Adult Children’s Supportive Behaviors and Older Parents’ Subjective Well-Being—A Developmental Perspective on Intergenerational Relationships

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The research reported in this article is part of the multidisciplinary Berlin Aging Study (BASE). BASE is conducted by the Committee on Aging and Societal Development (AGE) of the Academy of Sciences and Technology in Berlin in collaboration with the Free University Berlin, Berlin, Germany, and the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and Education, Berlin. We are indebted to the members of the TransCoop Network of Intergenerational Relations (Chairs: K. Luescher & K. Pillemer) and to Iain Glen for valuable comments on an earlier draft.

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Adult children’s supportive behaviors were examined with respect to children’s autonomy and social motivation towards parents, and with respect to longitudinal changes of parents’ subjective well-being. In total, 115 adult children from 83 German families completed a questionnaire on supportive behaviors and social motivation. The children also reported what pleased or irritated their parents most. Findings suggest that filial autonomy was associated with resistance to strain. Older parents’ satisfaction improved when children expressed affection or gave emotional support. However, informational support from children was associated with decreased satisfaction among parents. Findings suggest that filial autonomy may facilitate supportive behaviors that correspond to older parents’ socioemotional needs.

In middle adulthood, children often experience a transition in the relationship with their parents, who have by then reached late adulthood and may be frail and need care. In industrialized societies, adult children are typically expected to feel responsible for their parents’ well-being and to engage in adequate support-giving behaviors (e.g., Blieszner & Hamon, 1992; Chen & Adamchak, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 1998; Stein, 1993). However, the determinants of children’s willingness
to give support to their parents are not yet fully understood. For example, what are the reasons for adults to engage in supportive contact with their parents? What predicts the kind of support that adult children give to their parents? In addition, we were interested in whether filial support contributes to older parents’ subjective well-being. For example, too much filial support is known to have detrimental effects on parental well-being (Silverstein, Chen, & Heller, 1996). We ask whether the type of social support matters: Do parents benefit from emotional support as well as from their children’s instrumental or tangible support?

We explore two research questions in our study. First, we examine whether adult children’s social motivation predicts filial support to parents. Adult children’s social motivation, here, refers to the child’s goals when having contact with parents, and to the child’s perceptions of potential pleasures and irritations with older parents. We argue that adult children’s social motivation toward their parents depends on the extent to which adults feel autonomous from their parents (as expressed in their perceptions of pleasures and irritations). Second, we explore also whether children’s support given to their parents influences their parents’ subjective well-being over time. Extending assumptions of socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Lang, 2000; Lang & Carstensen, 2002), we hypothesized that older parents benefit most when supportive transactions with adult children are associated with the maximization of emotionally meaningful contact.

**Determinants of Filial Support to Older Parents**

In most modern, industrialized societies, the bonds between adult children and their older parents are typically reported to be characterized by strong emotional closeness and affection (e.g., Silverstein, Parrott, & Bengtson, 1995), value consensus (e.g., Roberts & Bengtson, 1990), frequent contact, and support exchanges (Ikking, van Tilburg, & Knipscheer, 1999; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Wenger & Jingming, 2000). Adult children often engage in caregiving activities when their parents are frail or are in need of help in coping with activities of daily living (e.g., Chappell, 1990; Cicirelli, 2000). From the perspective of intergenerational solidarity theory (e.g., Bengtson & Roberts, 1991), intergenerational affection and normative solidarity are viewed as strong determinants of the child’s willingness to give support to his or her older parents (e.g., Silverstein et al., 1995). Moreover, developing intergenerational solidarity is expected to be associated with a more positive aging experience both for the middle-aged child as well as for their older parents (e.g., Silverstein et al., 1996). However, what if children generally do not enjoy being with their parents? Does this imply a breakdown of the parent-child bond?

Some authors have suggested that the ample evidence for the prevailing bonds between adult children and their old parents in industrialized Western societies
reflects a historical “... shift from a family system based on consanguine values to one held together by the bonds of conjugality and sentiment ...” (Hess & Waring, 1978, p. 242). According to this “sentimentalist position” (Hoff-Sommers, 1987), the emotional quality of the parent-child relationship determines adult children’s willingness to take responsibility for their parents when help is needed. However, such a sentimentalist perspective is challenged by findings of close intergenerational ties that have persisted even in the face of the most adverse conditions such as abuse, neglect, or conflict within the family (e.g., Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988). Consequently, it may be concluded that normative obligations of adult children towards their parents are not associated with the affective dimension of the parent-child relationship. This implies, for example, that filial responsibility for parents may not necessarily depend on whether the child’s relationship with them is also characterized by strong emotional closeness.

