff & Kasper, 2006) In the Netherlands, 22% of people aged 25 and up have at least one parent or parent-in law who needs some support (Alders et al., 2004). This support includes

housekeeping, odd jobs, transport and help in managing finances, and social and emotional support by calling and visiting (Knipscheer, Dykstra, Van Tilburg, & De Jong Gierveld, 1998). Although some scholars express worries, signaling a possible diminution of support (Cicirelli, 1983; Clawson & Ganong, 2002; Komter & Vollebergh, 2002; Wolff et al., 2006) or even speaking of 'family decline' (Popenoe, 1993), others signal changes in family life, but not a decrease in support (Attias-Donfut & Arber, 2000; De Jong Gierveld, 1998; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Stuifbergen, Van Delden, & Dykstra, 2008), or see new possibilities because of an increase in potential support providers (Murphy, Martikainen, & Pennec, 2006), an increasing importance of multigenerational bonds (Bengtson, 2001) or new types of family life (Stacey, 1993).

Norms of filial obligation have often been regarded as an important motivator for adult children to provide support (Burr & Mutchler, 1999; Silverstein, Gans, & Yang, 2006; Stein et al., 1998). These norms are subject to change over time. In the US for instance, they weakened in the period from the 1980s to the 1990s (Gans & Silverstein, 2006). Changes in family circumstances have been the basis for notions of "family decline" and predictions that social cohesion in our society is disappearing (Popenoe, 1993; Putnam, 1995). Though more and more adult children are part of complex family structures including step- and half family, in which obligations towards parents and stepparents are less clearly defined (Ganong & Coleman, 2006), whether greater family complexity is accompanied by a decline in filial obligations, remains an open question.

When investigating norms of filial obligation among the public, many studies refer to general, societal norms e.g. (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007; Gans et al., 2006; Lowenstein & Daatland, 2006). If our society is becoming more individualistic, the prescriptivity of general norms may be felt less (for a discussion of the role of prescriptivity in norms, see (Wallace & Walker, 1970). At the same time, individual norms – norms that are valid for a certain person in a certain situation- may become more important. When taking into account both attitudinal norms of filial obligation and personally felt norms of obligation, the latter appear a better predictor of actual support giving (Stein et al., 1998).

Our aim is to investigate how adult children and their elderly parents perceive obligations to provide support, and to what extent they invoke (a) general, societal norms and (b) personalized obligations as motives for support giving up the family line. Our working hypothesis is that in an individualized society like the Netherlands, general societal norms are giving way to personal obligations to provide care.

Research on support giving within families has often focused on those who already provide support (e.g. (Finch & Mason, 1990; Timmermans, 2003). The emerging picture of caregivers is one of highly motivated daughters with strong feelings of obligation. But it is known that motivations may be adapted to circumstances, such that not rewarding or demanding activities may be judged more positively to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Norms and motives of those engaged in care giving may be adapted to the situation and not reflect views the person had prior to the situation. We therefore investigated feelings of obligation among those who were not currently engaged in support giving, but for whom the possibility of being engaged in these tasks was nevertheless real.

Methods

Participants

Data are from a 2006 qualitative study on support giving by adult children to elderly parents. The sample is a targeted sub sample from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study, a representative national longitudinal research project among 8161 independently living adults aged 18 to 79. For full details on the NKPS and the sampling frame we refer to the codebook (NKPS (Dykstra, Kalmijn, Knijn, Liefbroer, & Mulder, 2005a; Dykstra, Kalmijn, Knijn, Liefbroer, & Mulder, 2005b). Participants in the qualitative study were primary respondents, taken from the representative sample, and selected family members. Primary respondents had an elderly single parent aged 75 and over living within a 10 km distance but did not, at that time, provide support to this parent (i.e.

