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## Intergenerational Support and Marital Satisfaction: Implications of Beliefs About Helping Aging Parents

*Everyday support given to aging parents is a salient aspect of married life that may have implications for marital quality. Among 132 middle-aged couples drawn from Wave 1 of the Family Exchanges Study, the authors examined the moderating effects of each spouse's normative and motivational beliefs about helping parents on associations between the frequency of*

*everyday support that wives and husbands gave to their own parents and marital satisfaction. Husbands' more frequent provision of support was linked to wives' greater marital satisfaction when reports of personal rewards linked to helping parents were high for wives or low for husbands. Conversely, wives' more frequent provision of support was linked to husbands' lower marital satisfaction when reports of filial obligation were low for husbands or high for wives. Findings highlight the interdependence within couples and indicate that both spouses' perceptions are important in understanding linkages between intergenerational support and marital satisfaction.*

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This article was edited by Kelly Raley.

*Key Words: couples, intergenerational relationships, marital quality, marriage, parent-child relationships, social support.*

Popular culture has long been rife with colorful characterizations of how relationships with parents can affect marital functioning, as depicted in television sitcoms such as *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996–2005) and movies such as *Monster-in-Law* (2005). Likewise, the consequences of intergenerational ties for satisfaction within the marriage have been explored as a theme in the family therapy literature (e.g., Bowen, 1978; Silverstein, 1990). Nevertheless,

relatively little theoretical and empirical work has examined the intersection of parent–child ties in adulthood and marital relations. Scholars have noted, however, that married couples often have four or more parents with whom they share their time, resources, and affection through the provision of social support (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). Because everyday types of help given to parents (e.g., advice, emotional support, practical assistance, financial aid) result in less time and resources available to invest in the marriage, the frequency of this support may have critical implications for each spouse’s marital satisfaction.

The linkages between everyday support given to parents and marital satisfaction are particularly valuable to examine among middle-aged couples for at least two reasons. First, prior research indicates that middle-aged men and women provide emotional support, advice, or practical assistance to their parents at least once per week (Fingerman, Kim, Tennant, Birditt, & Zarit, 2015). Second, the frequency of everyday support given to parents tends to increase throughout midlife as a consequence of parents’ emerging health problems and age-related life circumstances such as the transition to widowhood (Kim et al., 2016). Hence, for middle-aged couples, everyday support given to aging parents is likely to represent a salient and enduring aspect of married life. In this study, we used a dyadic perspective to examine associations between the everyday support that wives and husbands gave to their own parents and marital satisfaction. We also considered how each spouse’s beliefs about helping parents condition these associations.

## BACKGROUND

### *Theoretical Framework*

This study was guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives that suggest the interdependence among married couples with regard to implications of each spouse’s family support roles for marital quality. According to family systems theory, tension between spouses will often arise as a result of a third party’s involvement in their lives (Bowen, 1978). In particular, a partner’s lack of differentiation from his or her family of origin can be problematic for the marital system. With respect to everyday support

given to parents, the provision of more frequent support may reflect the presence of a powerful parent–child bond that diminishes the role of the adult child’s spouse. Consequently, the spouse may be dissatisfied with the couple’s relationship. A wife who gives more frequent everyday help to her own parents, for example, may be highly interdependent with her parents in a way that interferes with functioning in her marital role. As a result, her husband may be unhappy with the marriage because he resents this interference and the amount of time his wife spends with her parents.

Furthermore, role theory asserts that ideals, values, and role responsibilities are inevitably in conflict over the distribution of one’s limited resources (e.g., time, emotions, material goods; Goode, 1960). Applied to everyday support given to parents, providing more frequent help may be linked to lower marital satisfaction because spending a greater amount of time and energy in the adult child role results in less available time and energy to devote to one’s marital role. Spouses may view aging parents as competitors for time and affection, so high levels of support given to parents by one spouse may lead to feelings of jealousy and rivalry in his or her partner (Chasin, Grunebaum, & Herzog, 1990; Silverstein, 1990).

Finally, interdependence theory proposes that partners influence each other’s experiences and depend on one another to obtain valued needs including social support, affection, and emotional closeness (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). In turn, levels of relationship satisfaction reflect the extent to which each individual favorably evaluates the relationship and believes that his or her partner adequately fulfills these relational needs. Specific to middle-aged couples, it is therefore possible that more frequent everyday support given to parents may be related to lower marital satisfaction in both partners because working to fulfill the needs of parents invariably takes time away from attending to needs within the marriage.

### *Intergenerational Support and Marriage*

Parents are an important source of support in their adult offspring’s marriage but may also contribute to marital strain (e.g., Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Reczek, Lui, & Umberson, 2010). The relationship dynamics among grown children, their parents, and their spouses are

challenging to navigate for all parties given the involuntary nature of the in-law tie and the often difficult negotiation of power and status in the family (Morr Serewicz, 2006). Moreover, mutual influences occur within these relational triads, such that interactions between one dyad (e.g., adult child and parent) have the potential to affect interactions between another dyad (e.g., adult child and spouse). Middle-aged couples commonly report unresolved marital issues linked to relationships with parents, including the determination of boundaries and distance between the couple and their families of origin (Silverstein, 1990), the balance of time spent with the extended family versus the nuclear family, and conflict related to respecting the wishes of one's parents versus the wishes of one's spouse (Beaton, Norris, & Pratt, 2003).

