

THE MORE THE MERRIER?
MULTIPLE PARENT-ADULT CHILD RELATIONS*

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Abstract

Though parent-adult child ties are generally positive, most parents have multiple children whose relations may yield collective ambivalence combining higher and lower quality. Little research has investigated these multiple relations. NSFH respondents aged 50+ with adult children ($N = 2,270$) are used to assess patterns of quality and contact across multiple children in the same family. This illuminates mixed experiences, especially for lowest quality and contact across children, contributing to collective ambivalence in parent-adult child relations within families. Having more children increases prevalence of both positive and negative relations. Stepchildren exhibit more negative relations than nonstepchildren, even in the same family. Mothers have more positive but not more negative relations than fathers; but mothers have more negative relations with stepchildren.

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Running headline: Multiple Parent-Adult Child Relations

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Parent-child ties are central and long-lasting, prolonged by increased life expectancy into the later adult years of parents and middle age and beyond for children (Mancini & Blieszner, 1989). Parent-child relations are generally characterized by positive feelings and solidarity (e.g., Bengtson, Biblarz, & Roberts, 2002), and Umberson (1992) has cited the parent-child tie as a particularly strong and unique source of social attachment. Although parent-child relations would seem influential throughout the life course, research summarized in the next section has failed to find a consistent association between parent-adult child relations and parent well-being. These inconsistent findings may reflect the mixed quality of those relations, especially when viewed across relations with multiple children; that is, positive relations with children may be counteracted by negative relations with the same or other children. Research has tended to focus on particular parent-adult child dyads or aggregated measures, instead of viewing parent-adult child relations as a network in which some relations may be more positive and others more negative.

We address the multiple parent-adult child relations experienced by most parents in middle and later life, to better describe and understand their textured nature. The concept of *intergenerational ambivalence* (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998), which has been applied to particular parent-child relations, is extended here to a collective view across multiple children. We look at patterns of *collective ambivalence* and how they are related to selected predictors that include family structure characteristics (size and presence of a stepchild) and parent gender.

Multiple Children and Collective Ambivalence

Although parent-adult child relations can be expected to affect parent well-being, recent

reviews have concluded that “little is known” about whether adult children affect parent well-being (Knoester, 2003, p. 1431) and that research on whether adult children affect parent distress is “inconclusive” (Weinstein, Glei, Yamazaki, & Ming-Cheng, 2004, p. 512). Research has found no or only weak overall associations between parent well-being and proximity, contact, and support from adult children (Brubaker, 1991; Logan & Spitze, 1996; Sutor & Pillemer, 1987; Ward & Spitze, 1998; Weinstein et al., 2004).

If the parent-adult child tie is a central one, why is evidence of contributions to parent well-being so weak? Though parent-child relations may matter, children (and parents, for that matter) are a “mixed blessing.” Parent-adult child relations have been described in generally positive terms, with typically relatively close proximity, frequent contact, emotional closeness, and feelings of normative obligation accompanied by support and advice (Bengtson et al., 2002; Logan & Spitze, 1996; Lye, 1996; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Umberson, 1992). These positive portrayals notwithstanding, family ties have both positive and negative dimensions (Ingersoll-Dayton, Morgan, & Antonucci, 1997; Krause, 1995; Okun & Keith, 1998).

Parent-adult child relations have been said to be characterized by ambivalence: contradictions at social-structural and subjective-emotional levels reflected in a mix of solidarity and conflict, autonomy and dependence (Lowenstein, 2007; Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Pillemer & Sutor, 2005; Spitze & Gallant, 2004). Ambivalence illuminates the presence of both positive and negative relations, and research has indicated that negative dimensions of social ties can be a particular source of unhappiness and distress (Krause, 1995, 2005; Rook, 1997; Umberson, 1992). Research on ambivalence has largely focused on “mixed feelings” within particular dyads (Lowenstein, 2007). Ambivalence may also be viewed as a collective ambivalence of mixed feelings across multiple children-- positive with some children but less positive with

others. For example, Aldous, Klaus, and Klein (1985) found that parents may refer to some children as more “comforting” and others as “disappointing.” A view that explicitly considers multiple family ties better enables an understanding of mixed relations across children.

Research has generally viewed parent-child relations in terms of individual dyads or children combined as a composite. Focusing on a particular tie, however, or viewing children as an undifferentiated composite, loses information about how relations with one child fit within and are related to those with other children in a network of parent-child ties. Multiple relations in any such network include the possibilities that some are positive but others are negative. Some research has looked at relations with multiple adult children. For example, there is evidence of differentiation across children on emotional closeness and “favoritism” (e.g., Aldous et al., 1985; Sutor & Pillemer, 2007). Such work is extended here to further consider within-family variation in parent-adult child relations as it relates to collective ambivalence.