no support with housework or with odd jobs, 27% of all). We focused on those with single parents aged 75 and over, because the chances of needing help increase with age and with being single (Alders et al., 2004; Hoeymans, Van Lindert, & Westert, 2005). 75 years has been a common cut-off point in other research on the elderly (Alders et al., 2004; Lowenstein et al., 2006). Because less than one per cent of elderly parents in the Netherlands share a home with one of their children (Alders et al., 2004) and because we expect this to be a different situation from most, we excluded adult children co-residing with their parent. We also excluded primary respondents who were suffering major problems from a permanent handicap or illness because it is unlikely that help to parents will be forthcoming from them. Insofar as information was available, we selected primary respondents with parents whose health state was less than optimal. To achieve variation in the availability of formal services, we included primary respondents from both rural and urbanized areas.

To avoid basing our findings on only one family member, we interviewed the parent and a sibling when possible. After an interview with a primary respondent was completed and if applicable, the interviewer asked permission to contact family members. If more siblings were available, the interviewer decided which sibling to contact on the basis of the information in the interview, striving for contrast maximalization, i.e. the largest variety in circumstances and views possible.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted in the respondents' home or a different location if preferred by the respondent. Topics included: contact (frequency, opportunity, initiative), relationship between adult child and parent, needs of the elderly parent and support provided to the parent, norms of filial obligation, personal feelings of obligation, other motives for providing or not providing support, and the parent's response to support. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Information that could identify persons was replaced before the interviews were analyzed.

Analysis

In analyzing the interviews we used a combination of prestructured codes and inductive coding (as recommended by (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interview excerpts were labeled with predefined codes that were largely similar to the topics in the topic list. We revised these codes twice in response to our data. The coding with these codes was done by two researchers (MS and KL) in continuous deliberation, adjusting and clarifying the codes and their contents especially in the first phase of coding. Convergence of coding by the two researches was low at the start of the project (27% overlap), but reached a maximum of 58% during later phases of the project. For the purpose of this study, themes within the codes were refined by MS. The refining of codes was discussed in the research team and iterated. Our conclusions are based on the resulting codes. All coding was done with the use of Nvivo 7, a program designed for coding in qualitative settings.

Results

Participants

We compared the primary respondents in our interviews with the respondents from the representative sample who fulfilled the same criteria except for providing support. They were comparable with regard to sex, age, marital status, number of siblings, number of children, educational level, degree of urbanization, age of the parent and quality of the relationship with the parent, but the primary respondents had a lower than average score on questions measuring norms of filial obligations. Some parents had died after the initial NKPS-interview, and we included families in which the parent had died no longer than a year ago. An overview of participants and the families they belonged to is given in table 1.

Although primary respondents had previously indicated they did not provide support, many of them did. In some cases the amount of support giving had augmented recently: the gap between answering the questionnaire that formed the basis of our selection and the interviews was two years. Another explanation is that the amount of support provided did not seem substantial enough to consider it when answering questions on support giving, or the support given was of a different nature than the one asked about in the questionnaire.

Insert table 1 around here

Themes in the data

Providing support is an individual choice

We found a reluctance among respondents to speak of a general obligation to provide support, stressing that every person should make their own decision regarding such support. But at the same time, adult children could feel a strong obligation towards their own parents:

R: I find it a kind of basic right, you were kicked into this world and formed, or deformed as your parents deemed right, yes, you can make your own choices in what you want to do in return for that.

I: Do you, say, find it an obligation to ask him to come over every now and then? Or does it feel differently?

R: Both... one time I enjoy him coming over, but it becomes ever more, I notice this in myself, laborious to keep the contact going when he is here (Son, 50).

A personal motivation was judged to be more important than socially imposed obligations.

Although the next respondent hints at expecting an internal motivation to be present with most people, he thinks it would not be good to count on it, for instance in policy making.

I: In general, do you think that children ought to help their parents?

R: No. No. No, I am not such a moralist that I think you should do that. I.. ehm... I don't think you can base policies on that, you ought to help your parents. I think it should come from inside. Ehm.... and I do expect it a little bit from people, but I still don't think that they ought to.

