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# Capturing Between- and Within-Family Differences in Parental Support to Adult Children: A Typology Approach

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## Abstract

**Objectives.** Families differ widely in the support they provide to adult offspring, both with regard to the overall level as well as the extent to which support is evenly distributed across offspring. This study addressed these dynamics by creating family profiles based on the average level and differentiation of support among children. We also examined demographic and psychological factors that predict typology membership.

**Method.** We utilized data from 431 middle-aged parents (aged 40–60) with at least two adult children. Parents provided separate ratings of support given to each child. Latent profile analysis was applied to two indicators of within-family support: mean level and differentiation among offspring.

**Results.** Latent profile analysis identified four patterns of parental support: (a) high support–low differentiation (52%), (b) medium support–high differentiation (26%), (c) low support–low differentiation (17%), and (d) low support–very high differentiation (5%). These patterns reflected distinct family characteristics, such as parental resources, parental beliefs (i.e., equal treatment, obligation), and offspring characteristics.

**Discussion.** Our findings emphasize the need to capture dynamics of support exchanges among multiple offspring at the level of family.

**Key words:** Between-family differences—Parental support—Typology approach—Within-family differentiation.

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Parents do not stop providing assistance to their children when they reach maturity or when they establish their own households (Bucx, van Wel, & Knijn, 2012; Swartz, 2009). Rather, research has shown that emotional support, advice, practical assistance, and financial help from parents play an important role in adult children's lives (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009; Johnson, 2013). Further, providing support to adult children appears to have implications for

parents' well-being (Bangerter, Kim, Zarit, Birditt, & Fingerman, in press; Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010).

To date, research has examined support exchanges between parents and adult offspring by focusing on support that occurs within one parent–child dyad in a family or by aggregating all help given by a parent (Lye, 1996; Ward, 2008). This is, in part, due to the fact that studies often assess support from the adult children's reports (e.g.,

Johnson, 2013; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997), not reflecting support to multiple children. Also, studies using parents' perspectives typically aggregate support to all children, or select one focal child (e.g., Aquilino, 2005; Henretta, Grundy, & Harris, 2002).

Yet, most parents are involved in support exchanges with more than one grown child (US Census Bureau, 2012). Decisions to provide assistance and support to a member are affected by other relationships within a family (Davey, Janke, & Savla, 2004; Spitze, Ward, Deane, & Zhuo, 2012); the help that a parent gives to one child may potentially come at a cost to what can be given to other children. Thus, it is important to consider multiple family members to understand how middle-aged adults divide their time and energy in supporting grown children (Seltzer et al., 2005).

In this regard, an emerging perspective emphasizes the importance of patterns of interactions within families and incorporates multiple dimensions of interactions to characterize typologies at the level of family (i.e., family-centered or typology approach; Bergman & Magnusson, 1997; Mandara, 2003). This is consistent with families as a system; the family is an organized whole, functioning as a totality (Cox & Paley, 1997; Fingerman & Bermann, 2000). So far, most studies have used a variable-centered approach by examining "factors" contributing to differences in the amount of support given to each child (e.g., Fingerman et al., 2009; Kalmijn, 2013a; McGarry & Schoeni, 1997; Sutor, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2006). That is, researchers assume the family as a summation of individual members and examine individual variables such as offspring gender and income, rather than looking at the composition of the family (i.e., offspring's siblings) as a whole functioning unit. Although the variable-centered approach is useful to test theories regarding parental motives (e.g., altruism, exchanges) at the child level, this may not be helpful to describe how parents distribute their resources among adult children at the family level – as naturally occurring. To fill the gap of the literature, using a typology approach, we addressed "patterns" of within-family differentiation in parental support more directly, while also examining family-level characteristics.

## How Do Families Differ in Parental Support?

In this study, we examined how middle-aged adults provide support to "multiple" grown children, including different types of support (e.g., emotional support, advice, practical assistance, financial support) from the perspective of parents. On the whole, parents differ in the level (amount or frequency) of support they provide to their children; some parents may provide more support to their adult offspring than other families (Henretta, Wolf, Van Voorhis, & Soldo, 2012; Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993). Parents also differ in the degree to which they tailor support to specific grown offspring; some parents may differentiate among their children in providing support, whereas other parents may provide support to their children equally (Sutor, Sechrist, & Pillemer, 2007). Thus, to classify patterns of parental support at the "family" level (including multiple children), we considered two within-family indicators: (a) *mean level* support in the family and (b) *differentiation* among children.

Prior research has identified individual and familial characteristics that explain between-family differences in the levels of intergenerational support (i.e., which parents provide more support; Eggebeen, 1992; Henretta et al., 2002). As a way to address between-family differences in intergenerational ties, studies have also utilized a typology approach by grouping people into distinct classes (e.g., Hogan et al., 1993; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). Using support indicators (i.e., assistance, care, advice, money) exchanged between parents and adult children, Hogan and

coworkers (1993) identified four support patterns; low exchanges, high exchanges, high giving, and high receiving. Van Gaalen and Dykstra (2006) found five patterns of parent–adult child relationships by combining contact, support, and conflict; these typologies differed in emotional qualities as well as in levels of support. However, most typology studies have considered differences only in levels of support to distinguish patterns. Moreover, these studies have addressed "dyadic" patterns of exchanges occurring within individual parent–child dyads, so with little information regarding "family" patterns, including multiple relationships within families.

