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Mothers, Fathers, Daughters, and Sons: Gender Differences in Adults' Intergenerational Ties

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Abstract

Women are more involved in family ties than men, but these differences may vary across generations as gender roles have shifted. We know little about gender patterns across generations in the same family, however. To address this gap, midlife men and women aged 40–60 ($n = 633$) from the *Family Exchanges Study* reported on relationships with each aging parent and each grown child. Mothers were more involved (e.g., more frequent contact, greater positive and negative relationship qualities, and more frequent support exchanges) than fathers in both generations, with parental gender differences stronger in the older generation. Offspring gender differences were generally consistent across generations, with daughters more involved by phone in emotional forms of support, and in negative relationship quality; these gender differences were stronger in the younger generation than the older ones. We discuss pervasive gender differences that favor mothers, as well as shifts in gender differences across generations.

Keywords

gender differences; mother; father

It is a basic truism that mothers are more involved with adult offspring than fathers and that daughters are more involved than sons. Yet, research supporting this premise has rarely considered whether gendered patterns are consistent across generations in the same family. Midlife adults often find themselves interacting with generations above (e.g., aging parents) and generations below (e.g., grown children; Fingerman et al., 2011; Grundy & Henretta, 2006). Gender differences in parent/child ties may not follow the same pattern for older generations of parents and midlife offspring as they do for midlife parents and young adult children because of generational and cultural shifts in gender roles. To address these issues, we examined gender differences in midlife adults' relationships with both their aging

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parents and their grown children. We refer to these patterns as “generational similarities and differences in gender patterns,” cognizant that the study does not directly compare generations, but rather examines midlife adults’ perceptions of ties with two generations (i.e., aging parents, grown children).

Involvement between Parents and Grown Children

This study of gender differences in parent/grown child ties has been guided by the widely used intergenerational solidarity model (Bengtson, 2001; Fingerman, Sechrist, & Birditt, 2013; Lowenstein, 2007; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Solidarity theory articulates how positive features of intergenerational ties are reciprocally linked. Although solidarity theory incorporates many dimensions of relationships, the theory has focused the most attention on three facets of intergenerational relationships: contact, positive relationship quality, and support. More recently, the conflict model arose to incorporate negative feelings in this relationship. These perspectives suggest that tensions occur even in positive relationships (Birditt & Fingerman, 2012). Indeed, tensions may reflect being invested in the tie, rather than antithetical to strong bonds (Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008).

The current study draws on these models to examine gender differences in ties between parents and grown children, and refers to these dimensions (e.g., contact, positive relationship quality, negative relationship quality, support) collectively as *intergenerational involvement*. We addressed gender differences in intergenerational involvement in two generations in the family by examining midlife adults’ ties to aging parents and to grown children. We asked (a) which gender differences in parent/grown child ties are consistent in both generations, (b) how gender differences in parent/grown child ties may differ in midlife adults’ reports on their ties to aging parents versus grown children, and (c) whether the status of the parents and offspring (e.g., married/not married) and education level moderate these patterns of gender differences.

Common Gender Differences in Midlife Adults’ Involvement with Parents and Grown Children

Some gendered patterns may be common regardless of generation (older or younger) or role (parent or child), particularly women’s greater involvement in these ties. Evidence suggests that mothers and adult daughters are more involved in intergenerational ties than are fathers or sons (Fingerman, 2001; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Walker & Thompson, 1983).

Mothers typically serve as the primary caregivers in young children’s lives (Ainsworth, 1979). Continuing into adulthood, mothers are charged with maintaining family ties, often in the form of “kinkeeping” or “family work” (Fingerman, 2001; Swartz, 2009; Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010). As such, parental gender differences may occur in multiple domains of involvement across adulthood. For example, studies have documented parental gender differences in contact with grown children. Van Gaalen and Dykstra (2010) collected data from grown children aged 18–79 in the Netherlands between 2002 and 2004. They confined the analytic sample to offspring who had face-to-face contact at least once a week

with at least one parent; only 33% of the responses involved fathers across this broad age range.

Theoretically, relationship qualities with mothers may involve greater closeness, and more negative relationship quality due to mothers' more frequent contact and greater investment in the tie (Fingerman et al., 2008; Swartz, 2009). Regional and national studies also find that offspring of both genders reported more positive and negative relationship qualities with mothers (Lee & Szinovacz, 2016; Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003). But other studies suggest mothers and fathers do not differ with regard to negative relationship quality (Birditt, Miller, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2009; Lendon, Silverstein, & Giarrusso, 2014).

Gender differences in support exchanges between parents and grown children are well documented. Numerous studies have found mothers exchange more support with offspring (i.e., receiving and providing) throughout adulthood (Fingerman et al., 2011; Suitor, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2006). Likewise, studies found that daughters provide and receive more support with parents than do sons across adulthood (Suitor et al., 2006; Swartz, 2009), though as we discuss further, these findings may vary by generation and by type of support.

Distinct Gender Differences in Midlife Adults' Involvement with Aging Parents and Grown Children

A key contribution of this study was to ask whether gender differences in parent/grown child ties vary across generations. Midlife adults often occupy two roles: as grown children to aging parents and as midlife parents to young adult children (Grundy & Henretta, 2006). We asked whether these midlife adults view ties to their own parents as more gendered than ties to their grown children. Such patterns may reflect gender norms and childhood patterns of relationships at different historical time periods and the roles midlife adults occupy (as a grown child perceiving parents or as a midlife parent reporting on their own involvement).