Family Structure and Collective Ambivalence

Parent-adult child ambivalence is based in the structure of those dyadic relations. Similarly, collective ambivalence across multiple children can be viewed as a function of family structure. Here we focus on two dimensions of family structure likely to be influential: family size (the number of adult children) and the presence of adult stepchildren.

Greater family size offers more opportunities for both positive and negative relations with adult children, and greater complexity in multiple parent-adult child relations may yield collective ambivalence associated with conflicting or competitive relations. Some studies have suggested within-family differentiation across adult children related to family size. Rossi and Rossi (1990), for example, found that larger families reduced contact with a particular child. Logan and Spitze (1996) also found that parents with more children had less contact with each

individual child, although having more children increased overall contact in an additive fashion.

Aldous and Klein (1991) have proposed different models of how family size may shape early parent-child relations and affect later relations with adult children. A *familism* model suggests that family bonds will be emphasized in larger families, promoting intergenerational ties; positive relations and contact with some children may also heighten quality and contact with others. A *size constraint* model (here called *competition*) suggests that larger families have weaker ties due to limits on parental time and energy, leading to less satisfaction and involvement in subsequent relations with adult children. These models have implications for collective ambivalence. A familism view suggests that larger families may exhibit less collective ambivalence, as there may be a more positive overall cast to relations across multiple adult children. A competition view, in contrast, suggests that larger families will have a greater mix of positive and negative relations across multiple children, yielding greater collective ambivalence.

Stepparenting may also affect parent-adult child relations in ways that foster collective ambivalence. Research has found the possibility of more strained relations between stepparents and adult stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 2006; Rossi & Rossi, 1990) and fewer normative obligations between adult stepchildren and stepparents (Aquilino, 2005; Ganong & Coleman, 2006; Ward & Spitze, 2007); these may reflect family instability and disruption (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Sweeney, 2007). Strains in relations with adult stepchildren may increase collective ambivalence directly and indirectly. Strained relations with adult stepchildren may themselves increase the mix of positive and negative experiences across all children, contributing to collective ambivalence. Strained relations with stepchildren may also strain parent relations and affect competition with nonstepchildren, thereby also increasing collective ambivalence.

Although parent gender is not a structural dimension of families, we attend to gender as

an organizing feature of family roles. Logan and Spitze (1996) note that gender differences in parent-child relations are not necessarily straightforward, and adult children can be a source of distress for both mothers and fathers. Nonetheless, women have been described as kinkeepers who express stronger obligations, maintain family ties, and are most involved in assistance and caregiving (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990; Logan & Spitze, 1996; Lye, 1996; Moen, 1996; Rossi, 1993; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). Such family connections carry both benefits and costs, and Pillemer and Suitor (2002) have argued that mothers may feel more ambivalence than fathers in the parent-child relationship. Kinkeeping roles may entail more of both positive and negative aspects in mothers' parent-child ties than fathers', yielding greater collective ambivalence across children for mothers. Gender may also shape the implications of such factors as family size and stepchildren. For example, Schmeekle (2007) has found differences in the dynamics of relations by stepmothers and stepfathers with adult stepchildren. More generally, if mothers are more connected to and affected by family ties than fathers, elements of family structure may have greater influence on collective ambivalence for mothers.

Research Questions

This study explicitly assesses relations of parents across multiple adult children, using a data set that allows a look at relations with each of multiple children. We address two types of research questions derived from the literature reviewed here. The first is descriptive: What are the patterns of parent-adult child relations when viewed across multiple children? It is expected that incorporating information from multiple adult children will enable a more comprehensive view of parent-adult child relations than what can be gleaned from individual parent-child dyads or composite averages. In particular, this will illuminate collective ambivalence that entails a mix of positive and negative relations across multiple adult children.

A second set of questions investigates variation in collective ambivalence, focusing on the factors we have reviewed: family size and presence of stepchildren, as family structural factors, and parent gender. Larger family size potentially increases the likelihood of both positive and negative relations with adult children, but familism and competition models suggest different possibilities: familism suggests that there may be fewer negative relations and therefore less collective ambivalence in larger families; competition suggests more negative relations and collective ambivalence in larger families. We have also argued that because parents may have more strained relations with adult stepchildren, and because this may also affect relations with nonstepchildren, parents with adult stepchildren will experience greater collective ambivalence across their adult children. Lastly, reflecting our discussion of kinkeeping by women and their presumably greater involvement in family relations, it can be hypothesized that mothers will exhibit more of both positive and negative relations across multiple adult children than fathers, yielding greater collective ambivalence for mothers than fathers. We also expect that family structure factors will have a greater effect on collective ambivalence for mothers than fathers.

