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Intergenerational Conflict and the Prevention of Abuse Against Older Persons

Final Report to Health Canada

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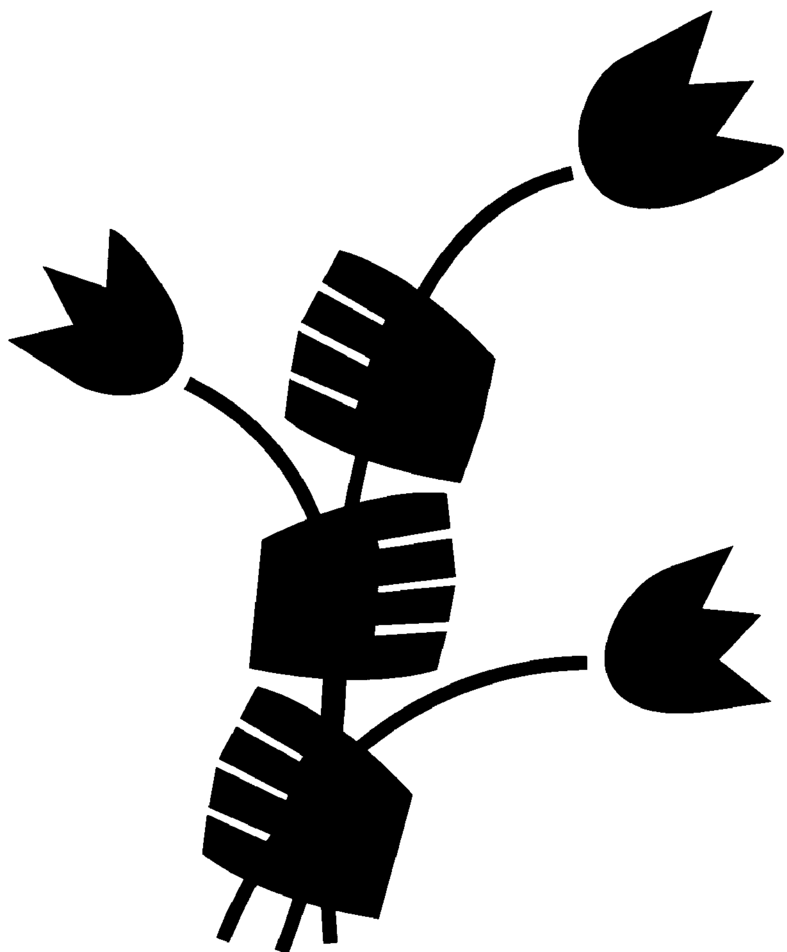

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Introduction

In this report the literature on elder abuse has been examined to ask two pointed questions. Is it likely that the social construction of parent-child relationships over the family life cycle is associated with child-to-parent elder abuse later on? If so, are there preventive strategies that families and practitioners can consider? The answer to both questions is yes. These questions stem from the literature that looks at what happens when adult children continue to need support beyond the point where both generations might have expected it (Norris & Tindale, 1994). This literature has been extended in the current study. Areas of potential conflict were explored within typical families, and consideration was given to how such conflicts might be resolved. The assumption, based on available research (Norris & Tindale, 1994), was that most families manage their differences non-abusively. The link between family relationship history and present or future developments in those relationships has not been seriously considered in the literature on adult parent-child relations (Whitbeck, Hoyt & Huck, 1994). This lapse is particularly important in the area of elder abuse.

The data analysed here extend the analysis to those families who find intergenerational support difficult. When the relationship circumstances of those families are explored, it can be argued that perceived inequities in the exchange of support are likely to be important contributors when there is family violence. Within an intergenerational context, this violence is likely to manifest itself in elder abuse.

Society expects that parents will nurture their young children and that these children will reciprocate with affection. Society also expects that children will become increasingly autonomous, and will not require the active nurturance of their parents beyond late adolescence. Love is expected to remain; significant contributions of tangible assistance are not. Nevertheless, as several authors have noted recently (e.g., Norris & Tindale, 1994), children often become only semi-autonomous, relying upon their parents for help well into their young adulthood and beyond. Various factors have contributed to this situation: the international economic recession that has lasted several years and been accompanied by significant job losses; an increase in the number of students extending their education beyond high school; high divorce rates; and more single mothers.