In 1965, Blenkner introduced the concept of filial maturity in order to describe a successful adaptation of middle-aged children who were confronted with their older parents’ losses due to aging. Blenkner (1965) suggested that when perceiving their parents becoming vulnerable and susceptible to health loss, adult children experience a filial crisis that requires children to overcome their possible adolescent perspective towards their parents. This means, for example, that the adult child is expected to detach from possible ideas that hold parents responsible for the child’s current life situation. Rather, the child is expected to start seeing the parents as having their own life, weaknesses, needs, and sorrows. Consequently, the adult child may come to understand that his or her parents are persons with a biography that goes back beyond the child’s own existence and have a life that is independent from the child’s own life. While Blenkner’s concept points to a promising venue for understanding the developmental shifts in middle-aged adult children, use of the term “maturity” may be misleading. Nydegger (1991) suggested referring to such developmental change among middle-aged children as the emergence of an autonomous perspective towards one’s older parents. Filial autonomy, in this respect, implies the establishment of a sense of independence from one’s parents and an understanding of one’s parents’ actual wishes, needs and styles as being unrelated to those of the child. An autonomous daughter may feel pleased when her mother expresses joy of life, and the daughter may expect to please her mother when she contributes to her joy of life. A dependent son, in contrast, may feel pleased when his mother praises him, and he may expect to please her when behaving in accordance with his mother’s assumed expectations, for example, by marrying, by having children, or by having a successful career. We conceive of filial autonomy as an adaptive motivational mechanism in child-parent relationships that is associated with better management of relational conflict. This implies that filial autonomy is associated with a resilient motivation to support the parents even when experiencing much strain in the relationship. In our study, we hypothesized that a sense of filial autonomy interacts with the specific motivation of adult children
for giving support to their older parents. For example, autonomous children are expected to be motivated to support their parents even if the adult children do not expect to enjoy the contact.

This points also to the contention that parent-child relationships are characterized by ambivalence (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998). According to this perspective, parent-child relationships entail contradictions that are “... interpreted as temporarily or even permanently irreconcilable” (Luescher, in press) and thus require individuals to find best solutions that may not always imply simply solidarity but also, for example, emancipation and autonomy. This notion of intergenerational ambivalence appears particularly relevant with respect to the possible differences in social motivation between adult children and their older parents. Individuals typically adapt their goals to their current life tasks and deadlines, depending on their position in the life course (e.g., Heckhausen, 1999; Lang & Carstensen, 2002). Adult children may feel that they have obligations towards their parents, and consequently, they may assume that their parents expect instrumental assistance from them. In contrast, older parents might seek primarily their children’s contact in order to maximize emotional-meaningful experiences.

Filial Autonomy and Older Parents’ Well-Being

Developmental differences in the social motivation of older parents and their middle-aged children may be characterized as a developmental schism (Fingerman, 1996): When parents grow old and experience some of the hardships of later life, children who are in their mid-life often experience challenges in their career or family (e.g., Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998). A possible consequence may be that children are emotionally more distanced from their parents although willing to give tangible support. In contrast, older parents may develop a desire to experience emotional meaningful interactions with their adult children rather than to become their child’s “support-receiving client.” While filial autonomy may indicate a successful resolution of the filial crisis of middle-aged children, it is an open question whether older parents also benefit from their child’s autonomy. For example, when filial autonomy is associated with a reduced emotional involvement with one’s parents, this may not match with the parents’ desire to maximize emotionally meaningful experiences in the relationship with their children. In contrast, when children give adequate amounts of support (i.e., not too much or too little), parental well-being appears to improve over time (Silverstein et al., 1996). This lends weight to the assumption that adult children’s supportive behaviors may affect their parents’ well-being.

For example, socioemotional selectivity theory contends that when individuals perceive their future to be limited in time, they prefer social contacts that are associated with emotional-meaningful experiences (Carstensen et al., 1999). One reason for this is that goals relating to emotional meaning are often short-term
and may therefore be more easily obtained when time appears limited. Because later life is inevitably associated with a shortening of the remaining time in life, it is expected that older adults prefer emotional meaningful contacts to other ones. This assumption of socioemotional selectivity theory has received considerable empirical support (e.g., Lang, 2000; Lang & Carstensen, 2002). So far, however, most of these findings have relied exclusively on self-reports of respondents, and not much is known about the benefits of specific types of supportive transaction within dyads of older parents and their adult children. From this perspective, it seems that older parents should benefit most in the relationship with their adult children when their children display strong emotional involvement. The present study, therefore, explored associations between children’s reports of support given to parent and parents’ subjective well-being.