These factors must be considered along with other parent and family characteristics that have been found to affect parent-adult child relations (e.g., see Logan & Spitze, 1996; Lye, 1996; Umberson, 1992). Our analyses include a standard set of controls for these other factors, including parent age, race-ethnicity, social class, marital status, and health. We also include the presence of a younger child in the household because this entails family situations that may have implications for parents' relations with adult children.

METHOD

Sample

Data are from Wave 1 of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH),

collected in 1987-88 (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996), a national sample of 13,017 persons aged 19 and over, with oversampling of some demographic groups. Wave 1 had particularly detailed measures of parent-child relations; these were not consistently repeated in subsequent waves, making Wave 1 data most appropriate for our goals here. The overall NSFH sample included 3,378 respondents with at least one adult child (aged 19 or older). We focused on parents in later middle age and beyond by selecting a subsample of these respondents who were age 50, yielding a sample of 2,270 (67% of the parents with adult children). Selecting this age range reduces the presence of younger children as a complicating factor in parent-adult child relations.

Table 1 summarizes characteristics of the sampled parent respondents and of their families. The mean age of parent respondents was 62.8, 65% were mothers, most were married, and over three-fourths of the sample was non-Hispanic White. The 2,270 parent respondents had a total of 7,322 adult children (mean = 3.4); almost half had one or two adult children; nearly one-fourth had five or more. A large majority of parent respondents had at least one adult child outside of their household, nearly one-fourth had a coresident adult child, 13% had an adult stepchild, and less than 10% had a younger child living in the household.

(Table 1 about here)

Measures

Wave 1 of the NSFH included questions about relations between parents and each of their adult children, allowing a more comprehensive view across those relations. Overall quality of relations with each adult child was assessed with a single item asking respondents to “describe your relationship with each of these children” from *excellent* (7) to *very poor* (1). A single item also asked parents to report frequency of contact with each adult child during the prior 12 months: “how often did you see” (from 1 = *not at all* to 6 = *several times a week*; coresident

children were coded as 7 in the analyses). Looking at parent-adult child dyads, parent reports of quality tend to be skewed positively. For example, in families of five or fewer adult children, mean quality scores reported by parents for particular children were about 6.3 out of 7; approximately 70% of reports for any particular child were the highest score (7). Reported quality and contact within parent-adult child dyads are only moderately correlated (.3 - .4).

Dyadic indicators of parent-adult child quality and contact were combined into collective measures across multiple adult children as dependent variables: To capture both positive and negative (less positive) relations, analyses focus on both highest and lowest reported quality and contact across multiple adult children in a family. For example, a parent having three children, with quality ratings of 7, 5, and 4 for those children, would be scored as 7 for highest and 4 for lowest. In combination, looking at both highest and lowest indicators offers a view of collective ambivalence. As will be noted, this ambivalence is also addressed by looking at the extent to which relations by parents across their adult children combine both higher and lower quality or contact with different children; for example, quality ratings of 7 and 4 in the illustration above.

Our discussion focused on the following hypothesized predictors of variation in parent-adult child relations: family size (number of adult children aged 19+), stepchildren (a dummy variable with 1 = any adult stepchild), and parent gender. As noted in the introduction, other variables which may affect parent-adult child relations were included in the analyses: parent age, race-ethnicity (dummy variables for Black and for Hispanic), marital status (a dummy variable for married), health (self-reported from 1 = *very poor* to 5 = *excellent*), and education (# of years) as an indicator of social class; presence of a child younger than 19 was also included (1 = younger child in parent's household) because this may affect parent-adult child relations.

Analyses are organized around the two sets of research questions. We look descriptively

at patterns of quality and contact viewed across multiple adult children; in particular, we assess how this illuminates collective ambivalence entailed in a mix of positive and less positive relations across adult children. That is, do measures of quality and contact across multiple adult children yield more problematic relations than evident from the generally quite positive indicators of solidarity in parent-adult child dyads? We envision collective ambivalence as experiencing lower quality and/or contact with at least one adult child and a greater mix of positive and less positive relations combined across adult children.

The second set of research questions addressed hypothesized variations in parent-adult child relations and collective ambivalence related to family structure (number of adult children and presence of an adult stepchild) and parent gender. We first discuss bivariate analyses of the associations between these hypothesized predictors and indicators of quality and contact across multiple adult children. Hypothesized predictors are then assessed more comprehensively in a multivariate framework, including the control variables noted above. Analyses also included tests of whether the effects of family structure variables are different for mothers and fathers.