I do think yes..no... I do not like 'ought'. 'Ought' is so close to 'must'. And I don't think much of that. No (Son, 55).

Some respondents stressed the fact that they *enjoyed* providing support and that therefore, they did not perceive it as something they were obliged to do:

No, I don't experience it as something I should do, I like to do it very much, I really do it wholeheartedly (daughter, 56).

Some of our respondents even thought it wrong to support a parent out of an obligation, it should be done with pleasure, or it would not be right.

R: Imagine that you have to take care of your parents but you just have a very bad relationship with your parents. Well, I feel something like you shouldn't do that, it will make you unhappy. And I can't imagine it making your father or mother happy either. So no, in that sense it doesn't work. I think you should really do such a thing because you want it (daughter, 46).

Another example of leaving everyone their own choices, is when respondents thought about what they expected their children to do for them. One daughter, providing support to her mother, clearly found that her daughter was not obliged to do the same for her:

R: No, I would not... all the things I do for my mother at this moment I really would not...well, not really want my daughter to do....that's not exactly what I mean... but it costs a lot of energy, let's state it that way. And I would not really demand all that energy (daughter, 68).

Some of the parents we spoke also thought that children should make their own choices regarding what to do for them. But at the same time, there was an unspoken hope that this would

include at least visiting them and showing some interest in them more often than they did. A 90-year old mother was both explicit in not wanting to impose an obligation on her only living son, and indicated that she would have liked him to be more attentive.

I: Do you think in general that parents may expect something from their children when they need it? Or do you think not?

R: Let me think... no, I think that everyone should make their own life. You can't tell someone to do this and do that...no.

....(when talking about the relationship with her son:)

Yes, I regret that.*(him being less considerate)* What do you think...especially because I don't have the other son anymore, and he was very.. he often came over, and was concerned with everything. Ma, you should do this, ma, you should do that. Or... yeah, he *(living son)* doesn't have that at all, he is not concerned with anything (new partner of father, 90).

Acceptance of obligation.

There were respondents who accepted an obligation to provide support. They did not mind this obligation in their own situation, and belittled its importance, saying that their pleasure in providing support overrode ideas of obligation, or stating that it goes without saying.

R: I do see it as an obligation, but an obligation I fulfill gladly. I mean it is not an obligation in the sense of oh, I have to do it again (daughter, 54).

R: My mother in law died last year, and, I have helped here daily for two-and-a half years with all sorts of things. I find that common practice I must say (daughter, 54).

Other respondents illustrated that they thought providing support was the obvious thing to do by naming reasons they would accept for not doing it: these were thought to be deviant situations.

R: Yes I think if you... Of course, there are circumstances in which it is understandable if children don't do it... let's be honest, you come across situations where children are pretty harmed by their parents. Yes, it can... there are people who are mistreated within the family, and I can imagine that then you draw the line at a certain point and say now I don't do anything in return anymore. That is also logical (daughter, 51).

Rejection of obligation.

Some respondents denied that they or anyone else had an obligation whatsoever to support their parents. This is clearly a different form of rejecting the thought of obligations. These children did not seem to be involved in the parent's circumstances. One son was very explicit about this, stating clearly that no matter what his mother's need would be, he would not feel obliged to help, emphasizing that it was the responsibility of home help services:

I: Do you think you should help your mother, that you are obliged to help her?

R: No, I don't think so.

I: Can you explain that?

R: Yes, I think there are public agencies to do that.

I: Like home care.

R: Yes, we don't have time for that.

....

I: If you would, say, work less, do you think then you should help your mother?

R: No, that's impossible, I cannot spare the time for that.

I: How do you mean that?

R: Let me state it this way, I did not ask to be brought into this world, and she has always said I have raised seven children, now they should take care of me. I say I don't have time for that, I don't feel like it. So I am not going to do it.

I: Do you think in general that children have obligations to care for their parents?