To date, findings on the linkages between giving support to parents and marital quality have largely focused on caregiving for disabled older parents (i.e., providing help with basic activities of daily living). This work suggests that children who feel more burdened (Adamson, Feinauer, Lund, & Caserta, 1992; Ron, 2006) or have spent a longer period of time giving support to parents (Bookwala, 2009) experience lower marital quality, perhaps as a result of spillover from the support role to the marriage. Other studies have found that changes in marital quality depend on characteristics of the caregiving situation. Suito and Pillemer (1994), for example, found no significant changes in marital satisfaction on average among wives caring for their disabled older parents during the course of a year. When declines in wives' marital satisfaction did occur, they were related to wives' reports that their husbands were emotionally unsupportive or tried to interfere with caregiving efforts. Unsupportive husbands tended to view their wives' care role as hindering their performance in other family roles, especially with respect to their marriage. Similarly, in a study of everyday support exchanges with parents, wives and husbands were less satisfied with their marriages when they gave more frequent support to their own respective parents than their partner gave to his or her own parents (Lee, Zarit, Rovine, Birditt, & Fingerman, 2012). Together, these studies highlight the value of considering the experiences and views of both spouses. Because everyday types of support given to parents are common and occur for a much longer duration

than the provision of filial caregiving support (Cooney & Dykstra, 2013), each spouse's perceptions and behaviors with regard to everyday help given to parents may have implications for marital satisfaction.

#### *Implications of Spouses' Beliefs About Helping Parents*

Husbands' and wives' beliefs about their role in supporting aging parents may condition the linkages between help given to parents and satisfaction within the marriage. For instance, Peplau (1983) conceptualized roles as consistent patterns of individual activity that are composed of behavior, cognition, and affect, which are inherently embedded in the context of interpersonal relationships. This view considers roles to be reciprocal in that they both influence and are influenced by the attitudes of each partner in a relationship. Likewise, interdependence theory posits that relational partners mutually convey their own personal goals and values with regard to their behavior in a given role using direct and indirect means (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). Scholars have argued that such dispositional factors may be useful in explaining how patterns of interdependence differ across dyads (Kelley et al., 2003; Wickham & Knee, 2012). Thus, the beliefs of each spouse may be essential in understanding how the everyday help that husbands and wives give to their own parents is linked to marital satisfaction. In this study, we focused on each spouse's normative and motivational beliefs about helping parents because cultural and emotional aspects of helping may affect how this support is experienced within a marriage.

*Normative beliefs.* Beliefs about filial norms are a major component of intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). Filial obligation refers to the extent to which one believes that adult children should give support to their parents. Although most adults in the United States report some degree of obligation to help aging parents (Dellmann-Jenkins & Brittain, 2003), the strength of these beliefs tends to vary widely (Fry, 1996). People are likely to be more satisfied with their social roles when their role behavior is congruent with their own attitudes or beliefs (Peplau, 1983). When a husband or wife gives more frequent support to parents, marital strain linked to these exchanges

may therefore be attenuated when the spouse perceives high filial obligation. Similarly, when a wife or husband reports high filial obligation and the spouse gives more frequent support to parents, it is plausible that both spouses may be happier in the marriage because the partner's intergenerational support behavior is consistent with the strong normative values expressed by the wife or husband. These couples may be less likely to experience marital tension that is linked to the provision of support to parents. The linkages between support given to parents and marital satisfaction may be exacerbated, however, when the support provider's filial obligation is high but the partner's filial obligation is low because incongruence in spouses' beliefs about their social roles can contribute to increased marital conflict (Peplau, 1983).

*Motivational beliefs.* Rewarding aspects of parent-child relationships (e.g., feelings of closeness, understanding, and affirmation) are another key element of intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). Indeed, personal rewards derived from providing social support are predictive of intergenerational exchange patterns (Fingerman, Pillemer, Silverstein, & Sutor, 2012). Put simply, people are more inclined to allocate time and energy into maintaining support exchanges with aging parents when doing so makes them feel good. In this study, we considered the moderating effects of motivational beliefs about helping parents that reflect feelings of personal rewards (e.g., feeling closer to parents or feeling good about oneself) as a result of giving support to parents.

When a husband or wife gives frequent support to their parents and derives personal rewards from doing so, marital strain related to giving this support may be attenuated. Similarly, when a husband or wife perceives helping parents as highly rewarding and the spouse's partner gives more frequent support to parents, both spouses may be more satisfied in the marriage because the partner's support behavior is aligned with the personal values reported by the husband or wife. In turn, support given to aging parents may be less likely to generate marital conflict. The link between support given to parents and marital satisfaction may be exacerbated, however, when the support provider's perceptions of personal rewards related to helping parents are high

but the partner's perceptions of these rewards are low. Discrepancy in these beliefs may reflect differences in the degree to which spouses rely on the marriage to fulfill important social needs (e.g., affection, emotional support), which may lead to decreased marital satisfaction (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993).

*Potential gender differences.* Despite the emergence of more egalitarian family roles among middle-aged couples during the past few decades, wives continue to give more frequent support to aging parents than their husbands provide (Kahn, McGill, & Bianchi, 2011). In addition, women traditionally experience more societal pressure to prioritize their engagement in multiple family support roles and to perform well in each of these roles (Blair-Loy, 2003). Furthermore, when compared with men, women report greater strain in managing competing demands related to their numerous roles, including the provision of everyday support to their partner, children, and parents (Stephens, Franks, Martire, Norton, & Atienza, 2009). Wives' beliefs and behaviors connected to helping aging parents are therefore likely to have particularly strong implications for satisfaction within the marriage. When wives give more frequent support to parents, marital strain related to this support may be attenuated if wives view helping their parents as personally rewarding and congruent with their own values. In addition, wives who give more frequent support to parents may be happier in their marriages when husbands have strong normative or motivational beliefs about helping parents. Husbands who value giving help to parents may be less reliant on their wives to meet their social needs and more supportive of their wives' involvement with parents, which may reduce marital strain linked to wives' high levels of commitment in this family support role. Conversely, wives' more frequent support given to parents may lead to heightened marital conflict if reports of filial obligation are high for wives but low for husbands.