Families also differ in how support is distributed across adult children (e.g., equally or unequally). For example, some parents may be high in support overall, but differentiate among their children. Other parents may invest their support in one child and seek to give to others as well (Kalmijn, 2013a). Still, other parents may not give much to any of their children; differentiation is low, but so is mean level of support. Thus, the degree of differentiation in support that parents exhibit toward their offspring can be an important aspect characterizing adult families. Indeed, research on childhood suggests that the degree of parental differential treatment varies by family-level contexts, such as socioeconomic status, family structure, and family stress (Crouter, McHale, & Jenkins-Tucker, 1999; Jenkins, Rasbash, & O'Connor, 2003), even after controlling for child-specific characteristics (e.g., age, gender, needs, personality).

Recently, scholars have examined within-family variation among grown children in intergenerational ties (e.g., Becker, Salzberger, Lois, & Nauck, 2013; Fingerman et al., 2009; Kalmijn, 2013a; McGarry & Schoeni, 1997; Sutor et al., 2006). These within-family studies have examined theories regarding motives for parental support (e.g., altruism, exchanges), focusing on "child-specific" levels of support (i.e., which child gets more) and predictors (i.e., why that child gets more). These studies, however, are not informative regarding between-family differences in the within-family differences in parental support (i.e., which parents differentiate more or less). In other words, these studies have looked at whether some children have higher levels of support than other children, but they have not considered whether some parents are more likely to favor a particular child with more support (and others not), whereas other parents provide equally to all their children. Prior studies have found that grown children's emotional well-being was associated with the degree of parental differentiation in support within the family, with siblings who are favored reporting better well-being than siblings who are not favored (Jensen, Whiteman, Fingerman, & Birditt, 2013; Pillemer, Sutor, Pardo, & Henderson, 2010). Thus, it is important to consider variability as well as mean level of support within a family.

## Why Do Families Differ in Parental Support?

This study examined parental support to multiple children by combining the mean level (i.e., average level across children) and differentiation (i.e., variability among children). We considered three sets of characteristics that may explain different patterns of parental support: (a) parental resources, (b) parental beliefs, and (c) offspring characteristics.

### Parental Resources

Research has documented that parental resources (e.g., time, energy, money) are positively associated with *levels* of support to adult children. Parent's socioeconomic status (SES; e.g., income, education) predicts financial support (Grundy, 2005; McGarry & Schoeni, 1997), though it is less clear whether parental SES predicts

non-tangible support, such as help with household chores and child care (Henretta et al., 2002). Parents who are in better health also provide more support to adult children (Grundy, 2005; McGarry & Schoeni, 1997). The presence of spouse may also offer support; married parents provide more support to grown children, compared to non-married parents (e.g., divorced, single; (Aquilino, 2005; Henretta et al., 2012). Finally, prior research has shown racial differences in parental support; White parents provided more support to grown children than Black and Latino parents (Fingerman, Vanderdrift, Dotterer, Birditt, & Zarit, 2011; Swartz, 2009). These differences appeared to be associated with racial differences in available resources (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004). Thus, given that parental resources are associated with greater capacity to provide material support and better access to information and advice for adult children (Swartz, Kim, Uno, Mortimer, & O'Brien, 2011), we expected parents with more resources to provide a higher mean level of support to their adult children overall.

Regarding *differentiation* of parental support among adult children, we expected negative associations with parental resources (i.e., more resources and less differentiation). According to resource depletion theory (Blake, 1989), parents who have limited material resources (e.g., income, education) are likely to show differential investment across offspring (Suito et al., 2007). Under economic crisis, families often allocate their limited resources across family members disproportionately as a part of family strategies to ensure their physical and economic survival (Moen & Wethington, 1992). In addition to material resources, parents who are less available psychologically (e.g., high marital distress, poor mental health) tend to show more differentiation toward young children (Crouter et al., 1999; Jenkins et al., 2003). Thus, parents who have fewer psychosocial resources (e.g., high depression) also may differentiate more among adult offspring.

### Parental Beliefs About Helping Offspring

The ability of parents to provide support (i.e., resources) does not necessarily mean they provide such support to grown children. Actual support behaviors may be conditioned by beliefs about obligation toward family members (A. S. Rossi & P. H. Rossi, 1990; Silverstein, Gans, & Yang, 2006). Research has shown that parents feel different levels of obligations toward adult children depending on their characteristics, such as family structures and race/ethnicity (Aquilino, 2005; Coleman, Ganong, & Cable, 1997). Adults who showed stronger feelings of obligations tended to provide more support to their offspring (Fingerman et al., 2011). Thus, we hypothesized that parents with stronger feelings of obligation toward offspring will provide more support overall. Regarding differentiation among offspring, however, we did not specify a hypothesis for parental obligation; parents who feel more obligated to support their offspring might differentiate *less* between offspring due to a general norm of obligation applying to all children, or they might differentiate *more* if there is a child in need, since they feel more obligated to help.

In Western countries, strong norms call for parents to treat their children equally (Kalmijn, 2013a; Parsons, 1974). Despite these cultural norms, studies find that parents differentiate among their adult children in terms of emotional closeness and support (Suito et al., 2006). Yet, studies have not examined whether the degree of differentiation reflects parental beliefs about equal treatment directly. We only found one study examining parental values/beliefs (i.e., religiosity) to explain differentiation among adult children (Suito et al., 2007); more religious mothers were less likely to have a preference for one child in terms of emotional closeness. Here, we asked whether parents who have stronger beliefs about equal treatment are less likely to show within-family differentiation in support among grown children.