Asking and giving among adult generations requires negotiation between parents and children, and between spouses. This is particularly important when families have not anticipated that such a situation would come about, and are unsure as to how it can be managed. Even with open communication, however, strain can still result and sometimes that strain produces conflict. Nevertheless, within normally functioning families, characterized by strong attachment relations, strain and conflict are resolved in the course of the family learning mutual, and thereby sustainable, interaction patterns (Patterson, 1982; 1986).

The analyses that follow:

- explore the status of current theorizing on elder abuse;
- suggest that this literature neglects the importance of the ways in which parent-child relationships are constructed;
- review the scant literature available that places elder abuse in a cross-cultural context;

- discuss data which do suggest links between the evolution of the parent-child relationship and the possibility of subsequent abusive relations;

- look further at these data to lend credence to the notion that cultural variations in the meanings families give to their expectations regarding parent-child relations can shed light on why these relationships sometimes become abusive; and

- present suggestions for professional practitioners, families and those engaged in advocacy which are a beginning in the process of prevention.

A Familial Context for Literature on Elder Abuse

According to a recent national survey, four percent of the elderly are maltreated in Canada (Podnieks, Pillemer, Nicholson, Shillington & Frizzell, 1989). Some of these abused elderly are mistreated by a son or daughter. What leads an adult child to abuse his or her parent(s)? While a number of theories/factors have been used to explain elder abuse, the ones that focus on family relationships, in particular those that consider the parent-child relationship history, will be presented here.

Relationship crises

The evidence to support the intergenerational transmission of family violence is limited, especially with respect to adult children retaliating against their now elderly parents. Griffin and Williams (1992), however, do point out that Steimnetz (1978) found that only one child out of 400 raised in a non-abusive home was abusive to his or her parent after reaching adulthood, while one of every two adults who were abused as children abused their elderly parents when they became adults.

What is the history of such abusive parent-child relationships? The term "filial crisis" is designed to convey the sense that parent-child conflicts that began in adolescence often continue into later life. This kind of relationship history has not received much research attention that carries the phenomenon forward into old age. Nevertheless, Godkin, Wolf and Pillemer (1989) suggest that complex and long-term family problems and unresolved conflicts are likely tied up with elder abuse. These researchers found that families in

which abuse occurs are more likely to have emotional problems that contribute to interpersonal difficulties. They state that "given the emotional and interpersonal problems of both parties, it is perhaps likely that a shared living arrangement becomes a 'pressure-cooker' situation that leads to abuse" (p.223).

Social exchange/web of dependencies

Griffin and Williams (1992) suggest that the most commonly cited risk factor for elder maltreatment is stress on caregivers created by dependent elderly people. Godkin and colleagues (1989), however, argue that it is in fact the dependencies on part of the abuser that may lead to abuse. Abusers have been found to be financially and emotionally dependent on their victims (Godkin and colleagues 1989; Pillemer, 1985). And while Ward & Spitze (1992) assert that, generally, co-residence does not have a negative effect on parent-adult child relations, housing dependence was found by Pillemer (1985) to be a factor that contributed to abuse. It is important to emphasize at this point that it is not simply co-residency that leads to abuse but, rather, the problem may lie in the fact that, people with a poor relationship history are living under the same roof.

Godkin and colleagues (1989) note that perceived power is intrinsic to the concept of exchange and offer that attempts by the dependent caretaker to restore the power balance may result in this adult child using violence. Pillemer (1991) argues that while the available evidence cannot accurately discern who is dependent on whom, it does appear that a serious imbalance of power in either direction may lead to a risk of abuse. If we are to know why a power imbalance has arisen in a parent-child relationship, we must have a grasp of the meanings people give to their family relationships.

Symbolic interactionism and the construction of relationships

Symbolic interactionism can be applied to the issue of violence to shed light on the different meanings of violence that people hold and the consequences these meanings have in various situations (McDonald, Hornick, Robertson & Wallace, 1991 citing Gelles, 1979). These meanings emerge as family members construct their relationships with each other (Cheal, 1991). The Symbolic Interactionist framework encompasses relationship development and the meanings that those who are involved construct. In this framework, the meaning of the relationship will determine the importance attributed to any particular behaviour. For example, it is more important to know whether parents perceive their relationship with their children to be equitable (and vice versa), than it is to know that the two generations are co-residing.