Although we expected women to be more involved with aging parents and young adult children than men, we expected more attenuated differences in the younger generation (i.e., midlife adults/parents reporting on young adult children) than the older generation (i.e., midlife adults/offspring reporting on their aging parents). With regard to differences between mothers and fathers, research suggests a shift in father involvement with young children began in the late 1980s. Fathers with intact marriages narrowed the gap with mothers by spending more time parenting children in the home (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Sandberg & Hofferth, 2001; Sayer, 2005). Furthermore, gender ideologies may play into parents' patterns of behavior with grown offspring. A study conducted in 2001 found that the grown children held less traditional views of gender roles (Cichy, Lefkowitz, & Fingerman, 2007); these grown offspring would now be the ages of the midlife parents, and their less rigid views of gendered behaviors likely persist.

Furthermore, age and status may make a difference. Younger adults are at an age where they are exploring different roles, including gender roles. Given the delay of marriage in recent cohorts, over half of young adult offspring are likely to be single (Allred, 2018), and single adults may be less gender differentiated than adults who are or have been

married. Indeed, despite changes in marital gender roles over the past few decades, marriage still involves some degree of gender differentiation (Mikucka, 2016). As such, midlife adults' relationships with grown children may be less differentiated by gender than their relationships with aging parents.

Nevertheless, some gendered patterns of intergenerational involvement may be consistent across generations. Rather, differences between generations may reflect distinct facets of the relationship which we consider here.

We expected consistent gender differences in contact between parents and grown children, though the frequency of contact may vary by generation. Young adults appear to have more frequent contact with parents by phone or by text than was the case in the past (Fingerman, 2017; Fingerman et al., 2013), but the gender patterns seem to be consistent—with daughters and mothers in more frequent contact (Sutor, Con, Johnson, Peng, & Gilligan, 2015; Umberson & Slaten, 2000).

With regard to relationship qualities, midlife adults may report greater positive and negative relationship qualities toward their grown children than their aging parents (Birditt, Hartnett, Fingerman, Zarit, & Antonucci, 2015), and gendered patterns for relationship qualities may be more noticeable with young adult offspring. Research suggests differences in midlife parents' positive and negative relationship qualities by offspring gender; they report greater positive and negative relationship qualities toward daughters than toward sons (Birditt et al., 2009). Another study found that, compared to young adult sons, young adult daughters themselves reported more positive and more feelings toward parents (Willson et al., 2003). These gender disparities are less obvious in older dyads (Willson et al., 2003; Willson, Shuey, Elder, & Wickrama, 2006).

Mothers may be more involved than fathers in support exchanges with offspring at all ages (Eagly, 2009; Kahn, McGill, & Bianchi, 2011). But generations may differ in the gender divide with regard to support exchanges with daughters versus sons. Midlife daughters were raised during a time when gender socialization placed greater emphasis on women retaining ties to their families of origin and particularly providing care and support (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982). As such, many studies find that midlife daughters are more involved in caregiving (Pillemer & Sutor, 2014; Solomon, Hanson, Bagg, & Lyons, 2015) and in supporting aging parents prior to caregiving than midlife sons (Huo, Graham, Kim, Birditt, & Fingerman, 2019; Huo, Graham, Kim, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2018). Nevertheless, a meta-analysis of caregiving data revealed only small or nonexistent differences between sons and daughters (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2006). Another study suggested midlife sons are as involved as daughters in specific types of caregiving (e.g., advice, financial management; Fingerman, Hay, Kamp Dush, Cichy, & Hosterman, 2007). As such, midlife daughters may be more engaged in support exchanges with aging parents in general, but there may be some nuances.

Gender differences may be less evident in support exchanges involving young adult sons and daughters. Midlife adults do favor daughters with support in some contexts (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009), but other studies do not find gender differences in parental

support of young adults or young adults' reactions to parental support (Mattanah, Lopez, & Govern, 2011). Furthermore, a nuanced perspective suggests that gendered patterns in midlife parents' support of young adult children may differ across types of support. For example, researchers examined over 5,000 parents in their fifties and sixties in the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study in 2004; mothers were more involved than fathers in providing emotional support to grown children but there was no gender difference in the provision of practical support to adult children (or to other social partners; Kahn et al., 2011). Thus, findings suggest that midlife parental involvement with young adult offspring may differ by gender with regard to stereotypical female behaviors such as contact and emotional support (and thus, may be similar to gender differences reported among older fathers and mothers). Yet midlife fathers may be as involved in other types of support, including practical or financial help (Johnson, 2013). This pattern would be different from the bifurcation by gender across types of support anticipated in midlife adults' exchanges with aging parents.

Factors Moderating Parent/Child Gender Differences in Different Generations

Finally, gender differences in midlife adults' ties to grown children may reflect the statuses that offspring and parents occupy as well as socioeconomic (i.e., education) disparities. These statuses may further differ by life stage. As such, we considered whether the following third factors condition gender differences in intergenerational ties: (a) young adults' student, marital and parental status, (b) midlife and aging adults' marital status (none were students, and all were parents). We considered parental SES/education level for both midlife parents and aging parents. Many of the young adults were still obtaining an education, and thus, SES indicators would not be meaningful for their potential socioeconomic status in the future.