The Present Research and Major Hypotheses

The findings reported are based on data from 115 adult children from 83 German families with at least one living older parent. The study was conducted as part of the Berlin Aging Study (BASE: Baltes & Mayer, 1999; Schütze & Wagner, 1995). Two research questions are explored: First, the association of filial motivation with adult children’s support-giving activities towards their older parents is examined. Specifically, we hypothesized that filial autonomy would be associated with a greater resistance to strains in the relationship with parents. Second, we explored the extent to which adult children’s reports of support given to parents are associated with changes in older parents’ subjective well-being over time. We expected that older parents would benefit more when their adult children engaged in emotional support-giving activities as compared to more instrumental support giving.

Method

A total of 115 adult children with at least one living older parent participated in the study. Parents were participants of the Berlin Aging Study (BASE: Baltes & Mayer, 1999, for a detailed description). The Berlin Aging Study is based on a multidisciplinary interview with 516 Berliners aged between 70 and 103 years. All participants were identified through probability sampling from the local registration office (in Germany each citizen is typically registered) stratified by age and sex. All participants were followed up after approximately 2 years. Participants who had a living child were asked to report the mailing addresses of their adult children. A total of 237 mailing addresses were obtained from 131 parents. In total, 115 adult children of 83 parents (48.5%) returned by mail a completed questionnaire. On average, adult children were contacted 17.9 months (SD = 6.6, Min/Max = 5.3–30.0) after their parents had participated in the first measurement occasion.
Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Adult Children and Older Parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Adult Children</th>
<th>Old Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N = 115)</td>
<td>(N = 83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Cohort (SD)</td>
<td>54.4 years (10.1)</td>
<td>84.4 (8.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number Living Children</td>
<td>1.9$^b$</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number Daughters or Mothers (%)</td>
<td>74 (64.3)</td>
<td>38 (45.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number Married (%)</td>
<td>82 (71.3)</td>
<td>31 (37.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number Widowed (%)</td>
<td>6 (5.4)</td>
<td>50 (60.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number Live Alone (%)</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>40 (48.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number Institutionalized (%)</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>9 (10.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number with Full-Time Job (%)</td>
<td>51 (44.7)</td>
<td>n. a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number with Part-Time Job (%)</td>
<td>17 (14.8)</td>
<td>n. a.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n. a. = not available; percentages (%) are shown in parentheses.

$^a$Demographic characteristics at first measurement of the 70 older parents, who participated also at the second measurement.

$^b$Mean refers to 85 adult children (73.9%) who reported having at least one child. Thirty adult children were childless.

Participants

Table 1 gives an overview of demographic characteristics of the adult children and older parents who participated in the study.

Adult children. The mean age of adult children was 54.4 years (SD = 10.1) with the youngest adult child being 28 years and the oldest 73 years of age. Most children who participated were married and had children themselves. About two thirds of the adult children were female and one third were male. Of those adult children who currently had a full-time job, two-thirds were male (n = 34; 66.6%). Most daughters were currently without a job (n = 40; 54.8%) or working on a part-time basis (n = 16; 21.9%). Most adult children (n = 82; 71.3%) lived in the same city as their parents (i.e., Berlin), 24 (20.9%) lived elsewhere in Germany and 9 children (7.8%) lived outside of Germany.

Older parents. The mean age of older parents was 84.4 years at the first measurement occasion (SD = 8.8, N = 83). Compared to the total of 347 parents who had participated in the first interview of the Berlin Aging Study, there were no significant differences with respect to level of age, sex, marital status, living situation, education, or socioeconomic status (for a description of the total sample of BASE. A total of 361 BASE participants (84% of the first measurement sample) took also part in a second single-session multidisciplinary intake interview. Of these 361 participants, 70 were parents of at least one child who had participated in the reported mailing study. The average time interval between the two measurements for these 70 older parents was 19.5 months (SD = 5.3, Min/Max = 5/30).
Adult Children’s Support and Parents’ Well-Being

of parents in BASE, see Wagner, Schütze, & Lang, 1999). Thus, older parents seemed to represent the heterogeneity of participants in the Berlin Aging Study that in turn was shown to be fairly representative of the aging population in Berlin (see Baltes & Mayer, 1999). A total of 70 older parents participated in a second interview after an average time interval of 20 months ($M = 19.5; SD = 5.3$). Finally, the four possible gender-specific parent-adult child dyads (i.e., mother-daughter, father-daughter, mother-son, mother-daughter) were equally well represented in the sample ($Chi^2 = 0.6, df = 1, N = 115, n.s.$).