### Offspring Characteristics

Offspring characteristics may be associated with overall levels and differentiation in parental support across offspring. Because this study examined between-family differences in patterns of parental support, we focused on aggregate characteristics regarding the composition of grown offspring.

Prior research has established that parents invest more resources in their biological children compared to step or adopted children (Hamilton, Cheng, & Powell, 2007; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Kalmijn, 2013b). It appears that the differences between biological and non-biological children in parental support reflect differences in biology, family structure, and past history of parent-child ties. That is, parents typically give more to their biological children than to stepchildren for a variety of reasons (e.g., the relationship has a longer history, more affection, greater likelihood of the tie enduring, more likely receipt of support from biological children). Thus, we expected that middle-aged parents with only biological children would provide more overall support to offspring, compared to parents with at least one step or adopted child. Also, parents with an adopted or step child may differentiate among their children more in providing support – due to the heterogeneity of offspring composition.

Children in larger families also tend to receive less support from parents because of depletion of parental resources for any given child (Downey, 1995; Fingerman et al., 2009; Strohschein, Gauthier, Campbell, & Kleparchuk, 2008). Further, a larger family size is related to more opportunities for differentiation of parental support (Ward, Spitze, & Deane, 2009). Thus, we predicted that larger family size would predict lower levels of support as well as greater differentiation in support across members.

We considered age and gender composition of offspring. Feminist theories suggest that daughters retain stronger ties to their families of origin and receive more support from parents (Fingerman et al., 2009; Suito et al., 2006). Thus, having a daughter may be associated with higher overall levels of parental support. And, when offspring are all the same gender, there may be less within-family differentiation in parental support (Suito et al., 2007). Parents also give more support to younger adult children, reflecting their needs (Hartnett, Furstenberg, Birditt, & Fingerman, 2013). Therefore, we expected that parents with younger offspring would provide more support overall. Further, bigger age intervals between siblings may represent heterogeneity in life stages, which may result in greater parental differentiation among offspring.

Finally, provision of support is facilitated or limited by geographic distance. Having any coresiding child will increase the overall levels of parental support (Hank, 2007; Suito et al., 2006). Also, we expected that presence of a coresiding child to result in inequitable support across offspring – due to extensive support to the coresident offspring.

In sum, this study addressed patterns of parental support at the family level by creating a typology based on mean level and differentiation across multiple offspring. To predict typology membership, we considered a range of family characteristics, including parental resources, parental beliefs, and offspring characteristics. We expected that more parental resources (e.g., higher SES, better health) would be associated with patterns reflecting higher mean levels of parental support, but less differentiation across offspring. Regarding parental beliefs, we expected that stronger feelings of parental obligations would be associated with patterns with higher mean levels of parental support and stronger beliefs of equal treatment would be associated with less differentiation of parental support among offspring. We also considered aggregate levels of offspring characteristics (e.g.,

genetic relatedness, family size, age, gender, living arrangement) predicting patterns of parental support.

## Method

### Sample

Data were from the “Family Exchanges Study” (Fingerman et al., 2009). The original sample included 633 middle-aged parents (aged 40–60) who had at least one child over age 18 and one living parent in the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area. The study identified potential participants via listed samples from Genesys Corporation supplemented with random digit dialing within geographic area codes. Utilizing Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI), we surveyed the participants for approximately 1 hr in 2008. Participants responded to questions about their own background (e.g., age, education, income) and each of their grown children.

This study included a subsample of 431 middle-aged parents (68.1%) who had at least two adult offspring ( $N = 1,182$ ) to examine within-family patterns among multiple offspring (see Table 1 for sample characteristics). The subsample did not differ from families who have one offspring ( $n = 202$ ) based on parental characteristics (e.g., demographics, beliefs), except age – older parents were more likely to have more than one child ( $t = -7.40, p < .001$ ). Regarding offspring characteristics, families with multiple adult children were more likely to include non-biological offspring than families with one child ( $\chi^2 = 8.25, p < .01$ ). Also, families with multiple adult children showed lower mean levels of support given to offspring than families with one offspring ( $t = -5.96, p < .001$  for total support; Supplementary Table 1).

### Measures

#### Support provision

We assessed support parents provided to each grown child using six items from the Intergenerational Support Scale (ISS; Fingerman et al., 2009; Vaux, 1988): emotional support, practical assistance, advice, companionship, listening to talk about daily events, and financial support. Parents provided separate ratings of each type of support given to each child. Mean scores across the six types of support (i.e., “total” support index) were calculated ( $\alpha = .90$ ). We used the total support index for ease of interpretation, but each type of support was examined separately in post hoc analyses.

#### Parent’s resources

Parents reported their demographic characteristics representing parental resources: years of education, household income (1 = less than \$10,000 to 6 = \$100,000 or more), marital status (two dummy variables; 1 = remarried, 0 = not married; 1 = have ever divorced, 0 = have not divorced), employment status (1 = employed, 0 = not employed), and race/ethnicity (1 = racial/ethnic minority, 0 = non-Hispanic White).