Indeed, nearly half of U.S. adults aged 18–24 are pursuing higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), but there is a paucity of research regarding gender differences in parental ties to offspring who are students versus those who are not. A study of college students in different countries revealed mothers provide more support to college students than do fathers, and adult daughters receive more support from parents than do adult sons (Fingerman et al., 2016). Here, we asked whether student status conditions midlife parent/child gender differences.

Offspring's marital status and whether offspring are parents may also moderate gender differences. Given the matrilineal pattern of intergenerational ties in the United States, theoretically, daughters retain ties to parents after they marry, but sons become more distant. Nevertheless, research suggests marriage generally exerts similar effects on sons and daughters (Bucx, van Wel, Knijn, & Hagendoorn, 2008; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008), though gender differences in phone contact increases slightly upon marriage because men may depend on their wives to telephone relatives (Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006). Parenthood in young adulthood may intensify gendered patterns in ties to midlife parents, due to

grandparents providing greater support to daughters who are parents than to sons (Chan & Elder Jr, 2000; Silverstein & Marenco, 2001).

The parents' marital status is also a key variable in patterns of gender differences in intergenerational relationships (Seltzer & Bianchi, 2013). Studies have found that never-married or divorced fathers are less involved with grown children than fathers from intact marriages (Clark & Kenney, 2010; Schwartz & Finley, 2009). Indeed, a national study of young adults revealed that they were more likely to lack contact with fathers who were not married to their mothers than to fathers married to their mothers (Hartnett, Fingerman, & Birditt, 2016).

We also asked whether socioeconomic status mitigates gender differences. Again, accepted truism in family science suggests parents from lower SES backgrounds engage in more traditional gendered parenting behaviors. Yet empirical data are scarce and suggest a more nuanced and complicated pattern (Kane & Kyro, 2001). Thus, the role of parental education in gender differences in intergenerational ties is worth examining.

We controlled for factors that may be broadly associated with intergenerational involvement. Gendered parent/child ties may vary by race or ethnicity (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004). Offspring age contributes to parental involvement in adulthood; younger adult offspring are more involved with parents across a variety of dimensions (Hartnett, Furstenberg, Birditt, & Fingerman, 2013). Parents in poorer health may have more frequent contact and receive more grown children (Henretta, Grundy, & Harris, 2002), and there may be complex gender differences in health (Case & Paxson, 2005). In sum, this study examined gender differences in midlife adults' involvement with young adult children and aging parents. We used a unique dataset in which midlife participants reported involvement with each of their aging parents as well as with each grown child.

Family Exchanges Study Method

We used data from midlife adults from the *Family Exchanges Study* wave 1 collected in 2008. The midlife sample (aged 40–60; mean age = 50.6, $n = 633$) was recruited via telephone listings purchased from Genisys Corporation and random digit dialing within area codes from the Philadelphia Greater Metropolitan Statistical Area, incorporating urban, suburban, and rural areas. A stratified sampling procedure obtained equal numbers of men and women distributed across the full age range, with heavier recruitment in high-density minority areas. Overall, the sample was 31% African-American and highly representative of the greater Philadelphia area, with the exception of being slightly more educated than the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

On average, participants had 2.16 children over the age of 18 (range of 1–11) and 227 participants had 2 living parents, whereas the remaining had only 1 living parent. To avoid participant fatigue, we asked detailed information regarding three adult children. Most participants (88%) had three or fewer children over age 18. For participants with more than three children over age 18, we asked about the child the parent helped most often, least often, and a random other child. We ran analyses controlling for whether participants had

more than 3 children (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*); the pattern of findings was identical, and we present the full sample of midlife adults here.

Measures

Participants provided ratings of their relationships with each parent and with each grown child. Studies assessing ties to each grown child and to each parent are relatively rare in the literature (see Sutor et al., 2018). These ratings included the frequency of contact, relationship qualities, and different types of support. Participants also provided demographic information about themselves and each family member including age, gender, years of education, marital status, employment status, and health rated from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*; Idler & Kasl, 1995). Description of participants and background information regarding their parents and grown children are found in Table 1.

Frequency of contact.—Participants indicated the frequency of two types of contact with each parent and grown child: by phone and in person. They used the following rating scale: 1 (*less than once a year or not at all*), 2 (*once a year*), 3 (*a few times a year*), 4 (*monthly*), 5 (*a few times a month*), 6 (*weekly*), 7 (*a few times a week*), to 8 (*daily*).

Relationship quality.—Positive and negative relationship qualities were assessed with 2-item measures of relationship quality that are widely used (Birditt, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2010; Fingerman et al., 2008; Umberson, 1992). Participants indicated how much each party (i.e., their father/mother/child): (a) loves and cares for them and (b) understands them from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). We calculated Spearman–Brown coefficients to more accurately reflect the internal reliability of the two-item positive relationship quality measure ($\rho = .74$ for parents, and $\rho = .74$ for offspring; Eisinga, Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2013). The coefficients indicate high internal reliability. They also indicate the extent to which the other party: (a) places demands on them or (b) criticizes them rated on the same scale. Likewise, we calculated Spearman–Brown coefficients to assess the internal reliability of the two-item negative relationship quality measure, $\rho = .68$ for parents, and $\rho = .60$ for offspring.

Frequency of support.—Participants completed the *Intergenerational Support Index* regarding the frequency of five types of support they provide to (and receive from) each parent and each grown child: emotional, advice, practical (e.g., running an errand, and help around the house), financial support, and listening to talk about daily events on a scale of 1 (*less than once a year or not at all*), 2 (*once a year*), 3 (*a few times a year*), 4 (*monthly*), 5 (*a few times a month*), 6 (*weekly*), 7 (*a few times a week*), and to 8 (*daily*).

