

Being More Than a Daughter: Middle-Aged Women's Conceptions of Their Mothers

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ABSTRACT. This study examined daughters' perceptions of continuities and changes in their relationships with their mothers in mid-life. Forty-two middle-aged daughters ($M = 49.4$ years) described the ways in which their relationships with their mothers had remained the same and had changed in recent years. Open-ended responses were examined for the presence of content pertaining to: instrumental support, shifts in emotional patterns, and references to parent/child roles in the relationship. Daughters tended to describe discontinuities in terms of their mother's instrumental needs and her vulnerabilities, and to describe continuity in terms of the emotional qualities of the bond. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworth.com]

Theorists and researchers have argued that middle-age is a period marked by shifts in cognition, attention, and values. There are three gener-

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al areas of change that have received attention in the adult development literature. First, mid-life is a period in which relationships with others tend to become salient and responsibilities for other individuals increase (Erikson, 1963). Second, it is a time when individuals' sense of who they are gains increasing complexity (Labouvie-Vief, Chiodo, Goguen, Diehl, & Orwoll, 1995). Finally, individuals become more aware of time remaining, of continuities with the past, and discontinuities into the future (Neugarten, 1968). The interface between these three developmental issues at this stage of life has not been examined. How do individuals perceive continuities and changes in important relationships? What are the complexities that underlie these conceptions? This study involved an exploration of daughters' perceptions of continuities and discontinuities in their relationships with their mothers at mid-life.

Recent research has found that middle-aged adults' representations of parents (Labouvie-Vief, Diehl, Chiodo, & Coyle, in press; Moss, Moss, Rubinstein, & Resch, 1993) and offspring (Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994) have implications for well-being. In particular, daughters' perceptions of their relationships with their mothers may play an important role in their psychological functioning at mid-life (Boyd, 1989; Barnett, Kibria, Baruch, & Pleck, 1991; Welsh & Stewart, 1995). Rather than separating from their mothers, daughters, retain ties to them throughout life (Rossi, 1993), and women's identification with their mothers is considered a central issue in their sense of self (Chodorow, 1978; Henwood, 1993; Ruddick, 1989). Women's perceptions of continuity and discontinuity in the relationship also appear to be important. Prior research has revealed that daughters' fears of change in their relationships with their mothers creates distress in mid-life (Cicirelli, 1988). Other research reveals that middle-aged daughters who sense that their mothers are still acting "motherly" may experience tension with their mothers (Fingerman, 1995; Troll, 1985). Prior studies have not systematically explored women's conception of both dimensions—stability and change—in their relationships with their mothers.

PERCEPTIONS OF CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY WITH MOTHERS

Two competing portraits of middle-aged daughters are evident in the adult development literature. Changes in daughters' responsibility for their mothers have been described, while continuity in the relationship has also been clearly documented. For example, gerontologists who describe women's roles as caregivers (e.g., Brody, 1985) have suggested that

daughters assume increasing care for mothers as their health declines. By contrast, a large body of research in family gerontology attests to the idea that mothers and daughters retain parental and filial functions into the later years of life (Fingerman, 1995; Seltzer, 1990; Troll, 1985; Walker, 1994).

Daughters' subjective ideas about continuity and change in their relationships with their mothers have been largely ignored. This study examines the overlap between these two ideas about middle-aged daughters' roles in their relationships with their mothers. Continuity and discontinuity should not be considered opposite nor exclusive dimensions. Rather, a given woman may perceive stability and change in the same relationship. The issues that underlie continuity and discontinuity may differ, however. In the present study, it was hypothesized that when daughters were asked to describe changes in their relationships with their mothers at mid-life, they would focus on instrumental tasks and their mothers' vulnerabilities. On the other hand, they were expected to emphasize the endurance of emotional aspects of their relationships when asked to discuss continuities.