Regarding parental health, parents rated their physical health on a 5-point scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). We assessed depressive symptoms using five items from the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis, 2000). The items (i.e., lonely, blue, worthless, hopeless about the future, no interest in things) were rated from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely), and a mean score was calculated ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

Among parental demographics, we also considered parent age and gender (1 = male and 0 = female). Although we did not hypothesize that these two demographics may represent parental resources, we included parent gender in the model as a control, given gender

Table 1. Parent and Offspring Characteristics

	M (SD)	Range
Parent characteristics		
Age	51.57 (4.73)	40–60
Male, %	45.9	—
Years of education	14.15 (2.05)	9–17
Household income <sup>a</sup>	4.41 (1.51)	1–6
Re/married, %	71.7	—
Ever divorced, %	20.4	—
Employed, %	74.9	—
Racial/ethnic minority, %	37.7	—
Health		
Physical health <sup>b</sup>	3.47 (1.08)	1–5
Depressive symptoms <sup>c</sup>	1.47 (0.67)	1–4.4
Beliefs about offspring		
Obligation to offspring <sup>d</sup>	3.70 (0.49)	2–5
Equal treatment <sup>e</sup>	3.48 (1.36)	1–5
Offspring characteristics		
All biological, %	75.6	—
Number of offspring	2.74 (1.13)	2–10
Age interval between offspring	5.61 (3.95)	0–19
Age of the youngest child		
All same gender, %	35.0	—
Have any daughter, %	81.4	—
Have any coresiding child, %	63.1	—

Notes. Family  $N = 431$ .

<sup>a</sup>Rated on a 6-point scale from 1 (less than \$10,000) to 6 (\$100,000 or more).

<sup>b</sup>Rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

<sup>c</sup>Mean of five items rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely).

<sup>d</sup>Mean of six items rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

<sup>e</sup>Rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal).

differences in supporting behaviors (A. S. Rossi & P. H. Rossi, 1990). Due to a high correlation with the youngest child’s age ( $r = .53, p < .001$ ), we did not include parental age in the model.

#### Parent’s beliefs about helping offspring

We considered two beliefs about helping offspring: (a) obligation and (b) equal treatment. For obligation toward offspring, we asked participants how often parents should provide their adult children the six types of support (e.g., emotional support, practical assistance, advice), rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Mean scores of the six items were computed ( $\alpha = .72$ ). For beliefs about equal treatment, parents indicated the extent to which they try to give each child the same amount of help, regardless of need, rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal).

#### Offspring characteristics

Parents also provided information about each grown child, including their relationship to that child (e.g., biological, step, adopted), age, gender, and living arrangement. Using information about each offspring, we created aggregate variables representing composition of offspring in the families. We considered whether all



children are biological (1 = *all biological*, 0 = *have non-biological child*). For offspring age, we included: (a) the age interval between the eldest and youngest children and (b) age of the youngest child. Offspring gender composition included: (a) whether all children are the same gender (1 = *same gender*, 0 = *mixed gender*) and (b) whether there is any daughter (1 = *have daughter*, 0 = *no daughter*). Also, we considered whether any grown child resided in the same household as the parents (1 = *have any coresiding child*, 0 = *no coresiding child*). Finally, the number of grown offspring in the family was included.

**Analytic Strategy**

**Description of support given to offspring**

We first looked at the intraclass correlations (ICC) to describe the amount of support given to multiple offspring (Donner & Koval, 1980; Griffin & Gonzalez, 1995). ICC is the proportion of the variance due to between-family difference among the total variance which is composed of within- and between-group variances. From a two-level multilevel model with no predictor (i.e., offspring nested within family), the ICC was calculated as the random intercept variance divided by the total variance (i.e.,  $\tau^2_{0i} / [\tau^2_{0i} + \sigma^2_e]$ ; Davey, Tucker, Fingerman, & Savla, 2009; Hoffman, 2007). Thus, 1 – ICC indicates the proportion of within-family variability.

Next, to represent within-family patterns of support among grown offspring, we calculated two (family-level) summary scores from the raw scores of support given to each offspring (Boyle et al., 2004): (a) *mean level* (i.e., average scores of support given to all offspring within a family) and (b) *differentiation* (i.e., deviation scores from the family mean; within-family standard deviations). We looked at the descriptive statistics of these within-family indicators, including correlations between them.

**Classification of within-family patterns of support**

We classified family patterns of support given to multiple children based on mean level and differentiation within the family. A latent profile analysis (LPA) was conducted using *Mplus* 7.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012). Before applying LPA, we transformed the original scores of mean level and differentiation into standardized scores (*T*-scores; *M* = 50, *SD* = 10) for ease of interpretation. We selected the best model based on model fit indicators, including the likelihood ratio chi-square test statistic, the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), the Lo–Mendell–Rubin likelihood ratio test (LMR LRT), and bootstrapped likelihood ratio test (BLRT).

**Prediction of within-family patterns of support**

After determining the optimal number of patterns, we examined which family characteristics differentiate the derived family patterns. Specifically, a multinomial logistic regression model was estimated with three sets of predictors (i.e., parental resources and beliefs, offspring characteristics). For the dependent variable (i.e., latent family pattern), we used the “most-likely” class variable which was constructed via the latent class posterior distribution. To correct the measurement errors between the “latent” class variable and the “most-likely” class variable, the misspecification rates (i.e., logits for the classification probabilities) were considered in the multinomial logistic regression model. This analysis was performed using R3STEP option in *Mplus* 7.3 (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014; Vermunt, 2010).