R: No, it is a general thing for me. Look, it just depends on what help the children want to give. And they should decide that themselves, what they want to do (son, 42).

Reciprocity

When talking about reciprocity, we found a discrepancy between what the younger generation felt should be reciprocated, and what the parents felt. The children's view went with a long time perspective, wishing to do something in return for the things they had received in the past.

R: She cared for us for years, now it's our turn. That just goes without saying, at least I think so (son, 43).

Some respondents also told how their parents thought they had a right to support in return for their upbringing, but this did not seem to be the predominant view:

R: And then we said Ma, wouldn't it be better to go to a home for the elderly? No I'm not ready yet for that, and I still have children (daughter, 60).

Parents seemed eager to reciprocate the support given by their children in the present. This was often accepted by the children as a token of appreciation, but a gift should not be too big, as illustrated by a daughter:

I: If you for example clean the windows or take her somewhere, then what do you get..?

R: Well, it would often be something like a jar of facial cream, or whatever, Yes. Yeah, she does that. But apart from that...no but I wouldn't want it either. Are you kidding. You do what you want to do for your mother, right? (daughter, 54).

Some parents reciprocated the support received with money. Adult children reacted differently to this, often accepting it as a sign of appreciation, or for services with an identifiable price .

R: I didn't care about the money.. but the idea behind it.. for her it meant that she was showing her appreciation. She also said it.. but in addition.. yeah, she did that too (son, 55).

R: Then she would say that car doesn't run on water. You understand? Then I would accept it sometimes (daughter, 68).

Receiving money for support given could also cause friction, when it was seen as not appropriate in the relationship between parents and children.

R: If I provide support.. yeah, little.. and then I think about it. And she: how much do I owe you? But I think hey you're not talking to a stranger, this is your own child, you don't have to say how much do I owe you. You understand? (daughter, 48)

In contrast to rewarding adult children, which was judged inappropriate, it was considered acceptable to reward grandchildren for their support. A mother in our sample talked about it as self-explanatory:

I: Do you give the children something for the help they provide?

R: Not my own children, but the grandchildren yes.

I: Yes, the grandchildren.

R: Yes, but never them (children) (mother, 79)

Quality of the relationship

Another basis for support giving many respondents mentioned was the relationship between the parent and the child. A good relationship could work as a catalyst for support giving:

R: I notice that I do it with pleasure because the relationship is good. It is simply pleasant. It is nice to be with her, she always tries to keep her spirit, and she is simply a nice person, so it is not difficult (son, 45).

Parents also mentioned a good relationship as a basis for support giving. They were careful to keep interactions amicable, and sometimes decided not to ask for support so as not to strain the relationship, even though a need for support was present.

R: Well, they could call a little more often. But it is... I always say it isn't necessary.

I: I see...

R: Because, well, it is like this, everybody has their own life more or less. And yes, that's the way it goes.

I: Do you accept that or do you regret it in a way?

R: Yeah, well, what is to be regretted and what is not to be regretted? If I want to call them... I often call them myself. Well, then it's alright again as well (father, 83).

Genetic Relatedness

Some respondents mentioned the blood tie as a reason for support giving, but it was hard for them to specify why it was important to them.

R: Yeah, what is important...? I, I think it is even more in the genes than in... how to say that, in upbringing or contact. Yes. Yes... I have that feeling, that's pretty substantial (son, 53).

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Discussion

We found five major themes in our dataset regarding norms for support giving to elderly parents: Individual choice, obligation, reciprocity, quality of the relationship and genetic relatedness. A general norm of filial obligation was often rejected, which is consistent with previous research showing an endorsement of statements on norms of filial obligations by 30-60% of respondents, depending on the content of the statement and country of study, with lower percentages in the Netherlands (Daatland & Lowenstein, 2005; Dykstra et al., 2007). However, this did not imply that respondents did not want to support their parents. Rather, they did not want to do this on the basis of societal norms or other people's expectations. In saying so, the essence of their view corresponded to that of respondents who acknowledged only an *individual* obligation, or those who accepted a general one, but who brushed aside its relevance, viewing personal motives to provide support as more important. A personal will to provide support was stressed instead. Thus it appears that norms of filial obligation were 'personalized' in our sample.