Discontinuities in Conceptions of Relationships with Mothers. Discontinuities in relationships with parents at mid-life appear to center around instrumental domains. Daughters may incur new demands from their mothers in terms of the tasks they perform and the advice they provide. In addition, individuals appear to become more aware of their parents' vulnerabilities, regardless of whether or not they must perform new duties. These changes are in keeping with mid-life changes pertaining to the salience of relationships, a growing sense of the complexity of self and of others, and an increased awareness of mortality. In addition, changes in the mother's status may induce a shift in the daughter's ideas about the relationship.

For example, daughters' actual interactions with their mothers may change in mid-life. As mothers age and their health declines, they are likely to turn to their daughters for help with financial advice, day-to-day tasks, and physical needs, particularly if they are widowed (Brody, 1985; Stone, Cafferata, & Sangl, 1989). Prior research suggests that shifts in demands create concerns for daughters. The term "role reversal" is found in early research addressing such changes (Glasser & Glasser, 1962; Rautman, 1962). The idea behind this term was that the principal role functions previously performed by the parent were now transferred to the child and vice versa. The term itself has been largely debunked in more recent gerontological writings (Brody, 1990; Seltzer, 1992), in recognition of the continuities in parent/child relationships (discussed below).

Mothers and daughters may not actually exchange functions, but there

is evidence that daughters become increasingly aware of present and potential future demands that may be placed upon them. Cicirelli (1988) coined the term "filial anxiety," speculating that daughters' concerns over the care that their aging mothers may need in the future serves as a source of distress. Empirical research supports this premise. In a study of community-dwelling older mothers and their daughters, Fingerma (1996) reported that over half the daughters mentioned their mothers' aging or health as a source of tension in the relationship, regardless of the fact that the mothers in that study were in excellent health. The mothers themselves rarely described their age as a concern.

Daughters' sense that their mothers do or will require care may be related to their own developmental tasks in mid-life. This stage of life is characterized by increasing awareness of the time remaining in one's own life (Neugarten, 1968). Hagestad (1982) suggested that awareness of mortality takes place in the context of intergenerational ties; a sense that one is next in line in the family may make daughters particularly aware of their mothers' vulnerabilities.

Theorists have suggested that adults' ability to understand their parents' humanity increases as they reach middle-age, even if they are not specifically worried about their parents. Blenkner (1963) coined the term "filial maturity" to refer to the stage of life when grown offspring are able to accept their parents' vulnerabilities. For daughters, filial maturity may involve a recognition that one's mother is not so different from oneself. Josselson (1996) referred to a phenomenon of "becoming the same age as one's mother." She suggested that daughters reach a point in middle-age where they are able to recall clear memories of their mothers at a comparable age. The gerontological literature suggests a cognitive shift in conceptions of parents at mid-life. As this shift occurs, daughters increasingly see their mothers as individual women not unlike themselves.

Continuities in Conceptions of Relationships with Mothers. Daughters were expected to acknowledge persistence in emotional aspects of the relationship, however. Although daughters' conceptions of their mothers may change, many expressive features of the relationship may not. Family gerontology literature and feminist researchers have argued that mother/daughter relationships in later life retain features of these relationships from early life (e.g., Rossi, 1993; Walker, 1994). Throughout life, daughters continue to seek their mothers' approval, and to turn to them for advice around a variety of issues (Brody, 1990; Seltzer, 1992; Troll, 1985). The endurance of strong ties between mothers and daughters has been noted as well (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Troll & Fingerma, 1996). Mothers and daughters continue to describe their relationships in positive terms at

this stage of life (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Walker, 1994; Welsh & Stewart, 1995).

Daughters may also experience other aspects of their role in the relationship as continuous at mid-life. For example, several researchers have suggested that even in old age, parents continue to experience a greater investment in their offspring and to perceive greater compatibility with offspring than do those offspring (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971; Fingerman, 1995; Hagestad, 1982). There is some evidence that daughters also retain an expectation that their mothers will be more invested in them. Fingerman (1995) asked aging mothers and middle-aged daughters to rate their own and the other party's behaviors in a recent conflict situation. She found that daughters were upset if their mothers did not acknowledge how they felt, even if the daughters claimed that they had not told their mothers how they felt. In other words, daughters appeared to retain a sense that their mothers were omniscient, even after such notions were long outgrown in other contexts.