Research has consistently found that men rely heavily on their spouses for emotional support needs, whereas women tend to obtain support from relatives, friends, and neighbors as well as from their partners (Antonucci, 2001; Stevens & Westerhof, 2006). Moreover, wives tend to provide more frequent emotional support to their husbands than vice versa (Verhofstadt, Buysse,

& Ickes, 2007). Consequently, on average, it is probable that husbands are more dependent on their spouses to meet their social needs. As such, when wives give more frequent support to parents and derive personal rewards from giving this help, husbands who do not share their wives' values about helping parents may be less satisfied with the marriage. These husbands may resent their wives' firm commitment to helping parents, which ultimately takes wives' time and energy away from attending to needs within their marriage. In contrast, when wives provide more frequent support to parents, marital dissatisfaction may be attenuated among husbands who report strong normative or motivational beliefs about helping parents. These husbands are likely to hold a more positive and supportive view their wives' provision of everyday help to parents, which may buffer marital strain related to this support.

#### THE PRESENT STUDY

We examined dyadic linkages between the frequency of everyday support that wives and husbands gave to their own parents and marital satisfaction reported by both partners. Among husbands and wives, we hypothesized that more frequent support provided to parents by either party would be associated with lower marital satisfaction. Of primary interest to this study, we also considered the moderating effects of each spouse's normative and motivational beliefs about helping parents on these associations. With regard to the link between one's own more frequent provision of support and lower marital satisfaction, we predicted that this association would be buffered when either spouse's normative or motivational beliefs about helping parents were high, but exacerbated when one's own beliefs were high but one's partner's beliefs were low. We hypothesized that these three moderation effects would be stronger for wives than for husbands. Turning to the link between one's partner's more frequent provision of support and lower marital satisfaction, we predicted that this association would be buffered when either spouse's normative or motivational beliefs about helping parents were high, but exacerbated when one's partner's beliefs were high but one's own beliefs were low. We hypothesized that these three moderation effects would be stronger for husbands than for wives.

#### METHOD

##### *Sample and Procedures*

The sample consisted of heterosexual married couples drawn from Wave 1 of the Family Exchanges Study (Fingerman et al., 2011) in 2008. Couples were recruited in a series of two steps. First, one eligible participant was identified within each household. Participants were recruited from the Philadelphia Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (urban, suburban, and rural areas), which comprises five counties in southeastern Pennsylvania and four counties in New Jersey (Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2001). Individuals were eligible if they were between the ages of 40 and 60 years and had at least one living parent and at least one living child aged 18 years or older. Potential participants were contacted via telephone using lists from Genesys Corporation, a stratified sampling method by age and gender (aged 40 to 50 years and aged 51 to 60 years), and random digit dialing in regional area codes. A total of 845 eligible participants were identified. Of these individuals, 633 (75%) completed an hour-long computer-assisted telephone interview concerning their relationships with their parents and adult children.

Participants were then asked if the research team could contact their parents, children aged 18 years or older, and a spouse if the participant was married and spouses shared biological parenthood of the adult offspring. Among the 633 participants, 335 (51%) were married at the time of the interview, and 287 (86%) of these participants agreed for their spouses to be contacted. Of the 287 spouses, 197 (71%) completed interviews; thus, a total of 197 couples participated in the study. Of these couples, 65 (33%) were not able to provide data on husbands' and wives' support given to parents because one spouse had no living parents. Therefore, analyses included 132 couples consisting of husbands and wives who each had at least one living parent. Table 1 shows demographic and background characteristics for the 132 married couples.

##### *Measures*

*Marital satisfaction.* Marital satisfaction was assessed with one item adapted from prior research (Umberson, 1989). Participants rated the overall quality of the relationship with their

Table 1. Demographic and Background Characteristics of Wives and Husbands

Characteristic	Wives			Husbands		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i> (%)
Age	49.74	4.62		51.50	4.98	
Non-Hispanic White			113 (86)			115 (89)
Education level						
High school			38 (29)			32 (24)
Some college			32 (24)			27 (21)
College graduate (4-year degree)			30 (23)			43 (33)
Post graduate			30 (23)			30 (23)
Currently employed						
Full-time			80 (61)			111 (85)
Part-time			23 (17)			4 (3)
Mother currently living			114 (86)			114 (86)
Mother's age	77.07	7.29		78.92	6.94	
Father currently living			68 (52)			64 (49)
Father's age	77.71	6.72		78.44	6.14	
Both parents currently living			50 (38)			46 (35)
Distribution of couple's help to parents						
Own parents helped more			59 (45)			42 (32)
Partner's parents helped more			47 (36)			64 (49)
About equal to both sets of parents			21 (16)			22 (17)
Do not give any help			5 (4)			4 (3)

Note. *N* = 132 married couples.

spouse on a scale from 1 = *poor* to 5 = *excellent*. Mean scores were 4.11 for wives ( $SD = 0.95$ , range = 1.00–5.00) and 4.21 for husbands ( $SD = 0.97$ , range = 1.00–5.00).

*Support given to own parents.* To determine the amount of social support that each individual gave to his or her own parent(s), we examined six types of everyday support using the Intergenerational Support Scale (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009): emotional, practical, socializing, advice, financial, and listening to the other talk about daily events. Participants reported how often they gave each type of support on a scale from 1 = *less than once a year or not at all* to 8 = *daily*. In line with prior studies (Fingerman et al., 2011; Silverstein, Gans, & Yang, 2006), we calculated the mean frequency of support given to parents. Mean given support was 4.25 for wives ( $SD = 1.36$ , range = 1.00–7.17,  $\alpha = .87$ ) and 3.61 for husbands ( $SD = 1.29$ , range = 1.00–6.50,  $\alpha = .87$ ).