Measures

Adult children completed a mailed questionnaire assessing sociodemographic characteristics, filial motivation, and supportive behaviors towards parents. Older parents completed an interview assessing sociodemographic characteristics, aging satisfaction, and health functioning.

Questionnaire of Adult Children

Filial autonomy status. Children’s answers to each of three open-ended questions assessing the pleasures and irritations experienced by them in the relationship with their parents were coded with respect to the presence or absence of filial autonomy. The three questions were: (1) “What can you do in order to please your mother (father)?” (2) “What can your mother (father) do in order to please you?” and (3) “What can your mother (father) do in order to irritate you?” Two raters coded adult children’s responses to all three open questions. Inter-rater consistency reached a Kappa value of .84. Table 2 gives some sample responses of adult children that were classified as indicative of either filial autonomy or dependency (i.e., absence of filial autonomy). Filial autonomy was defined as an expression of the child’s comprehension of his or her parents’ current life situation, actual wishes, needs or idiosyncrasy. Two groups were compared in the following analyses: Adult children who reported at least one indication of filial autonomy were classified as autonomous ($n = 45; 39%$); all other adult children were categorized as dependent or non-autonomous ($n = 70; 61%$). There were neither significant differences with respect to parents’ age, sex, health functioning, or living arrangements nor with respect to children’s age, sex, family status, and occupational status. Although the coding of the material was constrained by the respondents’ short answers to the open-ended questions ($M = 16.0$ words, $SD = 15.0$), responses (87.3%) provided comprehensive information and were reliably coded. There was no significant difference between the two groups with respect to the total number of words of the respondent’s written answers ($t(113) = −.54, n.s.$).
Table 2. Sample Responses of Four Adult Children Concerning Pleasures and Irritations with Parents Indicating Filial Autonomy and Dependency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indication of Filial Autonomy</th>
<th>Indication of Filial Dependency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ID48: “sweets, cigarettes, flowers, visits (in particular, grandchildren)”</td>
<td>ID5: “find a good job, a husband, ... becoming healthy”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID58: “visit her, listen to her, accept her the way she is, take her on an excursion”</td>
<td>ID40: “be there for him”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID48: “if he is joking or clapping with his box of sweets”</td>
<td>ID5: “if he accepts me the way I am. ... not commanding”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID58: “... staying as brisk”</td>
<td>ID40: “... listens to my problems and supports me”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID48: “if he carries to much”</td>
<td>ID5: “lack of caring fatherhood, Commanding”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID58: “if she seeks approval from others for everything She does, as she is always doing”</td>
<td>ID40: “when ignoring me”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Motivation for having contact with parents. Adult children rated on a 7-point scale to what extent each of four potential reasons was decisive for them when having or seeking contact with their parents (Clausen, 1993): (a) “... because she or he needs my help” (Help-giving motivation), (b) “... because it is a pleasure to be with her or him” (Pleasure motivation), (c) “... because I need her or his help” (Help-seeking motivation), and (d) “... because I feel obligated to do so” (Obligation motivation). In order to identify groups of adult children who differed according to their profiles of motivation for having contact with their parents, we classified children according to their predominating rating: A first group of 34 children (29.6%) reported having contact with their mother or father predominantly when they were seeking help. A second group of 30 adult children (26.1%) had contact predominantly in order to give help to their parents, a third group of 27 adult children (23.5%) reported contact with parents for pleasure reasons, and a fourth group of 24 adult children predominantly felt obligated to have contact (20.9%). Eight adult children had missing values and were excluded from analyses that were based on these variables.

Support given to parents. Adult children were asked whether they had given any of seven instances of social support during the past three months. Three types of social support were distinguished. Emotional support referred to three questions: (1) “Did you cheer up your mother/father, when she/he was sad?” (2) “Did you hug or kiss your mother/father or did you show any other gesture of tenderness towards your mother/father?” and (3) “Did your mother/father hug or kiss you or show any other gesture of tenderness?” Tangible support was assessed with two items: (4) “Did you help your mother/father with household chores?” and (5) “Did you
help your mother/father with shopping or other errands?” *Informational support* was again measured with two items: (6) “Would your mother/father turn to you, if he or she needed advice regarding an important decision in his/her life?” and (7) “Did your mother or father talk with you about personal matters that concerned her or him?” Children also reported whether they have contributed to caregiving or help with activities of daily living (ADL), when parents were in need of caregiving. “Yes” answers of items were summed for each type of support. On average, children reported 1.9 (SD = 1.1) instances of emotional support, 1.3 instances of tangible support (SD = 0.9), and 1.4 instances of informational support (SD = 0.7). A total of five children (4.3%) reported giving no support to their parents.