In summary, this exploratory study examined daughters' ideas about continuities and discontinuities in their relationships with their mothers. The study examines the question, do women understand their relationships with their mothers in the same terms that gerontologists do? If daughters' subjective descriptions of continuity and change matched the gerontological literature, they were expected to describe discontinuities in terms of their mothers' mortality, needs, and general humanity. In describing continuity, daughters were expected to emphasize the strength of their enduring bonds with their mothers, and their expectations that she would continue to function as a "mother" in many regards.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Single or childless women's perceptions of changes in their relationships with their mothers may differ from those of women who have children, because women without children have no actual experience as mothers. In order to allow participants a personal comparison to a role as parent, a sample of women who had raised offspring was used. In addition, efforts were made to recruit women who were not self-selected on the basis of their desire to participate in a study of daughters at mid-life. Participants were recruited from two other larger studies. The first study involved college-aged daughters and their mothers, and the second study involved middle-aged grandparents. Recruiting older generations through college students is a practice that is widely used in research addressing mother/daughter relationships (e.g., Thompson & Walker, 1984).

An open-ended survey approach was used. Gerontologists have repeatedly emphasized a need for greater use of qualitative techniques when assessing adults' perceptions of relationships with parents, in order to capture complex conceptions of the relationship (Mancini & Blieszner, 1989; Mangen, 1994). In addition, feminist scholars have argued for increased attention to women's descriptions of their own experiences (Thompson, 1992).

This study is limited by a variety of constraints. Women who agree to participate in studies about motherhood or grandparenthood may be particularly nurturing. Moreover, due to the population of the rural north-eastern area in which the study was conducted, the sample was predominantly of northern European descent and of middle-class income. Middle-aged women from other ethnic backgrounds might report different issues as constituting continuity or change in their relationships. Additional constraints are introduced by using two subsamples from studies of other topics. A sample derived in such a manner may, however, represent a more heterogeneous group of middle-aged daughters than a sample obtained when women are recruited for studies specifically addressing mother/daughter relationships.

METHODS

Sample

Forty-two middle-aged women ($M = 49.40$ years, $s.d. = 6.03$) participated. Twenty-eight middle-aged women were recruited from a study involving college-aged offspring and their mothers, and 14 were recruited from a study of grandchildren. There were no controls for the ages of the older mothers in either sample. A series of *t*-tests were conducted to examine whether the 2 subsamples differed in terms of the independent variables (e.g., age, education, self-rated health, mothers' age, etc.) or content codes of responses (e.g., instrumental care, emotional quality of relationship). The participants recruited from the grandparenting study tended to be older ($M = 54.62$ years, $s.d. = 6.74$) than the participants recruited from the study of college students and mothers ($M = 46.69$ years, $s.d. = 3.27$), but did not differ on any other variables.

Participants rated their current health compared to others their own age using a 5-point Likert Scale (1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4 = very good, 5 = excellent); the mean rating was 3.82 ($s.d. = .82$). On average, participants had at least some college education, mean = 4.12, $s.d. = 1.18$ (1 = elementary school, 2 = some high school, 3 = high school degree, 4 = some

college, 5 = bachelor's degree, and 6 = advanced degree). Nineteen women were employed full time, 4 were employed part-time, and 9 were full-time homemakers. The remaining reported that they were unemployed ($n = 7$) or students ($n = 2$).

Procedure

Participants were initially recruited into the two studies as follows. Grandparents were recruited through word-of-mouth, churches and synagogues, Senior Day at a local mall, and a newspaper article about the study in a local newspaper. In the college student study, daughters enrolled at a large state university were recruited through introductory and advanced classes in human development, through sororities, and through word-of-mouth. They took home a questionnaire for their mothers to complete and mail back. The data pertaining to relationships with aging mothers were obtained at the end of the battery of questions addressing relationships with grandchildren or relationships with college-aged children. Participants were asked if their own mothers were still living. If they indicated that their mother was alive, participants were asked if they would be willing to answer a series of questions about their relationship with her. All participants who indicated that their mother was living answered the questions.