RESULTS

Patterns of Parent-Adult Child Relations

What is learned about parent-adult child relations by viewing them collectively across multiple children? The first column of Table 2 summarizes patterns of quality and frequency of contact (highest and lowest reports for each across the respondent's children) for the sample as a whole. It was expected that a more complex portrait of collective ambivalence in parent-adult child relations would emerge when they are viewed across multiple adult children.

(Table 2 about here)

Different portraits of parent-adult child relations are evident from measures of highest

and lowest quality and contact. We have noted that parent reports of relations with particular adult children were skewed positively; this is reflected across children in the patterns for highest reported quality of relations: 83% reported “excellent” (7) relations with at least one child. For the lowest reported quality, however, 16% reported codes of 1 - 4 and 21% reported 5 - 6 with at least one child; 63% reported “excellent” as the lowest quality with any of their children, however, so even here the pattern is skewed positively. Most parents (58%) reported seeing at least one child several times a week or more (this includes 22% who coresided with an adult child); conversely, data for lowest contact in Table 2 indicate that 31% saw at least one child only yearly or not at all (comprised of 14% who saw at least one child “not at all” and 17% only “about once a year”), and another 43% saw at least one child less than weekly.

We also considered whether parents have mixed relations among their adult children; that is, more positive with some and less with others. The bottom of Table 2 reports on mixed quality of relations; because ratings are skewed toward 7, this treats any rating below 7 as “less positive.” Most parents (63%) reported only the highest quality (7) for all adult children, but 21% reported both high and lower (1 - 6) ratings and 17% reported only lower ratings.

We noted earlier that parent reports of quality within particular parent-adult child dyads were skewed very positively. On that basis one might conclude that there is a very high degree of solidarity and satisfaction in the relations between parents and adult children. This is also reflected in the highest reported quality and contact across all adult children reported in Table 2. However, the lowest quality and contact across adult children indicates that problematic relations within families are not uncommon and are more frequent than is suggested by individual parent-adult child relations. Although the collective indicators are also generally positive, looking at relations across multiple children enables a clearer view of situations of collective ambivalence

in which there are mixed relations that include less positive relations with at least one adult child.

Descriptive patterns may not be directly generalizable to the population because the survey oversampled some demographic and family groups. Our analyses were repeated using weighted data: Indicators of parent-adult child quality and contact described above are within a few percentage points of each other in the unweighted and weighted data. Our interest here is less in precise estimates of population parameters than in exploring patterns within a multivariate framework; analyses include controls for subgroup characteristics that may be over- or undersampled. For these reasons, the original unweighted data are used in analyses here.

Predictors of Parent-Adult Child Relations

The second set of research questions addresses variation in patterns of parent-adult child relations and collective ambivalence related to family structure (number of adult children and presence of an adult stepchild) and parent gender. Before assessing predictors in multivariate analyses, we first look at bivariate patterns for our hypothesized predictors: patterns for parent gender and family size are reported in Table 2; patterns for relations with adult stepchildren are reported separately in Table 3 to enable some additional comparisons.

As expected, highest reported quality and contact were greater for mothers than fathers; but lowest quality and contact do not differ significantly by gender. Looking at the mix of quality (bottom Table 2), however, fathers were more likely than mothers to have less positive relations across all of their children. Thus, mothers appear to experience more positive relations across their children without also experiencing more negative relations than fathers.

Parent-adult child relations are sensitive to the number of adult children. Highest reported quality of relations with any adult child increased with family size, but lower quality relations also exhibited a notable and more substantial increase (Table 2); for example, a lowest

reported quality of 1 - 4 rose from 11% with two children to 29% with five or more. A mix of quality across children also increased with family size; for example, reporting some children high and others lower increased from 13% in families with two children to 39% among parents with five or more (and reporting the highest rating for all children declined from 67% to 47%). Similarly, highest contact was greater in larger families, but infrequent contact with any child also increased (and even more strongly) with family size: for example, seeing any adult child only once a year or less was reported by 20% of parents with two adult children but by 60% of those with five or more children. Thus, larger families exhibited more collective ambivalence (a mix of positive and less positive relations) across children.

Table 3 summarizes quality and contact with adult stepchildren, using selected data on highest and lowest reports across adult children: Comparisons are made between stepfathers and stepmothers and for relations with adult nonstepchildren who have no stepsiblings and those who do. As hypothesized, both highest and lowest reported quality and contact with stepchildren were significantly lower than those for nonstepchildren; for example, quality means are 5.6 (highest) and 4.9 (lowest) with adult stepchildren, versus 6.7 and 6.2 with adult nonstepchildren without adult stepsiblings.