Of course, theoretically, personalized norms can be derived from general societal norms. If socialization is successful, general norms are internalized and integrated in the personality, and then experienced as an individual personal free choice. In a public environment such as the Netherlands, where norms of tolerance and individualism are strongly espoused, making it 'not done' to comment on other people's obligation to care, or to voice a general opinion of filial obligation, a felt obligation to help frail parents is construed as a choice to feel obligated. Thus, we found that individualism can go together with a positive choice to provide support, which is in contrast with recent American findings, in which individualism was reported to go hand-in hand with resentment about caretaking tasks for elderly parents, and a reluctance to perform them (e.g. Piercy, 2007; Pyke & Bengtson, 1996).

It is important to distinguish two meanings of individualism. In the American literature, its connotation is more with dissociating oneself from others. In Europe, individualism is more

associated with independence in opinions and decisions, and with giving a personal interpretation to a relationship. In this light, an individualistic choice can be very sociable (see also (Tomassini, Glaser, & Stuchbury, 2007) for a comparison of support in a more individualistic versus a familistic culture). The parallel between American and our research may be in the identification with the caregiver role. This identification stemmed from a collectivist or a religious outlook in the American respondents, but stemmed from an individual point of view in our respondents. Another explanation for the American literature finding a connection between individualism and *not* providing support is that the necessity to provide intensive care, for which no alternatives are available, is higher in the United States, making support giving an involuntary and more demanding assignment, and possibly the source of greater ambivalence. If ambivalence is experienced 'when social structural arrangements collide with (individuals') attempts to exercise agency when negotiating relationships' (Connidis, 2002), one can expect to find less ambivalence in social structures that leave more room for individual agency. Relationships with more dependency or support giving are more often ambivalent than other relationships (Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006; Willson, 2003). In the Netherlands, the availability of home help and broad acceptance of the use of it reduces the demands on adult children to care for aging parents. Ambivalence in our sample more often referred to norms regarding social contact in the adult child - elderly parent relationship rather than to support giving, in the way suggested by Lüscher & Pillemer (1998). A clash of the norms of independence and solidarity can for instance be noted when an elderly parent shows a wish for more contact but at the same time stresses the importance of both parent and child leading their own lives. But norms of solidarity or reciprocity need not clash with norms of independence if ambivalence can be resolved by combining the norms. Three possibilities to do this were found in our data. One is to feel that the choice to support the parent is made out of one's own free will. Ambivalence is then resolved at the individual, psychological level. At the structural level, ambivalence can be resolved by the availability of home help, and supervising the use of it. In that way the independence of both parent and adult child is ensured, while at the same time solidarity may be expressed in arranging the support needed. Ambivalence might also be resolved by rejecting the norm of solidarity.

Some rejected an obligation all together, insisting that support should be provided by formal services. But in the Netherlands, social contact may be the domain in which ambivalence is expressed most because practical support is not necessarily expected of adult children.

Elderly parents in our sample who denied the obligatory nature of support by their children showed three, interconnected reasons. They did not want to burden their children, which points to a form of altruism (see also (Dykstra et al., 2007). They were careful in not asking too much, so that some room remained for support when they really needed it. And the parents valued a voluntary nature of support given to them, which confirmed their value as a person, not just as a needy person.

Speaking of obligation or of individual choice went together with thoughts about reciprocity, the relationship between parent and child and the awareness of a genetic relatedness. This suggests that feelings of obligation or choice are generated by a blend of ideas on reciprocity, quality of the relationship and shared genes.