Respondents provided their mothers' age, $M = 75.07$ years, $s.d. = 7.26$, and rated her current health using a 5-point Likert Scale, (1 = poor, 5 = excellent), $M = 2.98$, $s.d. = 1.13$.

A series of questions followed that were intended to go from general to specific in gathering information about changes and continuities in mother/daughter relationships at mid-life. First, participants were asked to describe the ways in which their relationships with their mothers had changed in recent years. The next questions focused on role changes in the relationship. Participants were asked to describe the ways in which their own role in the relationship had changed. They were then asked to describe the ways in which their role had stayed the same.¹

The questions were presented in a manner that allowed participants increased ease of discussion, rather than in an alternated-fashion more typical of a controlled experimental design. Gerontologists interested in parent/child research in later life have suggested that it is important to use open-ended approaches that build rapport (Mancini & Blieszner, 1989), and the order in which questions are presented may also facilitate rapport.

Demographic and background information were obtained from questions asked during the college student/mother or grandparent studies.

Coding of Responses

The open-ended responses to the questions about continuity and discontinuity were coded separately using the same coding scheme. Content codes were developed inductively based on the hypothesized areas of interest: (1) instrumental issues, (2) emotional issues. A list of codes fitting each larger category was developed by reading transcriptions of each response and placing each thought unit under the appropriate larger category. Subthemes were generated from these lists.

Codes under instrumental issues encompassed provision of care and the mother's health status or independence. Emotional codes involved references to: the quality of the relationship, expressive support, and emotions felt towards the mother.

An additional category was also included pertaining to statements about changes and continuity in the nature of roles in the relationship. Codes under this category included: continuity of roles (e.g., "My mother is still my mother"), a movement towards a peer relationship (e.g., "We're more like friends"), or an explicit statement of role reversal (e.g., a daughter's stating, "It's like I've become her mother"). Two daughters also described their mothers' personalities (e.g., "She's still argumentative"), but this category was not included based on its low incidence.

Each participant's responses were then coded for material fitting each code. If a response could not be coded using existent codes, an additional code was added to the list. Responses were recoded until a single list of codes was generated that encompassed all responses and that could be applied to responses with inter-rater reliability. This list is included in Table 1.

A given response might fall under more than one code. Such an approach allows greater possibility for capturing the complexities of middle-aged individuals' conceptions of their relationships with parents (Fingerman, 1996). The principal investigator initially coded the responses. An independent rater established reliability across 19 randomly selected cases. Across 99 codes, raters disagreed 9 times. Disagreements primarily involved the code for mother retaining her role as mother and declining health. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

RESULTS

Responses to Questions

Table 1 includes the distribution of content coded from daughters' descriptions of continuity and change in their relationship. Certain issues

TABLE 1. Proportion of Mothers and Daughters Whose Responses Fell Under Each Code

Content Code	Ways Relationship has Changed		Ways Relationship the Same	
	High	Low	High	Low
<u>Instrumental Issues</u>				
Care Provision				
Helped with Tasks	.26	—	.02	.10
Gave Advice	.17	—	—	—
Received Advice	.05	—	.19	—
Mother's Physical Status				
Her Age/Health	.19	—	.02	—
Her Independence	.07	.14	.12	—
<u>Emotional Issues</u>				
Relationship Quality				
Closeness	.21	.14	.10	.02
Contact	.10	.12	.10	.02
Expressive Support				
Provide emotional support	.10	.05	.02	.02
Confide in mother	—	.12	.02	.04
Emotions Felt towards Mother				
Worry about her	.21	—	—	—
Respect her	—	—	.19	—
Desire her approval	—	—	.10	—
Resentments	.17	—	.21	—
<u>Role Pattern</u>				
Mother Retained Role	.05	—	.26	—
Like Friends	.17	—	.02	—
Role Reversal	.12	—	.02	—

were described in opposite directions by different women. For example, one woman indicated that she had more contact with her mother, while another woman indicated that she had less. Thus, the direction of the coded subtheme is indicated in the table. The terms "high" and "low" are used rather than "more" or "less" because the high end sometimes also referred to continuation of a high level of a phenomenon, rather than an increase. For example, some daughters indicated that their relationship had always been characterized by a high degree of closeness. Qualitative descriptions of response patterns are provided below.