*Normative beliefs about helping parents.* Filial obligation was assessed through six items adapted from prior work (Fingerman et al., 2011; Silverstein et al., 2006). Participants

reported how often they believe that middle-aged offspring should help their parents with the six Intergenerational Support Scale domains of support from 1 = *never* to 5 = *always*. Mean scores were 3.92 for wives ( $SD = 0.50$ , range = 1.33–5.00,  $\alpha = .79$ ) and 3.89 for husbands ( $SD = 0.52$ , range = 2.33–5.00,  $\alpha = .79$ ).

*Motivational beliefs about helping parents.* We measured motivational beliefs with six items assessing feelings of personal rewards as a result of helping. Participants indicated the degree to which they helped their parents from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a great deal* for the following reasons during the past 12 months: feeling especially close to his/her parent(s); when helping; helping is a way to feel close to his/her parent(s); he/she would feel bad if he/she did not help; he/she feels great when his/her parent(s) is/are doing well; he/she finds it rewarding to help his/her parent(s); and he/she helps his/her parent(s) to feel like a good person. Mean scores were 3.60 for wives ( $SD = 0.75$ , range = 1.00–5.00,  $\alpha = .71$ ) and 3.52 for husbands ( $SD = 0.84$ , range = 1.00–5.00,  $\alpha = .80$ ).

*Control variables.* We identified background characteristics that were anticipated to be related to marital satisfaction: age, minority status (1 = racial or ethnic minority, 0 = non-Hispanic White), years of education, and depressive symptoms. Depressive symptoms were assessed with five items from the Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis & Melisarator, 1983). On a scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*, participants reported how distressed or bothered they were during the past 7 days by the following problems: feeling lonely, feeling blue, feeling no interest in things, feeling hopeless about the future, and feelings of worthlessness. Mean scores were 1.49 for wives ( $SD = 0.63$ , range 1.00–4.60,  $\alpha = .80$ ) and 1.47 for husbands ( $SD = 0.64$ , range = 1.00–3.80,  $\alpha = .84$ ).

### Statistical Analyses

*Covariates.* To determine covariates, we conducted bivariate correlations between potential covariates (age, minority status, years of education, and depressive symptoms) and marital satisfaction. Depressive symptoms were significantly related to marital satisfaction for both wives ( $r = -.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and husbands ( $r = -.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, we controlled for each spouse's depressive symptoms. Age, minority status, and years of education were not correlated with marital satisfaction. Covariates that are not related to the dependent variable may lead to spurious relationships between variables (Rovine, von Eye, & Wood, 1988). Therefore, in line with prior studies (Fingerman et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2012), we only included covariates that were significantly related to the outcome in the models.

*Actor-partner interdependence model.* To account for nonindependence in dyadic data and to evaluate mutual influences within couples, we used the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny, 1996) with the mixed-model procedure in SPSS Version 22 (IBM Corp, 2013). The APIM combines a conceptual model of relational interdependence with statistical techniques that allow the simultaneous estimation of each partner's influence within the dyad. Hence, we examined dyadic associations between the frequency of everyday support given to parents reported by both parties and each spouse's report of marital satisfaction. In this study, *actor effects* refer to the extent

to which the frequency of support given to one's own parents is associated with marital satisfaction. *Partner effects* refer to the extent to which the frequency of everyday support that one's partner gives to parents is associated with marital satisfaction. Counter to traditional models that consider the person as the unit of analysis (e.g., regressions), the APIM considers the dyad as the unit of analysis. As such, actor and partner effects for wives and husbands were tested using spouse gender as a distinguishing variable ( $-1 = \text{husband}$ ,  $1 = \text{wife}$ ) within the same model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006).

Hierarchical models were conducted to determine the associations between the frequency of everyday support that each partner gave to his or her own parents and marital satisfaction as well as the moderating effects of each spouse's normative and motivational beliefs about helping parents on these linkages. Each model estimated a separate intercept for wives and husbands to enable examination of actor and partner effects for each spouse. Separate analyses were performed for each hypothesized moderator. In the first step, we entered actor and partner reports of the frequency of support provided to parents and depressive symptoms. In the second step, we added actor and partner beliefs about helping parents. We included four interaction terms in the third step to evaluate whether actor and partner effects vary on the basis of the actor and partner moderator variables (e.g., Actor Given Support  $\times$  Partner Filial Obligation; Garcia, Kenny, & Ledermann, 2015). Finally, in the fourth step, we added two three-way interaction terms in each model (Actor Given Support  $\times$  Actor Beliefs  $\times$  Partner Beliefs; Partner Given Support  $\times$  Actor Beliefs  $\times$  Partner Beliefs) to evaluate whether the associations between support given to parents and marital satisfaction varied as a function of the relative levels of each belief reported by husbands and wives. All predictors and covariates were grand mean centered (i.e., computed across the sample of husbands and wives combined; Kenny et al., 2006). To examine the nature of significant interactions, the statistical significance of associations between everyday support given to parents and marital satisfaction was evaluated at one standard deviation above and below the grand mean of the belief moderator variables to represent high and low levels of each belief, respectively (Aiken & West, 1991).