**Results**

**Description of Support Given to Multiple Offspring**

We first looked at how much differentiation (i.e., within-family variability) exists in amount of support given to each offspring (see Table 2). Consistent with prior studies (Suito et al., 2006), the two-level ICC revealed substantial within-family differentiation in support parents provided to their children. For the total support index (ICC = .40), within-family variability (60%) showed a larger portion of variance than between-family differences (40%). Thus, offspring *within* the same families differed in support received from parents somewhat more than they differed from offspring from other families (see Supplementary Figure 1). Proportions of within-family variance (i.e., differentiation) were similar across each type of support (ranged from 52% for emotional support to 63% for companionship).

We also examined bivariate associations between mean level support and differentiation within families (see Table 2). For total support, there was a negative association between mean level and differentiation ( $r = -.19, p < .001$ ); parents providing more support to adult offspring were less likely to differentiate among their offspring. For each type of support, tangible forms of support (e.g., practical, financial support) showed positive correlations for within-family means and differentiation, whereas non-tangible forms of support (e.g., emotional support, listening, advice) had negative correlations, except companionship. Thus, in general, parents who gave more tangible support also differentiated more among their offspring, but parents who gave more non-tangible support did so fairly equally to each offspring.

**Table 2.** Description of Support Provided to Each Grown Offspring

	ICC	Within-family mean level (a)		Within-family differentiation (b)		Correlation between (a) and (b)
		M (SD)	Range	M (SD)	Range	
Total support index <sup>a</sup>	.40	4.70 (1.33)	1–8	0.89 (0.80)	0–4.24	–.19***
Emotional support	.48	5.47 (1.78)	1–8	0.96 (1.05)	0–4.95	–.28***
Practical support	.44	3.83 (1.77)	1–8	1.10 (1.09)	0–4.95	.11*
Listening to talk	.38	5.77 (1.59)	1–8	1.06 (1.08)	0–4.95	–.36***
Companionship	.37	4.37 (1.52)	1–8	0.98 (1.01)	0–4.95	.01
Advice	.42	5.01 (1.58)	1–8	0.92 (0.99)	0–4.95	–.14**
Financial support	.43	3.74 (1.74)	1–8	1.10 (1.14)	0–4.95	.11*

Notes. Family *N* = 431. ICC = intraclass correlations (1,182 offspring nested within 431 families).

<sup>a</sup>Mean of six types of support rated on a 8-point scale from 1 (*less than once a year or never*) to 8 (*daily*).

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

### Classification of Within-Family Patterns of Support

We classified families into distinct patterns based on the average level and differentiation in “total” support given to adult offspring within families. The LPA identified four latent patterns of support as optimal (see [Supplementary Table 2](#) for the model fit). [Figure 1](#) demonstrates the mean scores of the within-family indicators for each pattern. As a post hoc analysis, we also repeated LPA using the average level and differentiation of each type of support given to adult offspring, and found similar results as ones from total support index (i.e., four-class model solution; see [Supplementary Figure 2](#)).

The first pattern, “high support–low differentiation” (52%) showed a high mean level ( $M = 55.20, SE = 1.33$ ) and low differentiation ( $M = 44.86, SE = 0.49$ ) in the total support given to grown children. Adult offspring in these families received support from parents frequently, and the levels of support did not differ much across offspring (see [Figure 2](#)). The second pattern, “medium support–high differentiation” (26%) had a medium mean level ( $M = 47.68, SE = 0.90$ ) and high differentiation ( $M = 58.93, SE = 0.97$ ) among offspring. Because the differentiation was high, some adult offspring in these families received a great deal of support, while others received very little, with medium levels of support from parents on average. The third pattern, “low support–low differentiation” (17%) was characterized by a low mean level ( $M = 39.25, SE = 2.74$ ) and low differentiation ( $M = 44.35, SE = 0.77$ ) in support. Offspring in this pattern received lower levels of support from parents at similar levels. The last pattern, “low support–very high differentiation” (5%) was characterized by a low mean level ( $M = 43.97, SE = 1.31$ ) but very high differentiation ( $M = 78.31, SE = 2.07$ ) among children. In this pattern, the parental support differed considerably across offspring, with perhaps one offspring receiving support while others received very little or no support.

### Prediction of Within-Family Patterns of Support

Next, we conducted a multinomial logistic regression to differentiate these four types of families, using three sets of characteristics (i.e., parent’s resources and beliefs, offspring characteristics). [Table 3](#) shows the effects of family characteristics on membership in these within-family patterns. All variables were entered simultaneously in the model; results reflect the effect of each variable when all other covariates are held constant. The first pattern (*high support–low differentiation*) was used as a reference pattern.

The second pattern of families (*medium support–high differentiation*) showed significant differences only in offspring characteristics,

compared to the reference pattern (*high support–low differentiation*). Specifically, these families were more likely to have non-biological offspring, larger family size, and bigger age gaps between offspring.

In the third pattern of families (*low support–low differentiation*), the parent was more likely to be father and have lower feelings of obligations toward adult offspring. In terms of offspring characteristics, these families were more likely to include non-biological offspring and the children were more likely to be older and live in separate households from parents.