While the meaning of family relationships has been briefly conceptualized in the elder abuse literature, not very much work has been done that links the construction of those relationships to the possibility of later life conflict and abuse.

Attachment in the parent-child relationship

The parent-child relationship is normally characterized by feelings of attachment that mediate the multitudinous exchanges that occur between the generations on an ongoing basis (Bowlby, 1969). A secure attachment allows the child to create a mental representation or "working model" of a good relationship. This model guides choices about how to manage interactions with others, both within families, and in the broader social world (Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985). It should be remembered that the majority of individuals of any age has had secure attachment experiences as children, and manage their current relationships in a manner that generally can be considered to be functionally sound.

One very significant outcome of strong bonds of attachment within the family is the capacity to negotiate and exchange support when it is required. Within such families, there is open communication about differences and a sense that, in the long run, help given and received are balanced. This is the essence of the conceptualization of global reciprocity in well-functioning intergenerational families.

Attachment theory has not been considered in the literature on elder abuse, although it has been mentioned in connection with child abuse. Children raised by abusive parents are likely to show evidence of insecure relationships as adults (Goldberg, 1991). As well, they are more likely than securely attached adults to have problems in parenting their own children (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). This suggests that attachment problems may predispose families to a pattern of abuse which is transmitted down through the generations.

These findings suggest that an attachment perspective may be a useful way of understanding the history of the parent-child relationship. For example, it may be that some caregivers become abusive whereas others do not because there is a weak bond of attachment between parent and child. Cicirelli's (1983; 1991) research on caregiving children provides support for this perspective. He has found that feelings of secure attachment on the part of children are likely to lead to protective (i.e., caregiving) behaviours if parents become dependent (Cicirelli, 1983). Presumably, these protective behaviours would guard against the potential for abuse even when other factors might predict it.

A critical feature of intergenerational family relationships, and a dimension generally ignored in the literature on elder abuse, relates to the relationship children have with their siblings and the conditions under which perceptions of inequity between brothers and sisters can be contributing factors to abusive behaviour directed at parents.

The sibling relationship

Siblings bonds have been shown to be important influences on children's development. As well, they may provide the most long-lasting attachment experiences that anyone may have: sibs share ties and experiences from birth or early childhood through until old age and death (Norris & Tindale, 1994). Nevertheless, sibling issues have not received any attention within the literature on elder abuse. Recent work on the "non-shared environment" of siblings, for example, may be instructive (Dunn & Plomin, 1991). This work notes that, despite what parents may say, they treat each of their children differently. This suggests that children who feel they have never been favoured by their parents may be more likely to mistreat them in old age than would their favoured sibs. When there are step-, half- or adoptive siblings within the same family, all attempting to manage the care of parents, the situation may be complicated further.
In talking about the various interrelationships within parent-child relations, much of the literature assumes majority cultural settings. The fact that there has not been much research into ethnic variations in the occurrence of elder abuse does not diminish the fact that the evidence to date suggests cultural meanings in relationships are important.

Ethnic variations

There is a lack of research on ethnic differences in patterns of elder neglect and abuse in Canada. McDonald and co-workers (1991) mention ethnicity only twice: once to assert that elder abuse occurs across ethnic, social and socioeconomic strata, and for a second time when they cite Phillips and Rempusheski (1985) surrounding reasons why practitioners do not label a situation as abusive; cultural stereotypes influence their definitions. While some large survey studies on ethnicity and elder abuse are under way in both Canada (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 1993), and the United States (Griffen & Williams, 1992), authors Ogg and Munn-Giddings (1993) lament that "ethnicity is rarely mentioned in any [elder abuse] studies, indicating an almost total lack of knowledge".