Descriptions of Discontinuities

Changes in Instrumental Domains. In keeping with the predicted pattern, nearly all daughters ($n = 37$) provided descriptions of discontinuities relating to instrumental issues, including provision of support or advice. In general, daughters' reports of shifts in support patterns seemed to stem from their increasing awareness of their mothers' vulnerabilities. For example, nearly a fifth of the women mentioned their mothers' health as a source of change in the relationship.

Daughters were aware of their mothers' independence and dependence in the context of shifting needs for support and declines in health. One daughter stated, "She's more dependent on me. She is old. I take her to the doctor and to the grocery store and shopping and to dinner. I call her everyday. When we were younger, I did not feel the need to do that. She was independent, and so was I." Three daughters mentioned their mothers' independence as increasing or remaining constant. Such daughters tended to mention their mothers' independence relative to other changes in this context: "I want to respect her need to stay in charge even when she isn't well." Another daughter stated, "Our roles may change. I can see that coming. . . . But my mother is feisty, fierce, and independent."

Although daughters usually pinned the primary source of change on their mothers, their descriptions included a sense of change within themselves. For example, daughters such as the one who provided the first example above are aware that they, too are growing older (e.g., ". . . When we were younger. . ."). Another daughter mentioned, "I guess I feel like I have to make sure that she's understood certain things because she has a slight hearing loss. I need to make sure she's heard correctly when she goes to the doctor's. Things like that." One woman proudly described her own willingness to take on a new challenge to meet her perceptions of her mother's needs, "I've become very aware of her health, and therefore, I have committed to go visit her—and that is a 4 hour drive—at least once a month. I call more frequently." It is the mother who precipitates the need for change, but the daughter who changes behaviors.

Discontinuities in Emotional Domains. Although it was initially predicated that daughters would focus on instrumental concerns when discussing discontinuities in their relationships with their mothers, nearly 1/3 of daughters described changes in emotional patterns as well. Some of these daughters focused on their own worries about their mothers and their need to be supportive of them. At times, daughters noted that they received less support from their mothers. Such women described their inability to confide in her or to seek her emotional support in a way that they previously had.

Daughters appeared to experience complex emotions with regard to changes in their relationships. For example, some daughters expressed pleasure in being able to provide for their mothers, particularly where they felt validated by the nature of such changes. The need to give the mother advice was something daughters noted as a desirable change. "My mother is a senior citizen now and I enjoy doing things for her including . . . helping her make decisions." In addition, one fifth of the sample described feelings of greater closeness. Daughters who felt that their relationships had grown more distant usually cited competing demands or geographic separation as the source of this change.

Finally, nearly a fifth of daughters expressed resentments they currently felt towards their mothers when describing changes in the relationship in recent years. These women appeared to be a distinct subset of the sample and are discussed in greater detail below.

Role Changes. Many daughters saw the changes in their relationships as part of a more general shift in the nature of their roles. Nearly a third of the sample mentioned changes in which they had either established a more peer-like relationship with their mother (17%) or had taken on what they perceived to be her role (12%). Such daughters sometimes explicitly stated, "We've had a role reversal. It's like I've become the mother and she's become the daughter."

Descriptions of Continuities

Continuities in Emotional Aspects. In keeping with the predicted pattern, the majority (55%) of daughters described the endurance of emotional aspects of the relationship. This proportion was less than the proportion of women whose responses fit the expected pattern of describing instrumental issues when discussing discontinuities.

When describing continuity of emotional qualities, many daughters described the strength the ties they had to their mothers, and their high regard for their mothers. One woman claimed, "I still love and respect her. Why, I wouldn't swear in front of her or talk back to her now any more than I would when I was 4 or 5." Several daughters also indicated that their mothers retained the power to influence their emotional states. Some women explained that their mothers could still make them feel guilty or anxious through disapproval, and make them feel good about themselves through approval, ". . . I get a warm fuzzy feeling when she praises something I've done . . ."