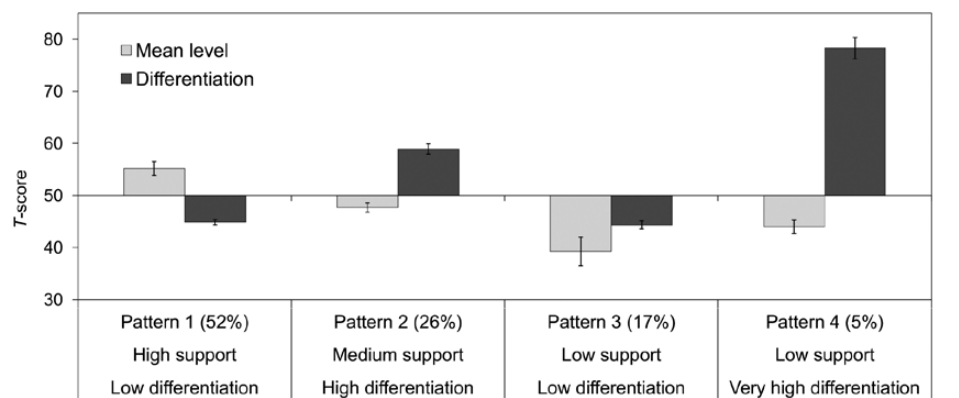
Finally, the fourth pattern of families (*low support–very high differentiation*) showed that the parent was more likely to be re/married, ever divorced, and show higher levels of depressive symptoms and lower beliefs about equal treatment. Also, the children were more likely to be younger and show bigger age gaps between offspring – compared to the reference pattern.

### Discussion

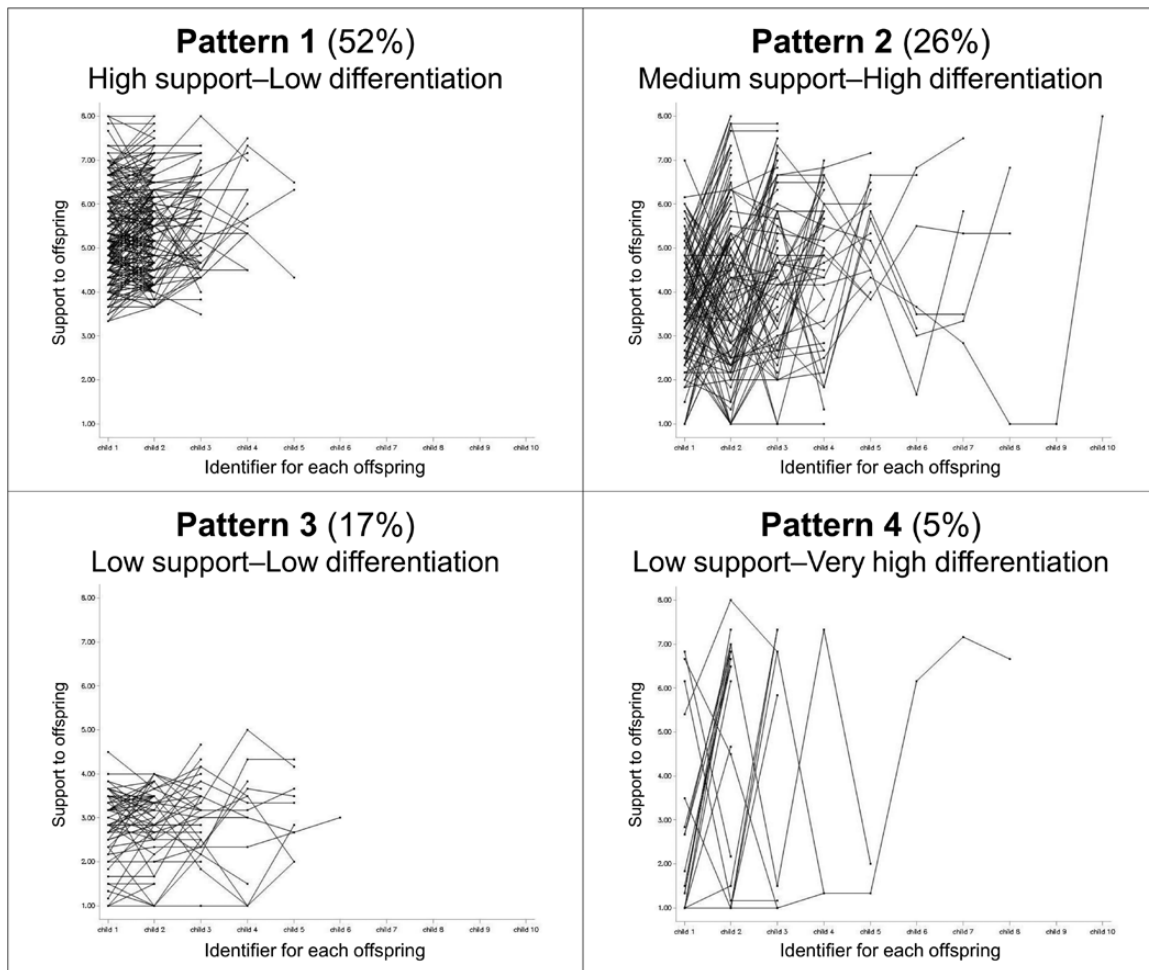
Research has indicated complexity in intergenerational ties, and one source contributing to complexity is multiple relationships within families ([Suito et al., 2006](#); [Ward et al., 2009](#)). However, less is known about how families allocate their finite resources to meet needs of multiple members within families. In an attempt to understand multiple relationships at the family level, we created profiles of parental support given to each of adult children, using mean levels and differentiation among offspring. Prior studies on intergenerational support have focused on only the levels of support – either overall levels across offspring or child-specific level ([Hogan et al., 1993](#); [Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997](#); [Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006](#)), but we added another dimension, differentiation in parental support to capture dynamics of between- and within-family differences in support.