It is even more rare when ethnicity is a specific focus of a study on abusive adult children. One example of such research (Anetzberger, 1987) considered the history of family violence among Americans sharing an Appalachian background. Appalachian communities typically are not well off economically, their people are often not well educated, and they live in isolated rural and mountainous settings in and near the state of Tennessee. Two important dimensions of this research are particularly relevant to this study. Parental abuse of children greatly increased the likelihood that the children, in turn, would later abuse their parents. Such relationship histories were common among study participants and this contributed to a culturally defined acceptance of elder abuse as expected, even if not desirable. And secondly, the likelihood that children would abuse parents was increased when there was long-term adult co-residency between parents and children.

Although these research findings are important, there are far too few studies involving both relationship histories and cultural variations. Indeed, comparative literature on family relationships is impeded as a significant body of research does not exist. As well, there is a need for longitudinal studies of relationship histories, and sensitivity in interpreting culturally diverse data (Cicirelli, 1994). Clearly, the areas of relationship patterns over time and ethnic variability in the meaning given to those relationships deserve much more attention.

Redirecting research efforts

A major reason for the lack of extensive research on elder abuse is the reluctance of victims to report their mistreatment. As Wahl and Purdy (1991) have noted, there are five possible reasons for older persons' hesitancy in disclosing abuse: they fear retaliation from the abuser, they are dependent upon the abuser for care; they fear institutionalization; they are ashamed to report that a family member is abusing them; and they believe that police and social agencies cannot help them. Such strong feelings make it unlikely that older victims will be willing to discuss abuse with researchers, even when confidentiality or anonymity are assured.

A possible solution to this problem is to move the focus of research into elder abuse to an earlier period in the family life cycle. Most studies of elder abuse have examined currently abusive situations and identified correlates (e.g., frailty of the elder, dependency of the abuser). An alternative strategy is to consider predictors and potential risk factors as they emerge in developing families. This would link the research to the large, and overlapping, bodies of literature on child

abuse and spousal assault which gerontological researchers usually overlook. Perhaps more importantly, a life-span view of elder abuse would encourage researchers to examine areas of conflict which, in well-functioning families, are managed successfully and do not lead to abuse. Determining problematic issues, and "home-grown" strategies for dealing with them could be quite valuable in the identification of older families at risk for abuse as well as suggesting methods of remediation where abuse already occurs. The research reported here reflects a first attempt at this redirection of efforts.

Conflict and the Potential for Abuse

Statistics indicate that most families are not abusive. Indeed, intergenerational families typically provide a great deal of support for their members (Norris & Tindale, 1994; Seniors Secretariat, 1993). This is not to say, however, that support never requires negotiation, or never has strings attached. There are areas of strain and conflict within even the most supportive of families. One goal of the research reported here was to examine these potentially problematic areas and determine within a group of well-functioning families with young adult children:

(1) why serious conflict does not normally occur;
(2) the relationship circumstances where conflict does emerge; and
(3) the conditions under which conflict could escalate rather than lead to resolution.

To explore possible differences among ethnic groups on any of these issues, this study included a sample of 10 Italian-Canadian and 10 Anglo-Canadian families (Tindale, Norris, Kuiack & Humphrey, 1993). These families met the following inclusion criteria: parents in an intact relationship with at least one child over the age of 18 and under the age of 40. Interviews with both generations of the 20 families yielded 70 completed responses. These interviews were carried out in the respondents' homes and probed the type, extent and impact of assistance exchanged by adult children and their parents. The support discussed could be either tangible (e.g., money) or intangible (e.g., advice).

All 20 families reported the extension of tangible aid in each direction. As it was extended from parents to children, tangible aid included shelter,

school tuition, car repair and financial loans. Intangible support primarily involved advice and moral support. Children, in turn, reported giving their parents tangible help in the form of labour, such as house or pet sitting and yard work. Unique to the Italian sample was assistance given in the translation of English documents. Interestingly, there was only one notable gender difference for help extended by either generation: unlike Anglo fathers, mothers and daughters, the sons in this group did not report providing any intangible support. This suggests one source of strain within Anglo families.

In the great majority of families, conflict was not reported. Only 2 of 9 young adult daughters reported that assistance had had a negative impact on the relationship. Similarly, when asked, only 4 of 28 young adult children reported that their giving help to parents resulted in conflict. The sources of conflict can be characterized as relating to:

- co-residency,
- gender and intangible support,
- perceived parent-child inequities, and
- perceived sibling inequities.