(Table 3 about here)

We suggested that parents with adult stepchildren may also have less positive relations with adult nonstepchildren in families that include adult stepchildren. The bottom part of Table 3 compares quality and contact patterns for nonstepchildren who did not have stepsiblings with those who had stepsiblings. Parent reports of lowest quality and both highest and lowest contact were significantly lower with adult nonstepchildren who had adult stepsiblings than those who did not (e.g., mean lowest quality and contact of 5.8 and 2.9 for nonstepchildren with

stepsiblings, versus 6.2 and 3.4 without stepsiblings; differences are statistically significant); nonetheless, reported quality and contact were substantially lower for adult stepchildren than for either group of adult nonstepchildren. Relations between stepparents and adult stepchildren appear to be problematic in themselves, and have relatively small effects on relations with other adult children in the family. In addition, although lower quality and contact with stepchildren than nonstepchildren are evident for both fathers and mothers in Table 3, both quality and contact for adult stepchildren were significantly lower for stepmothers than for stepfathers.

Regression analyses assessed parent-adult child relations in a multivariate framework. Dependent variables were the collective measures of the highest and lowest quality of relations and contact reported across adult children; in combination these assess collective ambivalence. Independent variables included the control variables of parent characteristics likely to affect parent-adult child relations (age, race/ethnicity, education, marital status, and health) and the additional family characteristic of the presence of a younger child in the household. Our focus is on predictors highlighted in our research questions: characteristics of family structure (number of adult children and whether there is an adult stepchild) and parent gender. Tables 4 and 5 report results for quality and contact, respectively.

(Tables 4 and 5 about here)

Tables 4 and 5 also report results separately for mothers and fathers to give a more detailed look at the role of parent gender. In addition, potential interactions between parent gender and the hypothesized predictors (number of adult children and whether there is an adult stepchild) were assessed using multiplicative interaction terms with the full sample models; statistical significance of change in R^2 when the interaction terms were added to the models was tested (Jaccard, Turrisi, & Wan, 1990).

A particular focus in these analyses is the role of family structure: family size and presence of stepchildren. Patterns in Tables 4 and 5 indicate that having more adult children increased the likelihood of both positive and negative (or less positive) parent-adult child relations. Parents with more adult children reported more positive relations in terms of highest quality and contact across children; however, they also reported lower scores for minimum quality and contact across children (and the coefficient for family size with minimum contact is the strongest in the tables). Thus, parents in larger families were more likely to experience collective ambivalence in their relations across multiple adult children, having more positive relations but also lower quality and contact with at least one child.

The patterns in Tables 4 and 5 for presence of an adult stepchild are consistent with the findings we reported earlier of more problematic relations with an adult stepchild, and of greater collective ambivalence across adult children in families with an adult stepchild. Parents with an adult stepchild reported lower scores for quality and contact (both maximum and minimum scores) across their adult children.

Multivariate gender patterns are consistent with patterns reported earlier. Compared with fathers, mothers reported more positive relations with adult children: mothers reported higher maximums across adult children for both quality and contact. Mothers also reported higher minimum quality across children than fathers, but the coefficient for the gender difference is small (-.05). We also assessed gender differences (interactions) in the effects of family structure (size and presence of stepchildren). As noted in the tables, gender differences in coefficients for family size and presence of adult stepchildren are not significant with one exception: The gender difference in coefficients for presence of an adult stepchild with minimum quality (-.20 for fathers, -.30 for mothers) is statistically significant; that is, there is a stronger association of

presence of an adult stepchild with lower minimum reported quality across adult children for mothers than for fathers. Nonetheless, it appears that problematic relations with adult stepchildren contribute to lower quality relations and collective ambivalence across adult children for both fathers and mothers.

Although our research questions did not focus on the control variables in Tables 4 and 5, we can summarize their patterns. Parent age is associated with higher relationship quality (both highest and lowest across children), but lower reported contact. Compared with White parents, Black and Hispanic parents exhibited some differences in quality and contact, but coefficients are not very strong or consistent. Parent education exhibits little association with quality or contact. Married parents generally reported more positive relations and contact (more so for fathers than mothers). Better health is associated with higher quality of relations, but has little association with contact. Presence of a younger child in the household, an unusual situation for these older parents, has little association with relations between parents and adult children.

DISCUSSION

Research on parent-adult child relations typically has not given explicit attention to parents' relations with multiple adult children, nor to differences in quality of relations across those adult children. We extend previous work on within-family differentiation in parent-adult child relations. In an analysis focusing on highest and lowest quality of relations and contact within families, we found substantial variation across parent-adult child dyads that yields a more complete view of parent-adult child relations. As hypothesized, there was more diversity of these relations in larger than smaller families, and in stepfamilies than nonstepfamilies.