**Older Parents’ Characteristics**

Older parents completed an intake assessment of the Berlin Aging Study at two measurement occasions. *Satisfaction With Aging* was measured with a German version of a subscale of the Philadelphia Geriatric Center Morale Scale (Lawton, 1975; Smith & Baltes, 1999). Older parents rated on a 5-point scale their agreement with each of five statement items. Sample items are: “I have as much pep as I had last year,” “I am as happy now as when I was younger,” and “As I get older, things are better than I thought they would be.” Internal consistency was Alpha = .72 (N = 83) at the first and Alpha = .61 (N = 70) at the second measurement. The rank-order consistency across the two measurements was r = .66 (p < .01). There was no significant mean-level change of satisfaction across the two measurements (F (1, 69) = 2.03, n.s.). *Subjective health functioning* was assessed with two self-report items: (1) Need of help with activities of daily living (getting up in the morning, self-care, eating) and (2) Participants rated the distance they can walk without difficulty on a 7-point rating scale (with 1 = “cannot walk” to 7 = “more than 3 miles”). Internal consistency of the two items was .75 at the first, and .71 at the second measurement occasion. Stability of health functioning across the two measurement occasions was r = .76 (p < .01, N = 70). The 13 older parents who did not participate at the second measurement occasion did not differ significantly from participants with respect to age cohort, gender, marital status, education, and satisfaction with aging at the first occasion. However, non-participating parents as compared to parents who participated at the second occasion reported lower functional health at the first measurement (F (1, 82) = 9.1, p < .01; $\eta^2 = .101$, $d = .80$).

**Results**

Statistical analyses were conducted in two steps. In a first step, predictors of adult children’s supportive behaviors were examined with respect to filial
autonomy and children’s motivation for having contact with their parents. In a second step, changes of older parents’ aging satisfaction were examined in relation to parents’ health functioning and adult children’s reports of support exchanges with parents. All regression analyses and the interpretation of significant interaction terms were conducted following the suggestions of Aiken and West (1991).

Patterns of Predominating Motivation for Having Contact With Parents and Filial Autonomy

Figure 1 shows that the distribution of groups of predominating motivation for having contact with parents differed between filial autonomous and dependent adult children ($\chi^2 = 12.9, df = 3, p < .01$). Figure 1 shows that among adult children classified as filial autonomous, pleasure motivation was more often reported as the most predominant social motivation ($\eta^2 = .067$ [Goodman-Kruskal Tau], $p < .01$). In contrast, dependent adult children more often reported having

![Figure 1. Salient reasons for being with parents (filial motivation).](image)

* $p < .05$. 
contact with their parents because they were seeking their parents’ help \((Eta^2 = .079\) [Goodman-Kruskal Tau], \(p < .01\)).

In the next step, we explored whether children’s pleasure motivation and filial autonomy status were associated with the amount and type of social support given to parents.

**Determinants of Support-Giving Behaviors**

Table 3 shows the unstandardized coefficients and effect sizes \((Eta^2)\) of three multiple regression analyses of children’s emotional, tangible, and informational support given to their older parents on demographic characteristics of the parent and the child and on filial autonomy and pleasure motivation. This analysis relied on the continuous ratings of pleasure motivation. All main and interaction effects of predictors were entered simultaneously into the equation. Eta-squared values indicate the unique amount of variance accounted for when the respective effect was entered last into the regression equation. Chronological age of children and age of parents were strongly correlated \((r = .76, p < .01)\). All observed effects remained unchanged when (parent’s and/or children’s) chronological age was excluded from the analyses. There was also no indication of problems caused by possible multicollinearity of predictors (e.g., all reported effect remained unchanged when effects of all other predictors were excluded from the equation).

As shown in Table 3, adult children gave more of each of the three support types when children perceived their older parents as being in need of care.

More emotional support was given to parents when adult children expressed a stronger pleasure motivation toward their parents \((Eta^2 = .127, p < .01)\). Irrespective of parents’ sex, adult daughters gave more emotional support than sons \((Eta^2 = .111, p < .01)\). Note that the daughters who provided emotional, tangible and informational support to their parents were mostly not professionally occupied and mostly lived near their parents.