Co-residency

One marker of the transition to adulthood in Western society is achieving residential independence. Moving away from home evokes changes in family dynamics. Social roles and relationships of parents and their adult offspring are challenged and altered. Studies of the impact of gaining autonomy from parents, or alternatively from children, have been conducted. Researchers have good understanding of the impact of the "empty nest" on parents as well as the impact of children's autonomy on parent-adult child interaction, relationship quality and individual well-being. Returning home, however, although it also creates changing family dynamics, has not been well researched.

The phenomenon of returning home after attempting residential autonomy is becoming more common (see Norris & Tindale, 1994, for a more detailed discussion). The current social and economic climate with increased marital dissolution, poor job prospects and increased enrolment in higher education has led many offspring to choose to return home in order to recover from an ill-fated first attempt. When adult offspring move back into the parental home after what seemed to be a successful launching, this can place a strain on the parent-child relationship. Research has indicated that, although co-residence of parents and adult children is not rare, it is not the preferred living situation for any family member (Ward & Spitze, 1992). Nevertheless, there is not enough research into the impact of co-residence on family relationships to conclude that this living arrangement can in itself lead to abuse, or even to increased conflict.

One interesting finding in the current analysis of 20 families was that the impact of co-residence is affected by both the gender and the generation of family members. The majority of both Anglo and Italian fathers did not report feeling that having a previously launched child return home was particularly stressful. In addition, all the Italian mothers who experienced the return of an adult child reported that it was a positive experience. Anglo mothers, however, did feel that having "boomerang" children was difficult. These women noted that it was stressful to have to change parenting style or expectations to accommodate an adult child. The ethnic and family role variation in the experience of co-residence indicates that it is the nature of, or the expectations for, the family relationship which is the key to understanding how co-residence can cause strain within the family.

Boomerang children are also semi-autonomous adults. Returning home means that parents, the child and any other significant others (i.e., peers of the child and the parents) all have to reassess the level of autonomy that should be accorded this child. Differences of opinion on this point between parent and child can be a source of stress. Nevertheless, these data underscore the point that even those family members who find the situation particularly stressful (i.e., Anglo mothers) generally accommodate themselves to the new arrangement.

The source of the stress also has a bearing on how difficult it is to manage. Is it the shared home and reduced privacy which cause unease or is it the character of the parent-child relationship? The results of this study suggest the latter may be most important. As one Anglo parent commented:

> "For our youngest one to come back it was often more of a burden. He tended to be rather dependent, and he didn't always come back because we asked him to."

Another Anglo parent held a similar view:

> "The youngest child, it was a bit more difficult having him home. Having an adult living at home who behaves like a child still, that complicates things."

There are insufficient data to argue that birth order is a critical issue, although this may indeed be the case. The central point here is that parents can manage co-residency more easily with some of their children than they can with others.

Although other research indicates that living away from one's parents is the preferred arrangement for adult offspring, this study indicated that there are ethnic variations in the circumstances surrounding the decision to leave home in the first place. Two Italian parents, for example, indicated the difficulty they had in coming to terms with their children leaving home:

> "She's my first born and I think the first person to make the adjustment to leave home. That was kind of an emotional trauma, I think, for the entire family. If I had forbidden her to do it, she would not have done it. In your mind you can balance it, but your heart sometimes doesn't always see it the same way."

> "None have moved back, because if they move out once they no come back no more. That's that, before they move out they got to think about it, that's that."

One Italian daughter explained why she chose to remain living at home:

> "If I moved out, my mom would cry."

Likewise, there is ethnic variation in response to the decision to return home. One Italian father saw his child's decision to move home as a sign that they had provided a good home:

> "At least we know that we are in touch or else they won't come back. A person won't come back to me or to anybody unless there is some love there."