Intergenerational ambivalence in parent-child relations (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998) offers a guiding framework for considering these patterns. We introduced the concept of

“collective ambivalence” to capture variation across parent-child relationships within a family, and we tested this through our focus on two structural characteristics of families: family size and presence of stepchildren. Models derived from Aldous and Klein (1991) are useful in thinking about how these two characteristics may relate to collective ambivalence. Their familism model predicts generally more positive relationships in larger families, whereas their size constraint (“competition”) model suggests more diversity in quality of relations in larger families (and thus more collective ambivalence). One might also expect more competition and stress and thus more varied relations (collective ambivalence) in stepfamilies.

We found that having more adult children increased the likelihood of both positive and negative (or less positive) parent-adult child relations. Larger families entail more opportunities for both positive and negative relations, heightening collective ambivalence. These patterns reflect elements of both the familism and competition models (Aldous & Klein, 1991). More positive relations in larger families support a familism view; however, more prevalent mixed or negative parent-child relations in larger families may reflect competition processes. Although these patterns are not inconsistent with other research suggesting on average lower contact in larger families (e.g. Logan & Spitze, 1996; Rossi & Rossi, 1990), they are not directly comparable due to our focus on highest and lowest quality and contact. We are aware of no other research that has taken this approach.

Examining multiple parent-adult child relations also illuminates relations with adult stepchildren. Reported quality of relations was lower in stepfamilies than in nonstepfamilies, reflecting hypothesized problematic relations and collective ambivalence associated with the presence of stepchildren. Parents’ relations with adult nonstepchildren in stepfamilies were also somewhat less positive, but the effects of an adult stepchild appear to be largely attributable to

less positive relations with stepchildren themselves. This is consistent with weaker ties to adult stepchildren (Aquilino, 2005; Ganong & Coleman, 2006; Ward & Spitze, 2007).

We also hypothesized that the intensity of a kinkeeping role of mothers would yield greater collective ambivalence for mothers than fathers, and that family structural characteristics would be more influential for mothers than fathers. Mothers reported higher quality and contact with at least one adult child than fathers reported. There was little difference by parent gender in the lowest quality and contact across adult children, however. There were some indications of gender differences in mixed quality of relations across adult children, but these largely reflect the greater likelihood that mothers report the highest quality with their adult children. These patterns are not best conceptualized as gender differences in collective ambivalence; rather, mothers' relations with adult children appear to reflect more of the benefits of intergenerational relations without more of the costs.

We also did not find that the effects of family size differed significantly for mothers and fathers. Contrary to the overall patterns for parent-adult child quality, however, mothers reported lower quality of relations with adult stepchildren than did fathers; presence of an adult stepchild was also more strongly associated with lower reported quality with at least one adult child for mothers than for fathers. Mothers appear to have more problematic relations with adult stepchildren that contribute to collective ambivalence. Stepfathers may receive more kinkeeping support from their wives (the biological mothers) in mediating ties with adult stepchildren than stepmothers receive from biological fathers. Cherlin and Furstenberg (1994, p. 371) have suggested that stepmothers find it harder to build relationships with stepchildren; they are less likely to live with them and they inhabit relationship "space" already occupied by the biological mother, whereas stepfathers "compete" less with (usually) noncustodial fathers.

Limitations of this study should be noted. First, measures of parent-adult child relations are based on parent reports. Parents tend to give more positive reports than children (Aquilino, 1999). Our focus is on parents' experiences, but patterns from adult child reports may differ. Indeed, adult child reports may yield more mixed relations and collective ambivalence than is evident for parent reports. Second, the data set used here offers an unusual variety of measures about relations with each adult child in a family, but the depth of those measures is limited. The measures of both relationship quality and contact are based on single items.

Third, data analyzed here are cross-sectional, providing an initial look at these patterns and introducing the concept of collective ambivalence. Longitudinal analyses (using the NSFH or other data) are needed to assess how parent-adult child ambivalence, both individual and collective, develop and unfold. Parent differentiation among children and parent-child ambivalence have roots in family history and early parent-child relations (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Sutor & Pillemer, 2007). Parent and adult child life-course transitions, such as marital and parental status, are also likely to be sources of ambivalence and differentiation across adult children (Aldous, Klaus, & Klein, 1985; Aquilino, 1997; Ha & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2008; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Knoester, 2003; Umberson, 1992).