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Wives' and Husbands' Scores

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Wife depressive symptoms <sup>a</sup>									
2. Husband depressive symptoms <sup>a</sup>	.02								
3. Wife given support <sup>b</sup>	.03	-.15							
4. Husband given support <sup>b</sup>	-.001	-.08	-.02						
5. Wife filial obligation <sup>c</sup>	-.03	-.05	.17 <sup>†</sup>	-.17 <sup>†</sup>					
6. Husband filial obligation <sup>c</sup>	-.12	.02	.07	.27**	.06				
7. Wife personal rewards <sup>d</sup>	-.02	-.02	.23*	-.11	.29**	.09			
8. Husband personal rewards <sup>d</sup>	-.01	.09	-.04	.27**	.02	.39***	.19*		
9. Wife marital satisfaction <sup>e</sup>	-.37***	-.14	-.12	.08	-.17 <sup>†</sup>	-.03	-.12	-.01	
10. Husband marital satisfaction <sup>e</sup>	-.13	-.39***	-.04	.10	-.09	.19*	-.06	.08	.46***

Note.  $N = 132$  married couples.

<sup>a</sup>Mean of five items rated from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*. <sup>b</sup>Mean of six items rated from 1 = *less than once a year or not at all* to 8 = *daily*. <sup>c</sup>Mean of six items rated from 1 = *never* to 5 = *always*. <sup>d</sup>Mean of six items rated from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a great deal*. <sup>e</sup>Rated from 1 = *poor* to 5 = *excellent*.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .07$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## RESULTS

First, we examined bivariate associations among key study variables in preliminary analyses. As shown in Table 2, significant correlations were found between wives' and husbands' reports of personal rewards linked to helping parents ( $r = .19, p = .03$ ) and marital satisfaction ( $r = .46, p < .001$ ).

In the first step of the APIM, there were no significant associations between the frequency of everyday support given to parents and marital satisfaction within the couple. We present coefficients and standard errors from each step of the analyses to show the moderating effects of spouses' beliefs about helping parents for wives (Table 3) and husbands (Table 4).

### Moderating Effects of Beliefs About Helping Parents

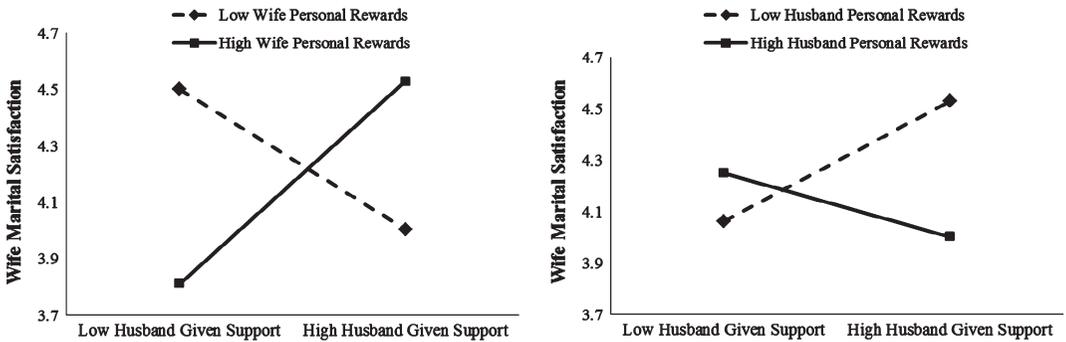
*Wives' marital satisfaction.* As shown in Table 3, the link between husbands' provision of support to parents and wives' marital satisfaction was moderated by wives' motivational beliefs ( $B = .28, p = .003$ ). Husbands' more frequent support provided to their own parents was significantly associated with wives' greater marital satisfaction when wives' personal rewards linked to helping parents were high ( $B = .26, p = .01$ ) but not low ( $B = -.18, p = .06$ ). In other words, wives were more satisfied with their marriages when husbands gave more support to parents and wives perceived helping their own parents to be highly rewarding.

The association between husbands' support given to parents and wives' marital satisfaction was also moderated by husbands' motivational beliefs ( $B = -.16, p = .02$ ). Figure 1 shows that husbands' more frequent provision of support to parents was significantly associated with wives' greater marital satisfaction when these beliefs were low ( $B = .17, p = .03$ ) but not high ( $B = -.09, p = .28$ ). Hence, wives were more satisfied with their marriages when husbands gave more frequent support and reported fewer personal rewards from helping their parents.

Regarding normative beliefs, there was a significant three-way interaction of wives' support given to parents, wives' filial obligation, and husbands' filial obligation ( $B = .56, p = .04$ ). Wives' more frequent support given to parents was linked to their own lower marital satisfaction when wives' filial obligation was high and husbands' filial obligation was low ( $B = -.30, p = .01$ ), but not when both spouses reported high beliefs ( $B = .12, p = .28$ ) or low beliefs ( $B = .08, p = .58$ ), or when wives' beliefs were low and husbands' beliefs were high ( $B = -.10, p = .50$ ). Thus, wives were less satisfied with their marriages when they gave more frequent help to their own parents and their husbands did not share their high levels of filial obligation.

The association between wives' support provided to parents and wives' marital satisfaction was not moderated by the beliefs of either spouse, which indicates that this association did not vary on the basis of wives' or husbands' beliefs about helping parents. The three-way

FIGURE 1. THE MODERATING EFFECTS OF WIVES' AND HUSBANDS' MOTIVATIONAL BELIEFS ABOUT HELPING PARENTS ON ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN HUSBANDS' SUPPORT GIVEN TO PARENTS AND WIVES' MARITAL SATISFACTION.



interaction of husbands' support given to parents, wives' filial obligation, and husbands' filial obligation was also not significant. Likewise, the three-way interactions of wives' and husbands' support, wives' personal rewards, and husbands' personal rewards were not significant, indicating that linkages between support given to parents and wives' marital satisfaction were not conditioned by the relative levels of wives' and husbands' motivational beliefs.