Analytic Strategy

We examined midlife participants' reports of ties to: (a) their own parents and (b) each of their grown children. Thus, we considered gender differences between participants as sons and daughters to their aging parents (i.e., mothers vs fathers), and gender differences between participants as mothers and fathers to each of their grown children (i.e., sons and daughters).

We tested the research questions regarding gender differences for parental involvement in contact (in person, phone), relationship qualities (positive relationship quality and negative relationship quality), and support exchanges (emotional support, listening, advice, practical, and financial support). To test the research questions, models were nested because participants reported on two parents and on multiple children, that is, we used multilevel models for two parents nested within offspring and multilevel models for multiple offspring nested within parents. We estimated separate models by generation (i.e., ties to aging parents in one set of models, and ties to grown children in another set of models). Given the number of analyses involved, we adjusted the significance level to $p < .01$.

To test whether gender differences were greater in midlife adults' reports of the older generation compared to their reports of the older generation (or vice versa), we examined interaction terms for gender $\times$ generation. For ease of interpretation, we present the models separately for younger and older generations in the tables, but report significant findings for the interaction terms.

In order to test the moderating effects of statuses and position, we examined offspring student's status, offspring marital status, and offspring parental status (1 = *yes occupies this status* versus 0 = *does not occupy this status*) $\times$ offspring gender. We ran analyses involving these young adult statuses only for gender differences in midlife parents' reports of their grown children.

We examined parental marital status (e.g., 1 = *married to offspring's other parent* versus 0 = *not married to offspring other parent*) and parental education background (*years of education*) as moderating variables to ascertain whether gender differences were stronger based on parental social positions. We grand mean centered the education variable before creating the interaction term, but the other variables were dichotomous. We then included the interaction terms for parental marital status $\times$ gender or for parental education in years $\times$ gender in the prior models. We conducted analyses involving these parental statuses for midlife adults' reports on both generations.

Results

The study relied on midlife participants' reports of relationships with each generation (i.e., their aging parents and their young adult children). Descriptive statistics regarding participants' involvement with aging parents are found in Table 2 and that with grown children in Table 3. We estimated ANOVAs comparing mother/daughter, mother/son, father/daughter, father/son reports and significant differences at the $p < .01$ level are indicated in the tables.

As can be seen in both generations, on average parents and grown children were in touch a few times a month or more often, with mothers and daughters in contact several times a week. We observed high positive quality and low negative quality relationship ratings. Participants provided frequent emotional support, listening, and advice to each generation—monthly with parents and several times a month with offspring. Listening was the most frequent form of support in both generations, and financial support was the least frequent.

Participant Involvement with Aging Parents and Grown Children

Participant involvement with aging parents.—We first considered midlife adults' reports on their aging parents, asking whether participants viewed their relationships with their aging mothers and aging fathers differently, and whether their own gender (i.e., being a son or being a daughter) mattered in these reports of parental involvement. We estimated multilevel models including gender of parent (i.e., mother and father) and gender of offspring (i.e., as midlife sons and daughters) for each dimension of involvement.

Table 4 includes significant findings for gender differences in the older generation. Participants reported that older fathers were significantly less involved than older mothers with: less frequent contact in person or by phone, lower positive and lower negative relationship qualities, and provision of less frequent support to fathers for all types of support. In analyses not shown here, we also examined support midlife adults received from each generation; the pattern of findings was generally the same (findings not shown here).

Midlife daughters and sons did not differ in reports of in person contact or relationship quality. There were offspring gender differences in telephone contact and provision of two forms of support: Midlife daughters provided more emotional support and more listening to parents than did sons. Offspring gender was not significant for advice, practical, or financial support.

Midlife participants' relationships with young adult offspring.—Significant gender differences in midlife parents' reports on involvement with their grown children are presented in Table 5. Similar to reported gender differences in the older generation, when reporting on their own children, midlife fathers reported less involvement than midlife mothers with regard to: phone contact, in-person contact, and provision of all forms of support (emotional, listening, advice, and practical support) except financial support.

Concerning offspring gender, midlife parents reported greater involvement with daughters than with sons via: more frequent phone contact, more negative relationship quality and more frequent provision of emotional support, listening, advice to daughters than to sons.

Gender Differences by Generation

In order to assess whether the gender differences varied significantly between the younger and older generation, we estimated additional models that included interaction terms between gender and generation. In other words, we included (a) generation (older, younger) $\times$ parent gender as one interaction term, and (b) generation (older, younger) $\times$ offspring gender as the other.

For the parental gender $\times$ generation interaction terms, the interaction terms were significant for negative relationship quality and all forms of support except emotional support. The older generation showed larger gender differences (i.e., mothers more involved than fathers) than the younger generation did. Given the consistency in the pattern of findings, figures are not shown here.

For comparisons involving offspring gender, interaction terms for generation (older, younger) $\times$ offspring gender were significant only with regard to negative relationship quality and financial support. In these two forms of involvement, the younger generation showed a larger gender discrepancy than the older generation did.

We also note that age of offspring showed a significant association with facets of the parent/child relationship in the models with significant interaction terms presented in Table 5. These associations reflected the greater gender differences in the younger generation, however, whereas initial predictions had anticipated the opposite effect.