We have only begun to assess parent-adult child relations within a family network context. There is a need to investigate more explicitly how relations with one or some adult children may affect relations with other adult children in the same family, as these interconnecting ties affect the mix of parent-adult child relations. For example, does more or increased quality, contact, or exchange with one adult child affect relations with others? What is the role of child gender and sibling gender composition in such dependencies? How does the presence of stepchildren in a family influence the level of dependency across parent-child

relations? Such questions relate to the familism and competition models, but could not be directly addressed here. Modeling by Spitze, Logan, Deane, and Zerger (1994) of parent-adult child exchanges suggested the existence of sibling dependence in such exchanges. Our current research is focused on developing appropriate data files and modeling to assess the effects of relations with one adult child on those with others (identifying citation deleted).

As expected, incorporating information from all adult children yields a more complete and nuanced view of parent-adult child relations. In particular, including lowest levels of quality and contact across multiple adult children uncovers a greater prevalence of mixed and negative (or less positive) relations. The generally high solidarity in parent-adult child relations notwithstanding, it is apparent that collective ambivalence is not uncommon for middle-aged and older parents. The presence of collective ambivalence, both its antecedents and outcomes, needs to be incorporated in theory and research on relations between parents and adult children.

We asked at the outset: What are the implications of collective ambivalence for parent well-being? Research on parent-adult child relations and parent well-being has been inconclusive. Considering relations across adult children uncovers more mixed and problematic relations, and negative interactions and feelings within social networks may be particular sources of distress (Krause, 1995, 2005; Rook, 1997; Umberson, 1992). A related analysis from the data set used here found that collective ambivalence and less positive relations with at least one adult child are associated with lower parent well-being (identifying citation deleted). Parent-adult child relations are a mixed blessing, and in that mix may rest a clearer understanding of their implications for well-being and for such other outcomes as intergenerational support and caregiving.

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Table 1. *Sample Demographic Characteristics: Parent Respondent and Family Characteristics.*

Parent characteristics	<i>n</i>	%	Family characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Age (mean = 62.8)			Adult children (mean = 3.4)		
50s	935	41.2	1	339	14.9
60s	821	36.2	2	589	25.9
70+	514	22.6	3	512	22.6
Gender			4	332	14.6
Fathers	797	35.1	5+	498	21.9
Mothers	1473	64.9	Any adult child outside hhold	2139	94.2
Marital status			Any adult child coreside	497	21.9
Married	1337	58.9	Any adult stepchild	295	13.0
Separated/divorced	339	14.9	Any child < 19 in hhold	174	7.7
Widowed	581	25.6			
Never-married	13	0.6			
Race/ethnicity					
White	1780	78.4			
Black	361	15.9			
Hispanic	119	5.3			
Other	9	0.4			

Table 2. *Summaries of Parent-Adult Child Relations Across Multiple Adult Children for Total Sample and by Parent Gender and Number of Adult Children: Quality and Contact (% Highest and Lowest Ratings) and Quality Mix (% Various Combinations of Higher and Lower Quality).*

Variables	Parent gender			Family size (# adult children)					
	Total	Fathers	Mothers	1	2	3	4	5+	
<u>Quality (highest)</u>									
1-4	3%	5%	2%	9%	2%	1%	3%	1%	
5-6	14%	19%	12%	14%	17%	13%	12%	13%	
7	83%	77%	87% *	77%	81%	86%	85%	86%	*
<u>Quality (lowest)</u>									
1-4	16%	17%	16%	9%	11%	12%	20%	29%	
5-6	21%	23%	20%	14%	21%	22%	24%	24%	
7	63%	59%	64%	77%	69%	66%	57%	47%	*
<u>Contact (highest)</u>									
1-2 (\leq 1/year)	4%	6%	3%	10%	6%	3%	2%	1%	
3-4 (< weekly)	23%	26%	21%	32%	27%	22%	18%	16%	
5 (1/week)	15%	15%	14%	13%	14%	19%	16%	12%	
6-7 (> 1/week)	58%	53%	61% *	46%	54%	57%	63%	71%	*
<u>Contact (lowest)</u>									
1-2 (\leq 1/year)	31%	32%	31%	10%	20%	28%	37%	60%	
3-4 (< weekly)	43%	43%	42%	32%	45%	50%	51%	34%	
5 (1/week)	10%	9%	11%	13%	15%	11%	6%	3%	

6-7 (> 1/week)	16%	16%	16%	45%	21%	11%	5%	3%	*
<u>Quality mix</u>									
All 7	63%	59%	64%	77%	67%	66%	57%	47%	
7 & < 7	21%	17%	23%	n.a.	13%	20%	28%	39%	
All < 7	17%	23%	13% *	23%	19%	14%	15%	14%	*
<i>n</i>	2270	797	1473	339	589	512	332	498	

Note: Quality coded from 1 to 7, 7 = highest (*excellent*); contact coded from 1 to 7, 7 = highest (coresident).