*Husbands' marital satisfaction.* As presented in Table 4, the link between wives' support provided to parents and husbands' marital satisfaction was moderated by husbands' normative beliefs ( $B = .26, p = .02$ ). Figure 2 shows that wives' more frequent support provided to their own parents was significantly associated with husbands' lower marital satisfaction when husbands' filial obligation was low ( $B = -.18, p = .03$ ) but not high ( $B = .09, p = .24$ ). Thus, husbands were less satisfied with their marriages when they reported low filial obligation and wives gave more frequent support to their own parents.

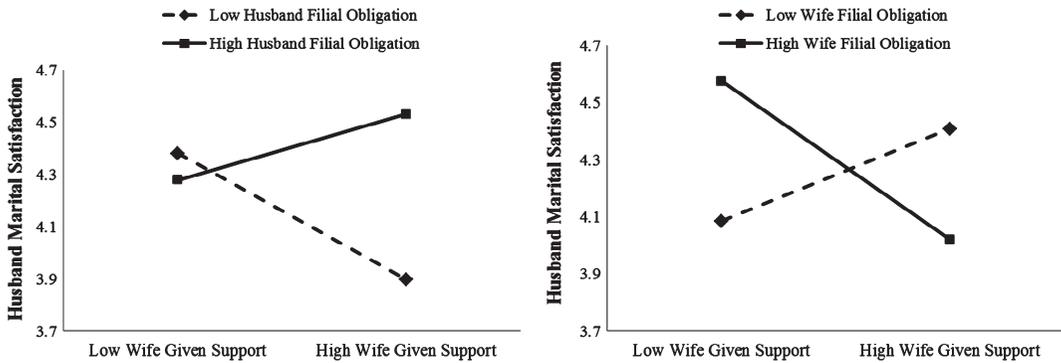
The link between wives' support given to parents and husbands' marital satisfaction was also moderated by wives' normative beliefs ( $B = -.31, p = .002$ ). Figure 2 shows that wives' more frequent support given to their parents was significantly associated with husbands' lower marital satisfaction when wives' filial obligation was high ( $B = -.20, p = .01$ ) but not low ( $B = .12, p = .14$ ). Hence, husbands were less satisfied with their marriages when their wives had high filial obligation and gave more frequent support to their own parents.

The association between wives' support given to parents and husbands' marital satisfaction was not moderated by husbands' or wives' motivational beliefs. Likewise, the link between husbands' support given to parents and their own marital satisfaction was not moderated by the normative or motivational beliefs of either party. Therefore, this association did not differ on the basis of spouses' beliefs about helping parents. Moreover, none of the three-way interactions were significant, which suggests that the relative levels of wives' and husbands' normative and motivational beliefs did not condition the linkages between support given by either spouse and husbands' marital satisfaction.

#### Post Hoc Tests

We estimated models controlling for wives' and husbands' views of the relative amount of everyday help that the couple gives to each set of parents, models accounting for wives' and husbands' provision of caregiving support to parents-in-law, and models adjusting for each spouse's report of whether both parents were living to determine if the findings changed in the context of these variables. In the model controlling for whether both spouses' parents were living, the association between husbands' support given to parents and marital satisfaction was moderated by wives' motivational beliefs ( $B = .21, p = .04$ ), but this association was not significant when wives' beliefs were high ( $B = .14, p = .16$ ) or low ( $B = -.19, p = .07$ ). The findings therefore remained consistent across models, which confirmed their stability.

FIGURE 2. THE MODERATING EFFECTS OF HUSBANDS' AND WIVES' NORMATIVE BELIEFS ABOUT HELPING PARENTS ON ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN WIVES' SUPPORT GIVEN TO PARENTS AND HUSBANDS' MARITAL SATISFACTION.



## DISCUSSION

The present study indicates that beliefs about helping aging parents are important in understanding the linkages between support given to parents and marital quality among middle-aged couples. This study extends prior research by demonstrating that each spouse's beliefs about helping parents influence how the frequency of everyday support that wives and husbands give to their own parents is linked to marital satisfaction. Overall, findings indicate that the degree to which the provision of intergenerational support within the marriage is beneficial or detrimental to marital quality depends on each spouse's perceptions of filial obligation or personal rewards connected to giving this support, but these normative and motivational beliefs appear to hold different implications for wives and husbands.

### *Implications of One's Own Beliefs About Helping Parents*

Several gender differences emerged regarding the moderating role of one's own beliefs about helping parents. First, motivational beliefs were important for wives but not for husbands. Consistent with our prediction, husbands' more frequent everyday support given to parents was associated with wives' greater marital satisfaction when wives viewed helping their own parents as highly rewarding. In accord with interdependence theory (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), wives who hold these beliefs may view parents as a source of emotional support and self-affirmation that reduces reliance on their

marriage to obtain such social needs. Hence, it is possible that a wife may be more satisfied when her husband gives more frequent support to his parents because he is also less dependent on the marriage to fulfill social needs. Alternatively, because the husband's support behavior is aligned with his wife's personal orientation toward helping parents, his more frequent support provision may help to satisfy her social need to give intergenerational support. Moreover, whereas women are traditionally expected to prioritize their engagement in multiple family support roles, these expectations are generally not held for men (Blair-Loy, 2003). Therefore, wives who place high value on supporting parents may be more satisfied with their married lives when husbands give more frequent everyday help to parents because this help represents a relatively unexpected contribution. In contrast, because wives are typically expected to provide this support, husbands' motivational beliefs are likely to be less consequential for how they experience their wives' provision of support to aging parents.