Statutes and Social Positions as Moderates of Gender Differences

Offspring student, marital and parental status.—We examined interactions of offspring gender $\times$ offspring student status in models involving young adult offspring. We did not observe significant interaction effects in these models. We further asked whether offspring marital status or offspring parental status condition parent or child gender differences; these interaction terms were not significant.

Parental marital status.—Further, we reestimated the models reported previously in Tables 4 and 5 using an interaction term for parental marital status (1 = *married to the offspring's other parent*, 0 = *not married to the offspring's other parent*) $\times$ parent gender. In these cases, we considered only those parents who were still married to one another; parents who were remarried to a different spouse were included in the *not married to the offspring's other parent* group. When participants reported on their aging parents, significant interaction effects for parent gender $\times$ parental marital status were evident for: phone and in person contact, providing all types of support, and receiving practical and financial support. Plotting the significant interactions revealed consistent patterns. Married parents showed smaller gender differences than unmarried parents across indicators; participants reported that they were more involved with unmarried older mothers than with unmarried older fathers. These unmarried older mothers were primarily widowed.

We looked at midlife parent gender $\times$ parental marital status to predict involvement with young adult children. We found significant interactions for: in person contact, providing practical and financial support, and negative relationship quality. As with older parents: married midlife parents showed smaller gender differences than unmarried parents. Simple slopes analysis revealed that midlife fathers not married to the other parent were less involved with grown children compared to midlife mothers not married to the father across all indicators of involvement. Midlife mothers and fathers who were married to one another showed smaller gender differences. Unmarried midlife parents primarily reflected never being married or divorce (sometimes remarried to a different partner) rather than widowhood.

Parental education.—We included parental education as a moderator of parental gender (parent gender $\times$ parental years education). These interaction terms were not significant and are not shown here.

Discussion

Life course theory proposes that historical settings shape intergenerational ties (Hutchison, 2010). Research in the 20th century documented clear gender differences in intergenerational ties: Mothers were more involved in all aspects of grown children's lives than fathers; daughters were more involved than sons. Empirical data verified this premise in the 1980s (e.g., Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Umberson, 1992). Findings from the current study conducted in the 21st century are consistent, suggesting persistence in general patterns of gender differences in intergenerational ties involving midlife adults. Yet findings also suggest nuances in these patterns between parents and offspring, and across generations.

Parental Gender Differences

Midlife adults reported greater involvement with their aging mothers than with their fathers across many dimensions (more frequent in person and phone contact, greater positive and negative relationship qualities, and providing mothers with more frequent emotional support, advice, listening, practical and financial help). These patterns may reflect constraints on the mothers' lives stemming back decades. Mothers of the Baby Boomers were likely to have remained in the home raising their children (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010) and patterns of involvement with their children in midlife may reflect a continuation of parenting patterns established early in life.

With regard to their relationships with their own grown children, however, these midlife participants reported fewer gender differences, and then in domains that are stereotypically female such as telephoning, emotional support, and listening. Perhaps we would have observed greater father involvement and discrepancies in the opposite direction had we asked about stereotypically male activities.

Furthermore, midlife fathers and mothers were similar in tangible aspects of the relationship with young adult offspring such as in person contact, practical help, and financial help. Midlife mothers and fathers also reported similar feelings of positive relationship quality with their offspring and similar negative relationship quality (though they reported more negative relationship quality with daughters than with sons). As such, some features of parent/child ties may be beginning to transcend gender in current cohorts, though in general, differences between mothers and fathers persist across cohorts. In fact, gender differences were evident in the most frequent behaviors in this tie (e.g. phoning, listening).

Offspring Gender Differences

Offspring gender was not a major factor in the midlife generation. In the older cohort, midlife sons and daughters were equally involved with their aging parents, except with regard to emotional support and listening. In the younger cohorts, young adult daughters were more involved than sons on the same dimensions (e.g., telephoning, emotional support, listening) as well as in advice. As such, daughters' family roles appear to be fairly consistent across generations.

These observations may reflect differences in life course development of the relationships as well. Female lineages are common among Western families (Clark & Kenney, 2010;

Fingerman et al. 2012; Willson et al., 2003) and may dominate when young people traverse the threshold to adulthood. As the life course unfolds and parents incur declines associated with late life, gendered patterns may change. For example, in the older dyads in this study, the mothers were more likely to be widowed. Grown children often increase involvement when a parent becomes widowed (Ha, 2008; Ha, Carr, Utz, & Ness, 2006) and this may be true for sons as well as daughters.

Shifts in these patterns may contribute into the later stages of life. When parents incur health declines, many parents may show a preference for daughters to provide hands on care (Pillemer & Sutor, 2014; Solomon et al., 2015), and patterns may shift again. Thus, future research regarding gender in parent/child ties should examine gender differences over time.

Factors that Condition Gender Differences in Parent/Child Ties

We further pursued factors that may moderate associations between parental gender and parental involvement with offspring. Gender differences in parental involvement did not vary by offspring statuses (e.g., student status, marital, parental status). In other words, mothers and fathers were as involved with students and nonstudents, and student status was not a determinant of the strength of differences between daughters and sons. Likewise, despite general preferences along the matrilineal lineage, empirical studies have suggested that marriage exerts similar effects on men and women (Bucx et al., 2008; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008). Here, offspring marital status, or offspring being parents themselves, did not condition gender differences in young adults' involvement with parents.