* Differences within subgroups (gender and family size) statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Table 3. *Selected Highest and Lowest Reports Across Children of Parent-Adult Child Quality and Contact for Adult Stepchildren and Adult Nonstepchildren With and Without Stepsiblings.*

Subgroup		<i>n</i>	Quality ¹		Contact ²	
			% 7	Mean	% 5+	Mean
<u>Stepchildren</u>	Highest	290	56%	5.6	30%	3.6
	Fathers	130	64%	6.0 *	41%	4.1 *
	Mothers	160	51%	5.4	20%	3.2
	Lowest	290	43%	4.9	10%	2.5
	Fathers	130	52%	5.3 *	15%	3.0 *
	Mothers	160	37%	4.6	7%	2.2
<u>Nonstepchildren</u>	Highest	1864	84%	6.7	66%	4.9**
w/ no stepsibs	Lowest	1964	66%	6.2**	24%	3.4**
<u>Nonstepchildren</u>	Highest	244	80%	6.6	54%	4.5**
w/ stepsibs	Lowest	244	60%	5.8**	14%	2.9**

¹Quality coded from 1 to 7, 7 = *excellent*. ²Contact coded 1 to 7, 5+ = at least weekly.

*Differences between fathers and mothers statistically significant at $p < .05$.

** Differences in comparable measures between nonstepchildren with and without stepsiblings statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Table 4. *Regression Analyses of Parent-Adult Child Quality (Highest and Lowest Ratings Across Adult Children): Total Sample and by Parent Gender (Standardized Regression Coefficients).*

Variables	Quality (maximum) ¹			Quality (minimum) ¹		
	All	Fathers	Mothers	All	Fathers	Mothers
Parent:						
Age	.11*	.11*	.11*	.13*	.09*	.14*
Black ²	.00	-.02	.01	.02	-.01	.04
Hispanic ²	.02	.07	-.03	.01	.10*	-.04
Education	.00	-.02	.03	-.04	-.03	-.04
Married ³	.08*	.14*	.04	.14*	.16*	.12*
Health	.10*	.11*	.11*	.08*	.07	.10*
Gender ⁴	-.13*			-.05*		
Family:						
# adult children	.12*	.06	.16*	-.14*	-.19*	-.11*
Any stepchild	-.06*	-.00	-.10*	-.27*	-.20*	-.30*
Any young child	-.03	-.07	-.02	-.06*	-.07	-.07*
<i>n</i>	2056	729	1327	2056	729	1327
Adj. R ²	.049*	.044*	.040*	.151*	.151*	.161*

Note: Statistical significance was tested of gender differences in coefficients for # adult children and Any stepchild: only Any stepchild with minimum quality (-.20 vs. -.30) differed at $p < .05$.

¹Quality coded from 1 to 7, 7 = highest (*excellent*). ²Dummy variables with White the omitted category. ³Married = 1, unmarried = 0. ⁴Father = 1, mother = 0.

* $p < .05$

Table 5. *Regression Analyses of Parent-Adult Child Contact (Highest and Lowest Across Adult Children): Total Sample and by Parent Gender (Standardized Regression Coefficients).*

Variables	Contact (maximum) ¹			Contact (minimum) ¹		
	All	Fathers	Mothers	All	Fathers	Mothers
Parent:						
Age	-.12*	-.12*	-.14*	-.11*	-.14*	-.09*
Black ²	.03	-.03	.06*	.01	-.04	.03
Hispanic ²	.07*	.02	.09*	.05*	-.01	.08*
Education	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.05*	-.07*	-.04
Married ³	.10*	.18*	.05	.07*	.10*	.07*
Health	-.04*	-.04	-.03	.00	-.02	.02
Gender ⁴	-.10*			-.03		
Family:						
# adult children	.21*	.19*	.23*	-.41*	-.41*	-.40*
Any stepchild	-.16*	-.16*	-.16*	-.19*	-.17*	-.20*
Any young child	-.01	-.01	-.02	.01	-.00	.02
<i>n</i>	2132	750	1382	2132	750	1383
Adj. R ²	.096*	.078*	.107*	.239*	.246*	.238*

Note: Statistical significance was tested of gender differences in coefficients for # adult children and Any stepchild: none differed at $p < .05$.

¹Contact coded from 1 to 7, 7 = highest (coresident). ²Dummy variables with White the omitted category. ³Married = 1, unmarried = 0. ⁴Father = 1, mother = 0.

* $p < .05$