The interesting contrast in the experience of co-residence for the Anglo and Italian parents provides insight into the reasons why co-residence in itself cannot be identified as leading to abuse. For the Anglo sample, mothers indicated that having an adult child move home was a source of stress. The Italian parents noted, however, that an adult child considering moving out can cause family stress while his or her return can confirm the parents' view that they have a loving home. The Italian children may respond to their parents' views by feeling that they have little choice but to remain at home. For the offspring as a group (i.e., both Anglos and Italians), stressors can result from the decision to leave home, from a sense that one cannot leave home, or from a belief that one cannot return home. Thus, the nature of the parent-adult child relationship and the quality of family communication provide insights into how stressors related to co-residence can be managed successfully.

Consider co-residency from the perspective of the children. Of the Anglo offspring in this study who moved back into the parental home, all reported the experience as having a negative impact on the relationship with the parents. Areas of conflict included losing one's adult status and privacy, and experiencing guilt for intruding on the parents. As did their parents, the offspring stated that these situations had been resolved in such a way that there were no long-term consequences for their relationships. One Anglo child made the point that he had moved back home, and they needed to make it work:

> "I think we realized it was sink or swim. I mean, we either found some compromise or ruin everything for good."

For the Italian offspring, only 2 of the 13 who moved out and then returned home reported that the experience was negative. For one daughter, returning to a busy household after having been on her own required some adjustment:

> "When I came back home I found that there are so many voices and the phone's ringing off the hook and I was just used to being by myself. Actually, I am having a hard time."

Another Italian daughter found renegotiating her autonomy while in her parents' home the source of difficulty:

> "When I came back home, I was never really home very often in the evening. So I think (my father) found that really difficult, because he

> didn't understand why I wasn't in."

One Italian daughter reported that her relationship with her parents did not change with her returning home, but this in itself created a problem. Speaking for herself and other adult offspring in the home, she indicated that the lack of change in the parents' expectations was a source of stress:

> "They still complain about us coming in after a certain time and we don't think they should. You know, they really don't have the right because we're all adults now, but they still do."

A unique problem associated with moving back home was raised by another Italian daughter. Her role prior to moving out was to translate English documents for her parents. Despite demonstrating their ability to manage without her assistance, upon her return home the parents expected her to resume this role. Providing this assistance to her parents led the daughter to question her decision to come back:

> "Sometimes I feel that my father, realizing that I am living here, it's really easy now for him to be less independent. I'm sometimes questioning 'Are you asking me to do this because you really don't understand? Or is it because I can get it done in half the time?' In that respect I wonder if I'm doing him a favour, am I doing the right thing?"

In high-functioning families, stressors such as co-residence have negative, although not permanent, implications for the relationship. These data suggest, however, that families with poor communication skills or dysfunctional parent-child relations may not be able to resolve the conflict caused by co-residence. In such cases, there is an increased likelihood that the conflict could fester, and escalate: elder abuse then could be one possible outcome.

Gender and the giving of emotional support

This study revealed an interesting relationship between gender and intangible support. As noted above, no Anglo son reported providing intangible support to the parents. This has been well supported in the literature (although no attention has been given to the effects of ethnicity): sons provide tangible support to their parents while distancing themselves emotionally. One daughter in our study noted:

> "I am there if they need to talk to me. (My brother) is there as well, but he helps out in other ways, like helping my father with building things."

It has been speculated that this distancing is a buffer to stress and burnout for sons when parents become more dependent on their offspring for assistance in their later years. Daughters, on the other hand, often do not have this buffer and are deeply involved with their parents' emotional care (Myles, 1991).

To the degree that some sons are distanced and daughters are involved, the risk of greater strain on female caregivers is increased. If the source of this strain is not addressed and resolved, either in a renegotiation of the parent-child relationship, or by outside intervention, then the distancing of sons could contribute to an increase in the risk of abuse by the daughter. This situation also points to potential conflict among siblings regarding care for their parents.

For the Italian sample, no gender differences in the provision of intangible support were found. There is no literature that helps to explain this difference between ethnic groups. Nevertheless, a recurrent theme in the comments of the Italian families was that both tangible and intangible types of support were expected and received by all within the Italian network. This was articulated best by one Italian daughter:

> "It's never been, 'No, I can't do it because I don't have the time'. There's no such thing as never having time to help the family in any way."