Reciprocity was an important reason for feeling obligated to provide support. Most adult child respondents felt grateful towards their parents for caring for them as a young child and wished to do something in return. This is a focus on reciprocity over a long period of time, also called 'lagged reciprocity' (Silverstein, Haitao, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 2002). Many elderly parents did not expect or want to be reciprocated for what they had given their child when young and focused instead on reciprocation in the present time. Other research suggests that, although elderly generally prefer a balanced relationship in the present time (Antonucci, Fuhrer, & Jackson, 1990; De Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 2008), an unbalanced relationship does not influence relationship satisfaction so much when adult children are concerned (Kulis, 1992; Rook, 1987), although those parents who give more than they receive may feel more lonely (De Jong Gierveld et al., 2008). If parents and children use two different time perspectives for reciprocation it may explain

why seemingly unbalanced relationships - in which elderly receive more than they give - often continue to exist (Klein Ikkink & Van Tilburg, 1998): the relationship is not unbalanced when past favors are included – at least not in the direction suggested.

Reciprocating acts from the parents in our sample were usually regarded as a token of appreciation. This token should not be too big, and when money was given, it was either accepted for its symbolic value or for expenses with an identifiable price. The parents' reciprocating acts sometimes led to friction, when a child did not want to accept a gift from the parent. A possible explanation for this could be the preservation of one's self image as an adult. From puberty onwards, children develop a more individual sense of self, which stands apart from the parents (Palombo, 1988). As adults, they are involved in adult interactions, in which a balanced relationship is usually preferred (Gouldner, 1960). Combined with lagged reciprocity, adult children do not feel their parents owe them anything in return. Also, whereas children often like to be rewarded in the form of pocket money, compliments or favors in return, adults know that favors need not be reciprocated directly, but may be reciprocated somewhere in the course of a relationship- or that support can be given out of love without direct thoughts of reciprocation. This may be especially so in families, where the norm of direct reciprocity may be stretched over time (Antonucci, 1985; Silverstein et al., 2002). Thus, when adult children receive gifts for support given to their elderly parent, this may be regarded as being treated as a child, who needs to receive something material in return for a favor. For the parents on the other hand, it is a way to keep the relationship balanced in the present, and to maintain a feeling of independence (Van den Akker & Luijkx, 2004). If they can mean something for their children, they are not only frail and in need of help, but have a value as an equal party in the relationship. Illustrative is the case in which both elderly parent and adult child agree that it is okay to give money to the grandchildren, but no money is exchanged between the parent and the child. This may be accepted both because grand children have received less favors in the past and are therefore regarded less 'indebted' to their grandparents and because they are young and treated as children.

Another basis for wanting to provide support was a good relationship. But the role of the relationship in the dynamics of giving and asking for support was different for children and parents. For adult children, the quality of the relationship was treated as a given and was a ground for more or less support giving. A good relationship thus could work as a catalyst for support giving. For elderly parents, sometimes, retaining a good relationship was more important than receiving support. The relationship was then not treated as a basis for asking support, but asking support was seen as influencing the relationship, and possibly threatening it.

If parents and children share an enjoyable relationship, feelings of obligation may be compared with a form of friendship. Especially if parents can support the children as well as vice versa, a mutually balanced situation may arise. Inevitably, this situation will change in most cases. It would be interesting to know whether children will then continue their support because of the feelings they once felt (comparable to (Dixon, 1995)), ascribe their actions of support giving to some other motive, e.g. reciprocity or the genetic tie, or will not feel obligated to provide support anymore. Given the variety of motives for support giving, our data suggest that another motive will still guide some support giving.

Parents often prefer formal services to help from their adult children (Daatland, 1990; Daatland & Herlofson, 2003; Dykstra et al., 2007; Wielink, Huijsman, & McDonnel, 1997). This is both because they do not want to burden their children and because they do not want to be perceived as a burden themselves. They value a good, pleasant relationship with their children, often more than practical help - which they can obtain elsewhere. Formal support structures in welfare states such as the Netherlands have decreased the need for help by adult children. At the same time, the demands of work and care for the family may increase the burden to support others. These developments may combine to put up a barrier to ask for support, especially if a different source of help is available. The parents in our sample seemed to value a good relationship more than practical support. This form of support cannot be substituted by formal services, as it is unique to the relationship. Most of our interviewees were happy to provide this form of support, even if

practical support was out of the question for some due to time or financial restrictions. In a society with an increasing number of people working more hours, and with practical services available for many, we should maybe question whether practical forms of support are the right focus of research when the relationship between adult children and elderly parents is studied. Maybe we should concentrate more on genuine interest and contact as indicators of a good parent-child relationship.