Filial autonomous children, on average, gave more tangible support than dependent children \((Eta^2 = .040, p < .05)\). Older adult children as compared to younger adult children gave less tangible support to their parents \((Eta^2 = .054, p < .05)\). When parents lived in an institution, children reported giving less tangible support to their parents \((Eta^2 = .044, p < .05)\). In a separate analysis with a sub-sample, we tested the effects of filial autonomy on children’s contribution to caregiving among those children who perceived their parents as being in need of care \((N = 62)\). As we had expected, a significantly larger proportion of autonomous adult children (84%) than dependent children (43.2%) were currently engaged in caregiving activities for their parents, who were in need of care \((Chi^2 = 8.7, df = 1, N = 62, p < .01, Eta^2 [Goodman & Kruskal Tau] = .166)\). Note that we did not observe significant effects for any of the other three types of
Table 3. Results of Three Multiple Regression Analyses of Children’s Reports of Given Support (Emotional, Tangible, Informational) to Parents on Age, Sex, Parents’ Need of Care, Children’s Autonomy, and Pleasure Motivation (N = 115)\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Emotional Support/Tenderness</th>
<th>Tangible Support</th>
<th>Informational Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Age Cohort (Years)</td>
<td>B (SE)</td>
<td>Eta(^2)</td>
<td>B (SE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Sex (2 = Mother, 1 = Father)</td>
<td>0.12 (.20)</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>0.13 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s Age Cohort (Years)</td>
<td>−0.01 (.01)</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>−0.03 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s Sex (2 = Daughter, 1 = Son)</td>
<td>0.75 (.21)</td>
<td>.111**</td>
<td>0.11 (.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent in Institution (1 = Yes, 0 = No)</td>
<td>−0.32 (.33)</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>−0.61 (.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Needs Care (Child’s Report)</td>
<td><strong>0.56 (.23)</strong></td>
<td>.052*</td>
<td><strong>0.74 (.20)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filial Autonomy (1 = Yes, 0 = No)</td>
<td>−0.05 (.19)</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td><strong>0.34 (.16)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Pleasure Motivation(^b)</td>
<td><strong>0.04 (.01)</strong></td>
<td>.127**</td>
<td><strong>0.34 (.16)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filial Autonomy × Pleasure(^b)</td>
<td>−0.00 (.02)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>−0.03 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-Squared</td>
<td>.281</td>
<td>.238</td>
<td>.173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-Squared</td>
<td>.219</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .05; **p < .01 (Coefficients printed in bold are significant; +p = .06). Eta\(^2\) indicates the unique amount of variance accounted for when the respective effect was entered last into the regression equation.

\(^a\)Unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\(^b\)Continuous ratings were used: Higher scores indicate stronger pleasure motivation.
motivation for having contact with parents (i.e., giving help, seeking help, feeling obligated) on the amount of emotional, tangible or informational support given to parents.

In the right column of Table 3 it is shown that informational support was significantly related to parents’ need of help ($\eta^2 = .043, p < .05$), and to children’s sex ($\eta^2 = .056, p < .05$). Daughters gave more informational support to their parents. Moreover there was a significant interaction effect of filial autonomy status and children’s pleasure motivation on given informational support, which is shown in Figure 2 ($\eta^2 = .043, p < .05$). Figure 2 illustrates that dependent adult children gave more informational support to their parents when they also expressed a motivation of seeking pleasure with parents. This finding suggests that when dependent children did not expect to have pleasure with their parents, they gave less support. Figure 2 illustrates that this association was nearly inversed among autonomous adult children. When expecting to have pleasure with parents, autonomous children tended to give less informational support. A comparable but not significant interaction effect was observed with respect to given tangible support. This finding implies that adult children may support their older parents for various goals or reasons that may also influence the effectiveness of such social support.
Determinants of Older Parents’ Aging Satisfaction

We explored in a second analysis the effects of children’s given support on changes of parents’ aging satisfaction after two years. Although there were no significant mean-level changes of aging satisfaction on the group level \( F(1, 69) = 2.03; n.s. \), we expected that children’s supportive behaviors would account for individual differences in change scores of the parent’s aging satisfaction. Our second analysis refers to the 83 parents of the adult children (note, though, that only 70 parents participated also in the second measurement). Characteristics of adult children were aggregated individually for each older parent. In cases in which reports of more than one child of one parent was available (i.e., \( N = 26 \)), means of types of given support across siblings were computed. Results remained unchanged, however, when including only the adult child who gave the most support to the older parent.