There was a strong identification that the Anglo daughters or daughters-in-law gave more of all kinds of help to parents than did sons. The views of two daughters illustrate this point:

> "Well, personally, I think daughters do more. Mind you my sister-in-law is similarly inclined the way that I am. I will probably get more assistance from her than my brother."

> "I probably do more because I'm a girl and girls always seem to do more."

For the Italian sample, on the other hand, the offspring indicated that they felt the giving and receiving of assistance was equal across siblings. Nevertheless, they did identify a traditional gender division in the areas which a son or daughter was expected to contribute the most. This division is demonstrated in the comments of two daughters:

> "Because we're more a traditional family so, for the outdoor stuff, it's more the guy stuff, and the indoor stuff it's more the woman's thing."

> "For my sisters, we all help out in the house."

Likewise, Italian sons indicated a gender division in expectation for assistance.

> "Right now it's more my sisters (they rely on) for the responsible stuff."

> "Mostly I am asked to do long trips, the driving, like to Chicago. On a day-to-day thing, they rely on my sisters. "

Anglo fathers did not recognize that they received intangible support from their children, either sons or daughters, although they reported giving it to their children. This is a potentially problematic situation. It may be, for example, that the lack of recognition by these fathers of the emotion expressed in a gesture of helping may lead children to feel unappreciated. On the other side of the relationship, the inability of these fathers to recognize emotional input may cause them to feel there is little affection expressed by their adult children and lead them to feel unloved. The results of such inadequate communication may have consequences for the parent-child relationship when the parents are middle-aged and the children young adults, and again when the parents are considerably older. At this later point, chronic and severe communication blocks could serve to diminish the parent-child relationship in a way that could increase the likelihood of elder abuse.

Perceived inequities in support between parents and children

This study indicated differences between Anglo parents and their children in the perceived extent of assistance required by the older generation. These differing perceptions are a likely key to understanding how family relationships may deteriorate to the point where there is a risk of abuse.

When adult children with busy lives and children of their own feel obligated to assist parents, this can cause hard feelings and frustration. A sense of obligation may lead to having to choose between assisting the parents or pursuing other interests. As one of the children remarked:

> "I had an awful lot of work to do and I would always find myself in a, well, it wouldn't be overt emotional blackmail, but I would always feel that I've got this paper to get off but if I don't till the garden (my father) is going to put his back out."

Another indicated that more than the labour required, it was a lack of appreciation that was resented:

> "Sometimes I feel unappreciated for all I do."

The Italian sample did not indicate that the expectation or obligation to assist parents presented any difficulties within the parent-adult child relationship. On the other hand, the comments of both groups of fan-lilies suggested parents' provision of help to their children can cause strain. A breakdown in parent-child communication can lead to situations where parents give too much to an adult child who wishes to be recognized as autonomous and capable. The result can be conflict in the relationship, especially so when the adult child is married and a parent. This is indicated clearly by one Anglo daughter whose parents continued to treat her like a child while she struggled to see herself in the marital context as an independent adult:

> "...(my parents) are always here and some things happen between a husband and wife, or with a new mom, and you want to work it out yourselves. But (mom and dad) are there with ages of wisdom and sometimes it is hard to tell them, look, I usually love having your input, but right now leave me alone."

One unmarried Anglo child remarked that the support beyond what she asked for or expected is a denial of her impending adulthood:

> "Sometimes it does feel a bit like, well I'm the youngest and as I grow up it's like 'Oh, the baby is getting older now,' and the odd time I feel like they are trying to hold me back a little. They don't want the baby to grow up."

An Italian son observed that his parents' assistance had a negative impact on their relationship because it left him desiring more autonomy:

> "I don't feel guilty that I am borrowing the money. But it makes me want to have a job and pay for things myself. I want to do as much as I can on my own."

In a situation where adult children feel they are being denied autonomy, the relationship normally is renegotiated. The situation is manageable, if not resolved, and both generations carry on. Where the relationship is flawed, and/or the communication patterns are seriously impaired, the resentment may well create pressures that get expressed in abusive ways.

Sibling perceptions of inequitable support for parents

A sense of imbalance in how much help is provided to the parents by the adult siblings is another possible area of conflict. This study revealed that many of the adult offspring thought there were inequities in the levels of support extended to the parents. One Anglo daughter remarked :

> "I often feel that I do more. I feel sometimes (my sister) can be very self-centred."