Second, we found that normative beliefs mattered for husbands but not for wives. Specifically, husbands reported less marital satisfaction when they had low filial obligation and their wives provided more frequent everyday help to parents. Husbands who perceive their wives' support given to parents as a deviation from the norm are likely to attempt to change these patterns of interaction (Bowen, 1978). Such influence attempts may lead to arguments or heighten ongoing marital conflict that reduces husbands' satisfaction with the marriage. In

Table 3. Moderating Effects of Spouses' Beliefs on Dyadic Associations Between Support Given to Parents and Wives' Marital Satisfaction

Predictors	Model 1:	Model 2:
	normative beliefs <i>B (SE)</i>	motivational beliefs <i>B (SE)</i>
Step 1		
Wife depressive symptoms	-.55 (.12)***	-
Husband depressive symptoms	-.21 (.12)	-
Wife given support	-.09 (.06)	-
Husband given support	.05 (.06)	-
Pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.14	-
Step 2		
Wife beliefs	-.30 (.16) <sup>†</sup>	-.14 (.11)
Husband beliefs	-.14 (.15)	.003 (.10)
Pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.16	.14
Step 3		
Wife Given Support × Wife Beliefs	-.09 (.10)	.05 (.08)
Wife Given Support × Husband Beliefs	.22 (.11) <sup>†</sup>	.07 (.07)
Husband Given Support × Wife Beliefs	.18 (.11)	.28 (.09)**
Husband Given Support × Husband Beliefs	-.18 (.13)	-.16 (.07)*
Pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.20	.20
Step 4		
Wife Given Support × Wife Beliefs × Husband Beliefs	.56 (.27)*	-.01 (.11)
Husband Given Support × Wife Beliefs × Husband Beliefs	.05 (.28)	-.10 (.14)
Pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.21	.19

Note. Model 1 = filial obligation moderator. Model 2 = personal rewards moderator. *N* = 132 couples.  
<sup>†</sup>*p* < .07. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

addition, when husbands perceive low levels of responsibility to help parents, they may be likely to view their wives' more frequent provision of support as interfering with wives' performance in the marital role. Contrary to our hypothesis, wives with high filial obligation were not more satisfied when their husbands gave more frequent support to parents. Differences in traditional gender expectations for intergenerational support may in part explain these findings. Because women are traditionally expected to

Table 4. Moderating Effects of Spouses' Beliefs on Dyadic Associations Between Support Given to Parents and Husbands' Marital Satisfaction

Predictors	Model 1:	Model 2:
	normative beliefs <i>B (SE)</i>	motivational beliefs <i>B (SE)</i>
Step 1		
Husband depressive symptoms	-.61 (.12)***	-
Wife depressive symptoms	-.19 (.12)	-
Husband given support	.05 (.06)	-
Wife given support	-.07 (.06)	-
Pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.15	-
Step 2		
Husband beliefs	.37 (.15)*	.14 (.10)
Wife beliefs	-.22 (.16)	-.09 (.11)
Pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.19	.16
Step 3		
Husband Given Support × Husband Beliefs	-.07 (.12)	-.07 (.07)
Husband Given Support × Wife Beliefs	.20 (.11)	.18 (.10) <sup>†</sup>
Wife Given Support × Husband Beliefs	.26 (.11)*	.08 (.07)
Wife Given Support × Wife Beliefs	-.31 (.10)**	-.16 (.08) <sup>†</sup>
Pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.27	.19
Step 4		
Husband Given Support × Husband Beliefs × Wife Beliefs	-.32 (.27)	-.06 (.15)
Wife Given Support × Husband Beliefs × Wife Beliefs	-.14 (.27)	-.04 (.11)
Pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.27	.18

Note. Model 1 = filial obligation moderator. Model 2 = personal rewards moderator. *N* = 132 couples.  
<sup>†</sup>*p* < .07. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

provide this support, wives' filial obligation may be more specific to their own behavior. In contrast, husbands' filial obligation may largely reflect the extent to which they believe that their wives should give this support. Consequently, husbands' filial obligation may be more salient to how they view their partners' support provision.

Third, the pattern of findings in this study is consistent with prior research indicating gender differences in motivating factors for the

provision of support to one's own parents among middle-aged offspring. Whereas daughters are primarily influenced by feelings of emotional closeness and altruism toward parents, sons are more motivated by filial obligation (Silverstein, Parrott, & Bengtson, 1995). Therefore, the present study suggests that beliefs about helping parents may also affect how each spouse experiences the support provided by the spouse's partner.

### *Implications of One's Partner's Beliefs About Helping Parents*

We found that the motivational beliefs about helping parents reported by one's partner mattered for wives but not for husbands. Counter to expectation, wives were more satisfied with their marriage when husbands gave more frequent support to parents and reported low levels of motivation to help as a way to gain personal rewards. Husbands who are less motivated by the rewarding aspects of helping parents are unlikely to view parents as a strong source of affection or self-affirmation. Therefore, when a husband has low levels of these beliefs, the support he provides to his parents is unlikely to be driven by a desire to obtain affection or self-affirmation outside of his marriage. As a result, his more frequent intergenerational support is likely to be viewed positively by his wife because it does not erode the couple's dependence on one another to fulfill social needs (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). In addition, husbands who are less motivated to help parents as a means to feel rewarded may be more likely to maintain appropriate boundaries when giving this support, which could further benefit the marriage from their wives' perspective (Bowen, 1978).