Parental marital status did play a key role in the gendered nature of parent/child ties into adulthood and across generations. Consistent with prior studies, fathers who were not married to the offspring's mother were less involved in offspring's lives than fathers who were married to the mother (Clark & Kenney, 2010; Schwartz & Finley, 2009). Findings from this study across two generations in the family present a nuanced story regarding marital status and parental gender. In the older cohorts, findings most likely reflected widowhood and grown children's increased involvement with a parent who has lost a spouse (Ha et. al, 2006). In the younger generation, consistent with prior research (Kalmijn, 2013), divorced and never married fathers were less involved with grown children than were married fathers. Future research should attend to the complexities of parental marital status at different ages, particularly as marital status intersects with parental gender.

In this study, parental socioeconomic status did not exacerbate or attenuate observed gender differences in parental involvement in either cohort. As such, SES consistencies in gendered parenting behaviors also support the more nuanced perspective some scholars have introduced with regard to this issue (Kane & Kyyro, 2001).

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study makes important contributions to the literature, there are also notable limitations. The data collected for the two generations of parents and grown children were not directly comparable. Midlife adults reported on their aging parents and their grown children. As such, parental gender differences in the older generation were obtained from participants' reports, whereas parental gender differences in the midlife generation reflect

between-participant differences. Similar distinctions in within-participant versus between-participant reports occurred for the offspring. It is important to note that the midlife adult was the source of all information about gender differences, and research on intergenerational relationships going back decades suggests biases in self-report versus reports of parent (Broom, Jones, McDonnell, & Duncan-Jones, 1978), and the same might be true of reports of grown children. The midlife adult might artificially inflate distinctions between different parents or different grown children. Yet several findings point to the importance of these reports. We might expect greater similarity from a single reporter rating both of his/her parents than from two different individuals reporting on different parents and children in different families, but the opposite was found. Moreover, the gender differences in reports on offspring suggest that parents are highly attuned to their offspring's gender in adulthood.

Furthermore, children today are less likely to grow up with a father in the home than was the case 40 years ago (Cherlin, 2010). Research suggests that young adults are more likely to be estranged from their fathers when they did not reside with him during childhood (Hartnett et al., 2016). Thus, parental gender differences in involvement may be stronger and more pervasive in the future due to having nonmarried parents throughout childhood.

Finally, this study relied on global reports of parental involvement in a single survey. Future research may reveal greater complexities by using techniques that track behaviors throughout the day. Only a few studies have examined ties between adults and parents in daily surveys, and these surveys have focused on feelings and support (Fingerman, Kim, Birditt, & Zarit, 2016; Fingerman, Kim, Tennant, Birditt, & Zarit, 2015; Huo et al., 2019). Perhaps fathers are involved in mundane ways that researchers have not tapped. Mothers and fathers might also record their thoughts throughout the day; mothers may think about and worry about their children more often than fathers do (Hay, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2007).

In sum, although family scientists have long accepted the notion that mothers are more invested in grown children than are fathers throughout life, findings from this study suggest both generational and life course variabilities in these patterns. To a large extent, late life mothers and fathers remain divided along traditional lines with older mothers more involved with their grown children in ways that enhance the solidarity of the tie as well as with regard to negative relationship qualities. In midlife dyads, a narrowing of this gap has occurred, except along stereotypically female relationship behaviors pertaining to emotional support, listening, and telephone contact. Yet given the many ways in which men and women's roles have narrowed, it is notable that certain aspects of intergenerational ties appear to remain persistently gender-divided, even after children are grown and have left the home.

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Data availability and data disposition

Data used in this study are publicly available at the National Archive of Computerized Data on Aging (NACDA) as part of the ICPSR at the University of Michigan. The website is: <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NACDA/studies/36360> And via the data repository for the Population Research Center at UT Austin: https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/prc/_scientific-and-technical/prc-data-portal.php

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Table 1.

Background Information for Participants, Their Parents, and Their Offspring.

Variables	Participants (<i>n</i> = 633)		Participants' Parents (<i>n</i> = 868)		Participants' Offspring (<i>n</i> = 1,348)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	50.70	4.99	77.05	6.81	25.19	5.80
Education in years	14.18	2.02	12.17	2.81	13.73	1.92
Physical health ^a	3.48	1.07	2.78	1.09	4.26	0.93
	<i>Proportions</i>		<i>Proportions</i>		<i>Proportions</i>	
Women	.52		.63		.48	
Minority	.37		—		—	
Work status						
Employed full time	.65		.04		.51	
Retired	.04		.72		.00	
Marital status						
First marriage	.63		.40		.17	
Remarried	.07		.09		.08	
Divorced/separated	.18		.12		.03	
Widowed	.02		.34		.00	
Single/never married	.07		.04		.70	
Other	.03		.02		.09	

Note.^a1 = *poor*; 2 = *fair*; 3 = *good*; 4 = *very good*; and 5 = *excellent*.

Table 2.
Descriptive Information for Midlife Adults' Reports of Their Involvement with Their Aging Parents.