Continuities in Instrumental Domains. It was not predicted that daughters would focus on instrumental issues as sources of continuity in the relationship. Yet, in describing what remained the same, many women also

introduced ideas about what they received from the relationship. One tenth of the daughters described help their mothers provided them. One fifth of the sample mentioned the advice their mothers gave. For example, "I still look to her for advice for lots of things." Some daughters described their mothers' advice as imposed rather than sought, "She still gives advice that is unsolicited," or "If I come downstairs dressed to go out, she'll say something like, 'Do you really want to wear those ear rings with that outfit?'"

Continuities in Roles. Many women also described consistency in their sense that they were their mothers' daughters. Nearly a third of the sample indicated that their roles as mother and daughter had remained constant. A daughter stated of 85-year-old mother, "I'm still her daughter. There's a hint of sadness in that now that she is growing older, but she is my mother."

Resentment

Regardless of the questions asked, approximately a fifth of the women expressed negative affect in their answers. Sometimes the resentment was described in a way that indicated an overall sense of reconciliation. For example one daughter said, "Even though I know we'll never see eye-to-eye, I know that she still loves me." More often, such daughters felt demeaned by their mothers: "She still treats me like a child and tells me 'Drive carefully.'" One daughter felt completely abandoned by her mother at an earlier time. She was pleased that she now felt independent and secure, and had the opportunity to ignore her mother emotionally.

These daughters were no less likely to report helping their mothers. In fact, one daughter claimed to be doing a great deal for her mother, but couched these efforts in anger: "As a child, I received the least amount of attention, but was the one the most was expected of. I guess that part hasn't changed."

Resentful daughters did not appear to see their relationships as characterized by greater continuity or discontinuity. Rather, these women seemed to ignore the questions and to answer through the negative emotions they experienced. One theme that did emerge in their qualitative descriptions was a sense of distancing from the mother. Daughters who expressed resentment were more likely to say that they did not call her as often, that they didn't feel as close to her, or that they received little attention from her. There was a general sense that resentments stemmed from feeling invisible in the relationship early on in life, "She was never the type of mother who made you feel important," and pulling away in mid-life as a means of reconciling complex emotional experiences.

Daughters who expressed resentments appeared to be a specific typology. Codes from the other women's responses were examined to try to build other typologies. Quantitative analyses were conducted dividing codes binomially, 1 = code present, 0 = code absent. Point biserial correlations were calculated. A systematic pattern did not emerge. Qualitative analyses were then conducted in which responses were grouped into piles and reread for dominant themes. Neither approach yielded clear typologies of daughters who did not express resentments. Rather, the majority of women appear to experience a complex sense of continuity and change in their relationships with their mothers, across a variety of domains. In addition, analyses were conducted to examine whether daughters' descriptions of continuity and change were related to their mothers' age or health status. These correlations did not reveal a systematic pattern. Rather, daughters' sense of continuity and change appeared to reflect their own developmental issues.

DISCUSSION

The women who participated in this study described a complex sense of continuity and discontinuity in their relationships with their mothers at mid-life. Middle-aged daughters perceived some features of their ties to their mothers as uninterrupted, and other features as new or different at this stage of life. Researchers interested in cognitive development have noted that middle-aged adults provide complex descriptions of themselves and their parents as individuals (Labouvie-Vief, Diehl, Chiodo, & Coyle, in press). Yet prior research had not examined how middle-aged adults view their relationship to their parents and their roles more specifically. Beliefs about change and continuity may be relevant dimensions for women who take on caregiving duties when mothers eventually do require assistance.

Continuities, Discontinuities, and Complexities

The findings of this study suggest that daughters develop complex ideas about the nature of their relationships with their mothers in mid-life. Even after their own children are grown, middle-aged women described their mothers as powerful forces in their lives. As was initially expected, they described continuities in such emotional features as desiring their mothers' approval and their mothers' ability to make them feel guilty. Respect seemed to be a central issue in terms of maintained hierarchy in the relationship.