Wives' normative beliefs about helping parents, however, appear to be influential for husbands. We found that husbands had lower marital satisfaction when their wives gave more frequent everyday support to parents and reported high filial obligation. In line with family systems theory (Bowen, 1978), it is plausible that these beliefs reflect wives' high levels of involvement with their family of origin that may contribute to intensified marital conflict when wives give more frequent help to parents, but the lack of a similar pattern for wives' marital satisfaction suggests that these findings may in part be attributed to gender differences in how filial obligation beliefs are interpreted

and experienced. Previous research found that high filial obligation is linked to lower marital satisfaction among middle-aged wives but greater marital satisfaction among middle-aged husbands (Polenick, Seidel, Birditt, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2015). Consistent with prior studies on the gendered nature of family support (e.g., Coltrane, 2000; Wilkie, Ferree, & Ratcliff, 1998), this work suggests that filial obligation beliefs hold different meanings for women and men. When compared with men, women report greater strain related to managing multiple social roles (Stephens et al., 2009) and provide more frequent support to aging parents (Kahn et al., 2011). Thus, relative to husbands with high filial obligation, wives with high filial obligation who give more frequent everyday help to parents may be more likely to encounter interference between their intergenerational support role and their marital role, which may contribute to their husbands' dissatisfaction with the marriage.

Finally, wives' more frequent support given to parents was linked to their own lower marital satisfaction when wives reported high filial obligation and husbands reported low filial obligation. This suggests that wives with strong filial obligation who provide more frequent support to aging parents may only experience less marital satisfaction when their husbands perceive low levels of responsibility to provide this help. These husbands are likely to be unsupportive of their wives' commitment to help parents, which may lead to marital conflict.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

Strengths of this study include data collected on the same measures for husbands and wives, the use of dyadic data analysis to account for interdependence within couples, and the examination of each spouse's beliefs in moderating associations between the provision of everyday support to parents and marital satisfaction. Despite these strengths, this study has several limitations. First, cross-sectional analyses precluded the inference of causal relationships between everyday intergenerational support and marital satisfaction in the context of beliefs about helping parents. It is possible, for instance, that husbands who are less happy in their marriages tend to have wives who are highly involved in helping their own parents as a way to feel rewarded because the marriage is unsatisfying for both

spouses. These constructs are likely interrelated and reciprocal in a way that cannot be captured with cross-sectional data. Although the findings in this study are therefore limited, we suggest that the pattern of gender differences is compelling and thus underscores the importance of investigating how these processes may operate over time. Second, we did not have data on the everyday support that husbands and wives gave to their parents-in-law. Of note, however, findings remained after accounting for the relative distribution of everyday help that the couple gave to each set of parents, partners' provision of caregiving support to their parents-in-law, and whether each spouse had both parents living, which supports the robustness of this study. Third, although our one-item measure of marital satisfaction is widely used in survey research, the distribution of the variable was skewed toward high satisfaction. As a result, findings may not generalize to wives and husbands in more distressed marriages. Last, findings are specific to middle-aged couples and may not generalize to younger or older married couples. Nevertheless, this study lays groundwork for future research to gain a more nuanced understanding of how spouses' beliefs may influence the link between everyday support given to parents and marital quality.

#### *Future Directions*

A critical area for future investigation is to evaluate whether spouses' beliefs about helping parents condition the associations between long-term changes in the frequency of everyday intergenerational support and marital satisfaction. In addition, it is important to determine more proximal processes. For example, when husbands have low filial obligation, do they make more frequent attempts to influence their wives' provision of support to parents? Furthermore, are these influence attempts linked to greater marital conflict? The examination of such processes would provide insight into mechanisms that may explain the associations found in this study.

Future research should also consider how the frequency of support that wives and husbands give to their parents-in-law may be linked to marital satisfaction. Although middle-aged wives tend to give more frequent emotional support to parents-in-law, research indicates that wives and husbands spend a similar amount of

time giving practical assistance to parents-in-law at midlife (Chesley & Poppie, 2009). Husbands and wives have closer ties with their parents compared to their parents-in-law (Fingerman, Gilligan, VanderDrift, & Pitzer, 2012). Consequently, help given to parents-in-law may be more likely to be perceived as interference in the marriage.

Along with beliefs about helping one's own parents, other beliefs may be important to consider. It may be the case, for example, that husbands' and wives' perceptions of their partner's beliefs about helping parents play a stronger role in moderating associations between intergenerational support and marital satisfaction. In addition, future studies should assess spouses' beliefs about giving help to parents-in-law. Although prior work suggests that there are few normative guidelines for in-law relations (Morr Serewicz, 2006), research indicates that offspring give priority to helping their own parents (Chesley & Poppie, 2009; Lee, Spitze, & Logan, 2003). Therefore, beliefs about helping parents-in-law may be qualitatively different and could impact how wives and husbands experience the provision of such support within their marriage.

Finally, future research should include the assessment of spouses' beliefs about receiving everyday help from parents, along with how these beliefs may influence associations between received support and marital satisfaction. Help received from parents is common during midlife (Fingerman, Pillemer, et al., 2012) and could be viewed by one's spouse as intrusive or inappropriate. Thus, the type and frequency of support that wives and husbands receive from parents or parents-in-law may be linked to their levels of satisfaction within the marriage.

In summary, this study indicates that each spouse's beliefs about helping parents may be influential in determining associations between the everyday support that middle-aged wives and husbands provide to their own parents and marital satisfaction. The present findings highlight the importance of evaluating the interdependence among couples with regard to potential consequences of everyday intergenerational support for their marriage.

#### NOTE

This study was supported by grants from the National Institute on Aging (NIA), R01AG027769, Family Exchanges

Study II (Karen L. Fingerman, Principal investigator). The MacArthur Network on an Aging Society (John W. Rowe, Network director) provided funds. This research also was supported by grant, 5 R24 HD042849 awarded to the Population Research Center (PRC) at The University of Texas at Austin by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

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