	Aging Mothers				Aging Fathers			ANOVA <i>F</i> score
	Daughter (Participant)		Son (Participant)		Daughter (Participant)	Son (Participant)		
	(<i>n</i> = 284)		(<i>n</i> = 259)				(<i>n</i> = 180)	
Contact								
In person contact ^a	<i>M</i>	5.37		5.31		4.69	4.53	9.07***
	<i>SD</i>	1.92		1.87		2.09	2.18	
Telephone contact ^a	<i>M</i>	6.51		6.08		5.53	5.11	21.22***
	<i>SD</i>	1.75		1.69		2.11	2.14	
Relationship Qualities								
Positive relationship qualities ^b	<i>M</i>	4.04		4.17		3.87	3.68	10.97***
	<i>SD</i>	0.85		0.70		0.99	1.09	
Negative relationship qualities ^b	<i>M</i>	2.17		2.04		1.61	1.91	14.03***
	<i>SD</i>	1.02		0.84		0.82	1.02	
Support from Participants to Aging Parents ^a								
Emotional support	<i>M</i>	5.95		5.24		4.56	4.20	28.46***
	<i>SD</i>	1.89		2.04		2.38	2.23	
Listening	<i>M</i>	6.43		5.72		5.11	4.57	37.48***
	<i>SD</i>	1.72		1.72		2.13	2.10	
Advice	<i>M</i>	4.75		4.17		3.30	3.41	25.51***
	<i>SD</i>	1.96		2.01		1.93	2.03	
Practical support	<i>M</i>	4.34		4.20		3.19	3.12	18.97***
	<i>SD</i>	2.13		2.15		2.06	2.12	
Financial support	<i>M</i>	2.26		2.51		1.53	1.77	15.74***
	<i>SD</i>	1.71		1.86		1.18	1.47	

Note.

^aContact and support were rated 1 = less than once a year or never; 2 = yearly; 3 = a few times a year; 4 = monthly; 5 = a few times a month; 6 = weekly; 7 = a few times a week; 8 = daily.

^bRelationship quality ratings reflect average scores of 2 items rated 1 = not at all; 2 = a little bit; 3 = somewhat; 4 = quite a bit; 5 = a great deal.

.100' > d

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Table 3.
Descriptive Information for Midlife Adults' Reports of Their Involvement with Grown Children.

	Midlife Mothers (Participants)		Midlife Fathers (Participants)		ANOVA <i>F</i> score
	Daughter (<i>n</i> = 356)	Son (<i>n</i> = 384)	Daughter (<i>n</i> = 308)	Son (<i>n</i> = 336)	
Contact					
In person contact ^{<i>a</i>}	<i>M</i> 5.80	5.62	5.25	5.58	3.72
	<i>SD</i> 2.01	2.23	2.11	2.23	
Telephone contact ^{<i>a</i>}	<i>M</i> 6.79	6.21	5.88	5.72	19.89***
	<i>SD</i> 1.75	1.81	1.91	2.07	
Relationship Qualities					
Positive relationship qualities ^{<i>b</i>}	<i>M</i> 4.09	4.05	3.95	3.98	1.56
	<i>SD</i> 0.96	0.91	0.90	0.83	
Negative relationship qualities ^{<i>b</i>}	<i>M</i> 2.18	1.97	2.17	1.90	8.19***
	<i>SD</i> 0.87	0.87	0.90	0.83	
Support to Grown Children from Participants ^{<i>a</i>}					
Emotional support	<i>M</i> 6.09	5.44	5.21	4.95	18.23***
	<i>SD</i> 2.05	2.17	2.13	2.16	
Listening	<i>M</i> 6.50	5.69	5.28	5.32	27.53***
	<i>SD</i> 1.82	1.93	2.12	2.15	
Advice	<i>M</i> 5.54	4.88	4.81	4.77	12.27***
	<i>SD</i> 1.90	1.91	1.85	2.03	
Practical support	<i>M</i> 4.08	3.77	3.71	3.59	3.16
	<i>SD</i> 2.20	2.28	2.11	2.16	
Financial support	<i>M</i> 3.95	3.76	3.75	3.64	1.18
	<i>SD</i> 2.23	2.29	2.12	2.10	

Note.

^aContact and support were rated 1 = *less than once a year or never*, 2 = *yearly*, 3 = *a few times a year*, 4 = *monthly*, 5 = *a few times a month*, 6 = *weekly*, 7 = *a few times a week*, 8 = *daily*.

^bAverage scores of 2 items rated 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *a little bit*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *quite a bit*, 5 = *a great deal*.

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Table 4.
Gender Differences in Midlife Adults' Reports of Involvement with Their Aging Parents.

	Contact				Relationship Qualities			
	In-person contact		Telephone contact		Positive relation quality		Negative relation quality	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Fixed effects								
Intercept	5.37***	0.84	5.87***	0.75	3.40***	0.34	2.72***	0.37
Parent gender ^a	-0.58***	0.10	-0.88***	0.12	-0.30***	0.06	0.29***	0.06
Offspring gender ^a	-0.14	0.15	-0.38**	0.13	0.06	0.06	0.01	0.07
<u>Covariates</u>								
Parent education	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01
Parent first marriage ^b	0.00	0.17	0.08	0.15	0.15	0.07	-0.27***	0.07
Parent health ^c	0.10	0.06	0.18**	0.06	0.15***	0.03	-0.10***	0.03
Offspring age	-0.01	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Minority status ^d	0.55***	0.16	0.28	0.15	0.15	0.07	0.04	0.07
Random effect								
Intercept VAR	2.49***	0.23	0.98***	0.24	0.13	0.05	0.11	0.07
Residual VAR		0.13	2.33***	0.23	0.57***	0.05	0.73***	0.07
-2 log likelihood	3,414.1		3,390.1		2,105.8		2,314.3	
Support Midlife Participants Provide to Aging Parents								
	Emotional support		Listening		Advice		Financial support	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Fixed effects								
Intercept	5.54***	0.88	6.31***	0.77	4.36***	0.85	5.23***	0.90
Parent gender ^a	-1.06***	0.11	-1.16***	0.11	-0.97***	0.11	-0.80***	0.11
Offspring gender ^a	-0.59***	0.16	-0.60***	0.14	-0.32	0.15	-0.15	0.16
<u>Covariates</u>								
Parent education	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Parent first marriage ^b	-0.54**	0.17	-0.19	0.15	-0.47**	0.17	-0.56**	0.18