### Within-Family Description of Parental Support

On the whole, differences within families were greater than differences between families in parental support. This is consistent with the within-family difference literature, emphasizing the variability in support and relationship qualities among multiple grown children ([Spitze et al., 2012](#); [Suito et al., 2006](#)). Associations between differentiation in support and average support to children in the family differed by types of support. Interestingly, parents who provided more tangible support were more likely to provide that support



**Figure 1.** Four latent patterns of within-family mean level and differentiation in total support given to adult offspring. The original scales of mean level and differentiation were transformed into standardized scores,  $T$ -scores (group  $M = 50, SD = 10$ ) for ease of interpretation.



**Figure 2.** Graphs of total support given to adult offspring by the latent patterns of within-family mean level and differentiation. In these raw graphs, connected lines indicate same families.

unequally across offspring. By contrast, for non-tangible support (e.g., emotional support), parents providing a greater amount of support tended to do so equally across offspring. Provision of tangible support (e.g., practical, financial support) may be contingent on specific needs of offspring. Further, material and time resources are finite, forcing parents to focus only on specific offspring (e.g., offspring with needs or in good relationships).

### Within-Family Patterns of Parental Support

We created four family patterns as combinations of mean levels and differentiation in parental support. The derived patterns suggest that amount of support is not the only factor that distinguishes families – rather the extent to which parents differentiate among their adult children can be important to distinguish families in their supporting behaviors.

Two patterns (Patterns 1 and 3) showed overall high and low mean levels of support respectively, but did not show much differentiation across offspring. About half of families (52%) were high in support (Pattern 1), while 17% of parents were low in support (Pattern 3), consistent with prior research showing that majority of parents continue providing assistance to their adult children (Fingerman et al., 2009; Swartz, 2009). Thus, despite differences in the mean levels (i.e., high vs. low), support was equally distributed across offspring in these two patterns in the substantial proportion of these families (about 70%).

The other two patterns (Patterns 2 and 4) were characterized by high (to very high) differentiation across adult offspring, along with medium to low mean levels of support respectively. In these families (31%), support provided to each offspring differed a lot, so the mean levels appear to represent just the middle points of support between offspring who get the most and the least. Thus, considering only the levels of support may not be enough to reveal dynamics within families and differences in support patterns between families. Indeed, these findings suggest that research examining level of support to only one focal child or aggregate children (Aquilino, 2005; Henretta et al., 2002) may miss the other extreme of support, possibly within the same family.

### Prediction of Within-Family Patterns of Support

We examined factors that predict membership of the derived patterns, including parental resources and beliefs, and offspring characteristics. Regarding parental resources, two variables were associated with pattern membership (i.e., depression, marital status). Specifically, parents who reported more depressive symptoms were more likely to show “low support–very high differentiation.” This is consistent with expectations that more resources (e.g., better mental health) would be associated with providing support frequently and equally across offspring (Crouter et al., 1999; Jenkins et al., 2003). The support measure included several types of non-tangible support

Table 3. Multinomial Logistic Regression Model Predicting Family Patterns of Support Given to Adult Offspring

	Pattern 1 (52%)			Pattern 2 (26%)			Pattern 3 (17%)			Pattern 4 (5%)		
	<i>High support– Low differentiation</i>			<i>Medium support– High differentiation</i>			<i>Low support– Low differentiation</i>			<i>Low support– Very high differentiation</i>		
	B	SE	OR	B	SE	OR	B	SE	OR	B	SE	OR
Parental resources												
Male ( <i>yes</i> = 1)	Ref.			-0.27	0.43	0.77	0.94*	0.37	2.56	0.24	1.26	1.27
Years of education	Ref.			0.13	0.17	1.14	0.03	0.10	1.03	-0.13	0.24	0.88
Household income <sup>a</sup>	Ref.			0.10	0.23	1.11	-0.16	0.18	0.86	-0.52	0.65	0.60
Re/married ( <i>yes</i> = 1)	Ref.			-0.13	0.51	0.88	-0.02	0.51	0.98	3.72*	1.59	41.14
Ever divorced ( <i>yes</i> = 1)	Ref.			-1.09	0.81	0.34	0.08	0.46	1.09	1.69*	0.79	5.42
Employed ( <i>yes</i> = 1)	Ref.			0.32	0.52	1.37	0.51	0.52	1.67	-1.62	0.86	0.20
Racial/ethnic minority ( <i>yes</i> = 1)	Ref.			0.69	0.71	2.00	0.28	0.44	1.33	0.97	1.11	2.63
Physical health <sup>b</sup>	Ref.			-0.10	0.24	0.90	0.01	0.20	1.01	-0.15	0.45	0.86
Depressive symptoms <sup>c</sup>	Ref.			0.73	0.45	2.07	0.43	0.28	1.53	1.30*	0.64	3.66
Parental beliefs												
Parental obligation <sup>d</sup>	Ref.			0.17	0.65	1.19	-0.93*	0.38	0.40	-1.50	1.11	0.22
Equal treatment <sup>e</sup>	Ref.			-0.21	0.20	0.81	-0.17	0.14	0.84	-0.85*	0.39	0.43
Offspring characteristics												
All biological ( <i>yes</i> = 1)	Ref.			-1.76***	0.46	0.17	-0.79*	0.35	0.45	-1.07	1.04	0.34
Number of offspring	Ref.			0.77**	0.26	2.17	0.36	0.23	1.43	-0.10	0.59	0.90
Age interval between offspring	Ref.			0.19**	0.07	1.21	0.08	0.06	1.09	0.22*	0.10	1.25
Age of the youngest child	Ref.			-0.04	0.06	0.96	0.14**	0.04	1.15	-0.28*	0.13	0.75
All same gender ( <i>yes</i> = 1)	Ref.			-0.96	0.86	0.38	-0.23	0.51	0.80	-0.25	0.86	0.78
Have any daughter ( <i>yes</i> = 1)	Ref.			-1.50	0.98	0.22	-0.84	0.59	0.43	-0.80	1.24	0.45
Have any coresiding child ( <i>yes</i> = 1)	Ref.			-0.39	0.54	0.68	-1.83***	0.43	0.16	-0.96	0.89	0.38