A last basis for support providing was genetic relatedness. Some respondents mentioned the genetic link between them and their parent as a reason for being in a special relationship and for feeling obligated. When no obvious investments were made, for instance because the parent had left when the child was very small, genetic ties still made children feel obligated. It is obvious that sharing genetic material has a special significance for many, and can be a ground for filial obligations for some. But why this would be so, our data cannot tell.

It seems that the will to provide support, whether or not based on a feeling of obligation, is deeply rooted in many adult children, but that the reason for this willingness varies with the type of relationship the adult child experiences with the parent. To explain a feeling of obligation (or a will to provide support), the most obvious reason will be mentioned. Often, this will be reciprocity, because most children have received benefits in the past and most of them are grateful for that. Another obvious reason is the pleasure found in being in the relationship. This may refer mostly to egalitarian relationships. In the absence of these two reasons, only the genetic tie remains. Apparently, the importance of family goes beyond what they do for or how they behave towards each other. Being family in itself gives rise to obligating feelings.

An overarching theme in our results was a sense of individual choice with regard to the provision of support for elderly parents, as opposed to cultural norms of obligation. Personal reasons are a strong motivator for filial support (Pyke et al., 1996). But regarding obligations as personally motivated is also congruent with an individualistic culture. Ambivalence between independence

and obligation can be overcome if “children’s involvement with their parents (is) being represented as something freely chosen”(Allan, 1988). A personal choice to provide support, guided by personal norms, is a way to view oneself as an autonomous person, even when caught in an ascribed relationship. In a culture where autonomy is highly valued, obligations may be experienced as less pressing when they are felt to be one’s ‘own’, and not socially prescribed, and behaving according to one’s personal norms may foster one’s sense of self. Note that these norms largely coincide with former overt social norms.

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Table 1. Participating family members and the families they belonged to

Primary respondent (n=14)	Parent (n=5)	Additional siblings interviewed (n=9)	Family members not interviewed
Daughter (56) ^a	Father (79) Father's new partner (90)	Son (50) Son of father's new partner (62)	Son (54)
Son (45)		Son (43)	Mother (deceased ^b) Sister (deceased)
Daughter (52)			Mother (79) Daughter (50)
Stepdaughter (32)		Daughter (54)	Father (deceased) Son, brother of daughter (52) Daughters, sisters of daughter (50, 48) Stepson, brother of stepdaughter (36) Son, half-brother of stepdaughter (24)
Son (52)	Father (83)	Son (53)	none
Son (58)			Father (83) Sons (53,43) Daughter (deceased)
Daughter (60)			Mother (84) Daughters (59, 54, 51,45) Sons (58, 56, 55, 52, 49, 47)
Daughter (39)	Mother (82)	Daughter (54)	Sons (56,52,51) Daughter (57)

Son (56)		Daughter (68)	Mother (94) Sons (73, 70, 62,58)
Son (43)			Mother (77) Sons (46, 45) Daughters (48,44)
Daughter (46)	Mother (79)	Daughter (51)	Son (50) Daughters (49, 44)
Son (55)		Daughter (58)	Mother (deceased) Son (44)
Son (42)			Mother (78) Sons (58,56,54,50) Daughters (50, 46)
Daughter (48)			Mother (84) Son (58) Daughters (59, 50, 49)

^a Numbers in parentheses refer to age

^b Deceased family members are listed only if deceased less than one year ago and if discussed during the interview.