	Support Midlife Participants Provide to Aging Parents									
	Emotional support		Listening		Advice		Practical support		Financial support	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Parent health ^c	−0.04		0.06		0.10		0.06		0.01	
Offspring age	0.01		0.02		0.00		0.01		0.00	
Minority status ^d	0.38		0.17		−0.03		0.15		0.31	
Random effect										
Intercept VAR	2.54***	0.25	1.42***	0.22					2.27***	0.25
Residual VAR	1.68***	0.16	1.98***	0.19					1.67***	0.17
−2 log likelihood	3,512.7						3,392.0		3,465.8	
									3,533.1	
										3,045.9

Note. Parents $n = 868$, Offspring $n = 633$. Outcomes were rated 1 = *less than once a year or never*; 2 = *yearly*; 3 = *a few times a year*; 4 = *monthly*; 5 = *a few times a month*; 6 = *weekly*; 7 = *a few times a week*; and 8 = *daily*. VAR = variance.

^a 1 = *male*, and 0 = *female*.

^b 1 = *married to offspring's other parent*, and 0 = *not married to offspring's other parent*.

^c 1 = *poor*; 2 = *fair*; 3 = *good*; 4 = *very good*; and 5 = *excellent*.

^d 1 = *minority*, and 0 = *nonminority*.

**
 $p < .01$,

 $p < .001$.

Table 5.
Gender Differences in Midlife Adults’ Reports of Involvement with Their Children.

	Contact				Relation Qualities			
	In person		Telephone		Negative		B	SE
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE		
Fixed effects								
Intercept	9.92***	0.60	9.36***	0.55	2.90***	0.26		
Parent gender ^a	-0.35**	0.13	-0.78***	0.12	-0.07	0.06		
Offspring gender ^a	0.01	0.11	-0.45***	0.10	-0.24***	0.04		
<u>Covariates</u>								
Parent education	-0.12***	0.03	-0.01	0.03	0.04**	0.01		
Parent first marriage ^b	0.50***	0.15	0.29	0.13	-0.03	0.06		
Parent health ^c	-0.08	0.07	-0.07	0.06	-0.09***	0.03		
Offspring age	-0.10***	0.01	-0.09***	0.01	-0.04***	0.00		
Minority status ^d	-0.06	0.15	-0.18	0.14	-0.09	0.06		
Random effect								
Intercept VAR	1.08***	0.15	0.90***	0.13	0.26***	0.03		
Residual VAR	3.17***	0.15	2.42***	0.13	0.44***	0.02		
-2 log likelihood	5,805.4		4,951.2		2,991.9			
	Emotional		Listening		Advice		Practical	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Fixed effects								
Intercept	9.43***	0.62	9.02***	0.56	9.14***	0.55	8.58***	0.63
Parent gender ^a	-0.76***	0.14	-0.83***	0.13	-0.50***	0.12	-0.38**	0.14
Offspring gender ^a	-0.42***	0.09	-0.44***	0.09	-0.38***	0.09	-0.23	0.10
<u>Covariates</u>								
Parent education	-0.05	0.04	-0.02	0.03	-0.04	0.03	-0.10**	0.04
Parent first marriage ^b	0.44**	0.16	0.41**	0.14	0.24	0.14	0.37	0.16

	Emotional			Listening			Advice			Practical		
	B	SE		B	SE		B	SE		B	SE	
Parent health ^c	-0.06	0.07		0.02	0.06		-0.01	0.06		0.06	0.07	
Offspring age	-0.11***	0.01		-0.10***	0.01		-0.13***	0.01		-0.14***	0.01	
Minority status ^d	0.03	0.16		-0.30	0.14		0.20	0.14		0.02	0.16	
Random effect												
Intercept VAR	1.90***	0.17		1.20***	0.14		1.35***	0.14		1.89***	0.19	
Residual VAR	2.18***	0.11		2.35***	0.12		2.11***	0.11		2.31***	0.12	
-2 log likelihood	5,607.2			5,526.9			5,448.8			5,658.1		

Note. Parents $n = 633$, Offspring $n = 1384$. Outcomes were rated 1 = *less than once a year or never*, 2 = *yearly*; 3 = *a few times a year*, 4 = *monthly*, 5 = *a few times a month*, 6 = *weekly*, 7 = *a few times a week*, and 8 = *daily*. VAR = variance.

^a₁ = *male*, and 0 = *female*.

^b₁ = *married to offspring's other parent*, and 0 = *not married to offspring's other parent*.

^c₁ = *poor*, 2 = *fair*, 3 = *good*, 4 = *very good*, and 5 = *excellent*.

^d₁ = *minority*, and 0 = *nonminority*.

**
 $p < .01$,

 $p < .001$.