Notes. Family *N* = 431.

Ref. = reference pattern.

<sup>a</sup>Rated on a 6-point scale from 1 (*less than \$10,000*) to 6 (*\$100,000 or more*).

<sup>b</sup>Rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*).

<sup>c</sup>Mean of five items rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

<sup>d</sup>Mean of six items rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*).

<sup>e</sup>Rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

(e.g., emotional support, advice, listening, companionship), which may partially explain why parents' psychosocial resources appeared as more important in determining patterns of parental support – compared to economic resources (e.g., education, income).

Parental marital status was also associated with pattern membership; re/married parents and parents who have ever divorced were more likely to show “low support–very high differentiation.” This finding was not consistent with prior research showing higher support from married parents (e.g., Aquilino, 2005). Genetic relatedness of offspring (i.e., all offspring are biological) in the models may have overlapped with the “married” parents – thus, the effect of marital status may actually represent effects of “remarried” parents. Remarried parents typically provide less support to grown children than do parents married to the child's other parent (Kalmijn, 2013b). Nonetheless, we also included ever-divorced in the models, which should have partially controlled for the remarried group. Future research should seek to better explain why married parents would fall into this pattern.

Among parental demographics, we also found a significant effect of parent's gender, although gender was not a predictor for parental resources. Fathers were more likely to show a pattern of “low support–low differentiation.” This is consistent with gender differences in supporting behaviors in adult families (A. S. Rossi & P. H. Rossi, 1990).

For parental beliefs, both beliefs about obligation and equal treatment were associated with pattern membership. As expected, parents with stronger feelings of obligation toward adult offspring were less likely to show a pattern of “low support–low differentiation.” Interestingly, our finding also showed that parents who harbored stronger beliefs about equal treatment were less likely to have a pattern with “low support–very high differentiation.” Although prior studies examining normative beliefs have mainly focused on filial obligation to assist aging parents (e.g., Klein Ikkink, Van Tilburg, & Knipscheer, 1999; Silverstein et al., 2006) or parental obligation to support adult children (e.g., Daatland, Herlofson, & Lima, 2011; De Vries, Kalmijn, & Liefbroer, 2009), beliefs about specific motives and manners of helping family members may be involved in support (Fingerman, Cheng, Cichy, Birditt, & Zarit, 2013).

Finally, except gender composition, the composition of offspring in the family was significantly associated with patterns of parental support. Specifically, families with all biological children were more likely to show “high support–low differentiation” (Kalmijn, 2013b). Also, larger families were more likely to have a pattern of medium support and high differentiation (Fingerman et al., 2009; Ward et al., 2009). With regard to offspring age interval, families with bigger age spaces between offspring tended to show patterns with high differentiation (Sutor et al., 2007). Given that age is one of the central factors reflecting offspring's needs (Eggebeen, 1992; Hartnett et al.,



2013), this finding may show that parents are providing support, responding to differences in needs among children. Families with older children were more likely to have low mean levels and less likely to have very high differentiation, suggesting these older grown children all received little parental support (Hartnett et al., 2013). Families with any coresiding children were less likely to show low support and low differentiation. These findings regarding offspring characteristics suggest that the patterns of parental support given to adult children reflect recipients' characteristics (Suitor et al., 2007).

Some limitations of this study should be noted. First, we included offspring characteristics in aggregate, and did not specify conditions for each offspring that may lead to parental differentiation. Given that exchanges of support are contingent on needs of receivers (Davey et al., 2004), individual characteristics of each child (e.g., income, marital status) should be considered for patterns of parental support. Second, although we relied on reports of one parent regarding support given to each child, for a better understanding of family patterns, we might need to incorporate reports from other members in the families (e.g., both parents, offspring). Finally, the mean levels and differentiation within the same patterns did not differ by type of support, but it might be possible that the effects of some of the predictor variables can still differ between different kinds of support (e.g. financial resources are probably more closely linked to financial support than to emotional support).

Despite such limitations, this study is one of few to consider intergenerational support at family levels by incorporating both aspects of mean levels and differentiation and to investigate factors associated with family patterns of parental support. The existing theories and most empirical studies have used a child-parent dyad as the conceptual and analytical unit and provided only indirect evidence for variations within families. It would be important for future research to develop theories to explain dynamics between multiple members within families.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material can be found at: <http://psychsocgerontology.oxfordjournals.org/>

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