Table 4 shows the unstandardized regression coefficients and effect sizes (\( \eta^2 \)) of two multiple regression models of parents’ changed scores of aging satisfaction on children’s reports of given emotional, tangible, and informational support.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Model Without Covariates</th>
<th>Model With Covariates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( B ) (SE) ( \eta^2 )</td>
<td>( B ) (SE) ( \eta^2 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Characteristics of Older Parent</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Cohort (Years)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1 = Female, 0 = Male)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married (1 = Yes, 0 = No)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalized (1 = Yes, 0 = No)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Functioning (1st Measurement)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Functioning (Change)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child’s Report of Support Given To Parent</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support/Tenderness ( c )</td>
<td>2.32 (.88)</td>
<td>.095 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangible Support ( c )</td>
<td>0.17 (.96)</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational Support ( c )</td>
<td>–3.31 (1.5)</td>
<td>.068 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-Squared</td>
<td>.119</td>
<td>.393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-Squared</td>
<td>.079</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \( *p < .05; **p < .01 \).

\( a \)Residual change scores of aging satisfaction are used as dependent variable after partialing for the stability effect \( r = .66 \).

\( b \)Unstandardized regression coefficients are shown with standard errors in parentheses.

\( c \)When reports of more than one child of one parent were available, means of given-support across siblings were used. Results were unchanged when including only the adult child who gave the most support.
support before and after controlling for covariates. In the first model, all three predictors were included into the regression equation. In the second model, predictors and covariates were included simultaneously. Results show that when children reported giving emotional support (or tenderness), parents’ aging satisfaction improved over time ($\eta^2 = .095, p < .01$). In contrast, when children reported giving more informational support, aging satisfaction of older parents decreased after two years ($\eta^2 = .068, p < .05$). Giving tangible help to parents did not have a significant effect on aging satisfaction. Note that effects persisted above and beyond effects of institutionalization and changes of parents’ subjective health functioning. Institutionalized parents reported a decrease in aging satisfaction that accounted for 13.9% of the variance. Moreover, a decrease in subjective health functioning was associated with a substantive decrease in aging satisfaction ($\eta^2 = .148, p < .01$).

**Discussion**

Findings suggest that the majority of adult children actively support their parents when help is needed. Children reported giving tangible and informational support to their parents irrespective of whether this was associated with expected pleasurable experience. In contrast, children were more likely to give emotional support when they expected also to have pleasurable interactions with their parents. However, filial support of older parents had a limited influence on parents’ well-being. Parents’ well-being improved over time when children reported giving emotional support. However, parents’ well-being decreased when children gave informational support. The findings are consistent with assumptions of socio-emotional selectivity theory that posits that older adults preferably seek contact with their family members for reasons of maximizing emotional experiences (e.g., Carstensen et al., 1999; Lang & Carstensen, 2002).

**What Accounts for the Type and Amount of Filial Support?**

Adult children gave more tangible support to their parents when expressing filial autonomy in their reports about pleasures and irritations with parents. Moreover, when parents were reported to need care or help with activities of daily living, most autonomous children contributed to caregiving activities but only a minority of dependent adult children. These findings lend support to our assumption that filial autonomy may be associated with a more resilient motivation to support one’s parents. This is also underscored by the finding that dependent children (in contrast to autonomous children) gave less informational support when not seeking (expecting) to have pleasure with parents. Nevertheless, filial autonomy was associated with a pattern that was characterized by a predominating pleasure motivation in the relationship with one’s parents. Thus, the findings underscore that
filial autonomy is associated with a greater preparedness of children to respond to their parents’ actual support needs.

The concept of filial autonomy, as we have used it, describes an adaptive transition in the child-parent relationship among adult children. The age of adult children who participated in this study ranged from early adulthood to late adulthood. The finding that there are no age differences between groups of filial autonomous and dependent children may help to clarify that filial autonomy is expected to reflect a motivational response to older parents’ life situation and support needs rather than to chronological age. However, the interpretation of our findings is limited by the fact that our approach to filial autonomy relied exclusively on the adult children’s reports of what pleases and irritates in the relationship with their parents, and thus, has only an exploratory character in this study. For example, we did not verify the children’s perceptions of what pleases their parents, and we had been reluctant to ask children how they irritated their parents. Furthermore, the level of mutuality of such perceptions may be relevant for the development of filial autonomy. We do not know to what extent filial autonomy is also reflective of such “parental autonomy.” For example, knowing about what pleases and irritates in transactions with parents requires that parents and children are willing to communicate their specific needs, wishes, and idiosyncrasies. Assessing more explicitly the emotion-regulatory aspects in interactions between older parents and their adult children in future research may be a promising venue to understand the adaptive processes that underlie the filial transition in mid-life (e.g., Fingerman, 1996, 2000).