One Anglo son, while complaining that he felt his older brother did not help out as much with the parents as the other siblings, in fact, identified that it was his wife, the daughter-in-law, who provided the assistance to his parents rather than himself.

> "I would say my older brother, because he was first born, is the favoured child. He doesn't bust his butt to get over to help do any work. You know he's got to do his 9 to 5 thing and he's got two kids. My wife says, 'Too bad, I work 13 hours a day and I still get over there, why can't he?'"

Support to parents by the siblings was not identified by the Italian sample as an area of inequity. Yet, gender differences in the type of assistance Italian parents expected from their children were identified by a sister and brother as cause for difficulty:

> "My brother gives them a lot of financial advice. I think it comes back to the situation with my father, my brother being the eldest child and being male. I really feel that has something to do with it. I think he is looked upon as having the ideal solution to everything. You know, whatever I say doesn't matter sometimes."

> "It's tough. Not so much as the relationship with our parents as maybe it is between her and I. I don't know, maybe we've gone off in our own little directions or you know, come across some new ideas. Maybe it's something traditional with my being the oldest and being male, I don't know."

One Italian mother indicated that this expectation for the role played by the eldest son within the family can cause sibling conflict:

> "Yeah, typical little Italian boy. I hate to say it, but it's causing problems with the younger brother and sister because they see that he doesn't pull his weight."

The expectations for the role of the eldest daughter within the family can also be a source of strain between siblings. One Italian daughter remarked:

> "Now there are several people that I have to look over even though I'm not the oldest. But like I said, my older sister is not around that much."

A sense that one adult child does more than his or her siblings may lead to an extended familial conflict. Its resolution may well be more complex because it depends upon the quality of peer as much as parent-child relations and communication. The extended family context widens the range of possible sources for abusive behaviour to originate.

Conclusions: Conflict and Prevention in Parent-Adult Child Relations

Every family can identify situations that have caused strain. The study data discussed in this report indicate that families are usually able to resolve these issues with communication and patience. When this happens, there are no long-term negative consequences for the relationships. Thus, circumstances that cause conflict are not rare for families and may not be the key for understanding what leads to elder abuse. The history and nature of communication patterns within the family, the affectionate quality of relationships and even problem-solving skills are more likely to improve understanding of how situations such as co-residence and sibling rivalry can help build a simmering pot that one day boils over as abuse.

These research conclusions can be translated into concrete suggestions for practice. The list is not exhaustive, merely suggestive.

Professionals

- Understand what your client families consider conflict and what they consider a resolved conflict.
- More attention needs to be paid to dysfunctional relations as potentially abusive. There likely is a link between parent-child relations across the family life cycle.
- Respect the needs of adult children to buffer whatever frustrations they may feel toward their parents.
- Reports of elder abuse should be treated on a case-by-case basis considering gender, ethnicity and relationship histories.
- Child abuse workers, spousal abuse workers and elder abuse workers need to talk to each other.
- Civility is universal even while cultural expression may vary.
- Front-line professionals can develop role play scenarios that focus on intergenerational differences in expectations.

Family

- Something as simple as civility is an extremely important value. Look for this and demand it in interpersonal communication.
- Families with adult children who need continued support have to talk about the expectations of each generation. For example, do parents and children agree on what independence means?
- Realize that a child co-residing with a parent has compromised autonomy.
- Siblings who felt treated equally as young dependents may harbour resentment toward each other as young adults if they perceive differential support and sense of autonomy in the relationship to their parents.
- Some points of friction within fan-lilies fall along intergenerational lines, others have their source in gender differences, and others represent variations in relations parents have with different children.
- Poor parent-child relations with young children can return to haunt parents in their later years.
- Seek professional help as soon as parent-child relations deteriorate, whatever the age of children.
- As circumstances change, expectations need to be renegotiated.

Advocacy

- Treat the cause, not the symptom. Elder abuse may be symptomatic of a larger social problem (e.g., youth unemployment may well be the issue).

- Prevention is the key: raise awareness of the link between family relationships and elder abuse.

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