In our research, we have chosen a dyadic approach to the child-parent relationship that does not take the broader family and network context of the respective child-parent dyads into account (cf. Antonucci & Akiyama, 1997). Note also that our findings cannot answer the question whether the social motivation of adult children is a direct response to parental behaviors or needs. For example, we did not measure whether children changed their support behaviors in response to their parents’ declining health functioning. Moreover, we did not assess the responses of older parents to filial supports. It might be argued that filial autonomy is more difficult when older parents render impossible any attempt of their children to move in that direction (e.g., Nydegger, 1991). Consequently, future research needs to more explicitly address older parents’ motivation towards their children as well as vice versa.

The cultural context of the relationship between adults and their older parents in Germany may also be relevant when interpreting our findings. For example, adult children’s supportive behaviors may be influenced by the relatively new care insurance system in Germany that secures the financial availability of formal assistance when older people are in need of daily care. One implication is that caregiving tasks are typically either taken over by professional caregivers or by adult children while task-sharing is seldom. Our findings suggest that some adult children may wrongly believe that their older parents prefer to receive caregiving exclusively
from their child rather than from a formal helper. Older parents may benefit most if adult children focus on providing meaningful social encounters while leaving the more instrumental tasks of caregiving routines to professional caregivers. Further research in this direction appears a promising venue, particularly with respect to potential cross-cultural comparisons.

The mailing procedure used in our study may have caused some bias towards compliance among those children who actually maintained good contact with their parents. Thus, the reported findings might be specific to child-parent dyads where both partners experience support. However, findings do also shed some light on the more ambivalent or even conflict-prone aspects of such relationships between children and older parents.

Filial Support and Older Parents’ Subjective Well-Being

Older parents were more satisfied when their children reported giving emotional support. This finding lends support to the contention of the socioemotional selectivity theory that older people preferably seek contact with their adult children in order to maximize emotional-meaningful experiences (e.g., Carstensen et al., 1999). Note that while empirical support for the theory has so far typically relied on self-reports from older adults (e.g., Lang, 2000; Lang & Carstensen, 2002), the reported effects of filial support and tenderness on parents’ well-being pertained to reports of adult children’s supportive behavior rather than to parents’ self-reports.

The finding that children’s reports of given informational support was associated with decreases in parents’ well-being is also consistent with socioemotional selectivity. It should be noted, however, that the parents’ perspective on the support exchanges with children were not available, which implies that the veridicality of children’s reports could not be confirmed (e.g., Antonucci & Israel, 1986). One implication may be that when children give advice to their parents, this may easily be unasked-for advice. Unsolicited support has been shown to be detrimental to life satisfaction (e.g., Smith & Goodnow, 1999). Another possible explanation is that the negative effects of informational support reflected parents’ enhanced needs for support that may have caused parents to be less satisfied (when receiving “just” advice rather than practical help). Although this is not inconsistent with the theory, it implies that parents may not benefit much from their children’s advice or decisional support.

Finally, our finding that children’s tangible support behavior was not associated with parents’ satisfaction does not imply that tangible support is irrelevant. In most instances, receiving tangible support is welcome, and typically, tangible support is given only when there is also some kind of obvious incommoding need of help. The first may compensate for the second, and the result may be zero. Our findings suggest, though, that giving such tangible support may be most beneficial
for older parents when it is associated with expressions of affection and emotional support.

Another caveat that needs to be considered when interpreting our findings is that adult children’s supportive behaviors towards their parents were assessed only once and prior to the second measurement of parents’ aging satisfaction. As a consequence no conclusions can be drawn about effects of possible changes of children’s supportive behaviors over time on parents’ well-being. This is particularly relevant with respect to the possible long-term implications of our findings when children neglect their parents’ specific needs of help. Adult children may withdraw from and neglect their parents because they feel overwhelmed by their parents’ needs and desires, while in fact parents benefit most from their child’s presence and emotional closeness. Thus, our findings also point to the idea of intergenerational ambivalence (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Luescher, in press) suggesting that emancipation or mutual autonomy in the parent-child relationships may be one adaptive solution to seemingly irresolvable contradictions in social motivation.

In sum, our findings suggest that adult children are generally more motivated to support their parents when they expect to have pleasure when being with them. Filial autonomy among adult children appears to be associated with greater resilience against unpleasant experiences. Consequently, filial autonomy was found to be associated with a greater predominance of pleasure motivation towards parents. Older parents’ satisfaction improved when their children reported giving emotional support. Filial autonomy may in some cases facilitate supportive behaviors that correspond to parents’ socioemotional needs. As adult children seek to establish filial autonomy, and thus seek to understand their parents’ specific idiosyncratic desires and vulnerabilities, older parents might benefit from the resulting social exchanges if they provide meaningful and affectionate experiences.

References


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