Yet, daughters' descriptions provided a complex portrait of the nature of the mother/daughter bond that is not solely characterized by continuity. Rather, the relationship is seen as marked by changes in mid-life as well as stability. In fact, daughters described the emotional quality of the relationship more when they discussed changes than when they discussed continuities. Many daughters appreciated an ability to become closer to their mothers at this stage of life, and others lamented an inability to do so because of competing demands. Daughters' awareness of intimacy in the relationship may be related to the sense that they will someday fill their mothers' position in the familial lineage (Hagestad, 1982). Some of the daughters' responses in this study suggest that they are aware of changes in their available time and in their mothers' available resources, and use these changes to strengthen their ties with their mothers.

Daughters also emphasized patterns of care, advice, and emotional support when describing discontinuity within their relationships. They framed changes in terms of demands, declining health, cognitive impairment, or even just the mother's age if she were still healthy. In the early part of life, parents may be more aware of change in children than are children of changes in their parents. As they grow older, daughters may begin to note discontinuities in their parents. When a mother's autonomy wanes, a daughter may take greater note of this change than she did of her own increasing autonomy in the early part of adulthood. Moreover, a sense that they are now supplying their mothers with either emotional or physical assistance stands out to these women.

The daughters appear to experience what Cicirelli (1988) referred to as filial anxiety. Nearly a quarter of daughters indicated that they worry more about their mothers when asked to describe how their roles had changed. Prior research suggests that daughters experience burden from demands of caring for a mother who requires extensive help (Brody, 1985). Women in this study did not systematically resent what they saw as their mothers' increasing need for help. Occasionally a daughter expressed sadness over not being able to see her mother more often, or over her mother's loss of independence, but the majority of these women did not experience anger with their mothers for being unable to do things they had previously. Many daughters expressed a sense that new demands from their mothers were a catalyst to their own individual development. This is an area that requires further systematic assessment. Recent research has examined the rewards middle-aged daughters receive from caring for a frail mother (Allen & Walker, 1992; Walker, 1994), but few studies have examined opportunities for personal growth in this context.

Resentments

A surprising finding of this study involved the subset of women who were angry or hurt by their relationships with their mother. Some researchers have argued that women forgive their mothers' inadequacies when they themselves have children of their own (Josselson, 1996; Fischer, 1986). Although there are many limitations in the sample used here, all the women were mothers of grown children and presumably had realistic ideas about what mothering entails. An extensive literature has focused on burdens daughters incur when caring for a mother who is very frail and ill (Zarit & Eggebeen, 1995). Such literature fails to address the subgroup of women found here. These women do not appear to resent either changes in their expectations of their mother nor new demands. Rather, this specific subset appears to feel that they were inadequately parented. Some of these women expressed an ability to reconcile themselves to their need for more love than was provided. In another study of aging mothers' and middle-aged daughters' relationships, a smaller percentage of women felt left out of the other person's life, and expressed distress that this was the case (Fingerman, 1996). Little is known about this unhappy subgroup. Additional research might focus on the antecedents and consequences of resentments towards mothers at mid-life.

Suggestions for Future Research

There were several limitations in this study. Given the limited ethnic composition of the sample, it is difficult to ascertain whether the specific emotional experiences (guilt, need for approval, respect) are characteristic of mother/daughter relationships in general, or are specific to white middle-class women. For example, African American daughters report experiencing less strain in caregiving contexts than do European American women (Mui, 1992). Such research suggests that women from other ethnic groups may not find discontinuities in instrumental domains as salient at mid-life. Variation in ideas about continuity and change may stem from differing expectations about what daughters should be providing their mothers, what they should expect from their mothers, and the normative values pertaining to intergenerational relationships at mid-life.

In addition, the women in this study primarily resided in small, rural towns in the Northeast. Their reports of continued respect and a desire to assist their aging mothers may partially reflect more conservative values espoused in their communities. Daughters from other ecological contexts might view their relationships as less continuous than these women did, or might emphasize different features when describing continuity.

In summary, the daughters in this study seemed to experience change and continuity in their relationships with their mothers. Consistent with the caregiving literature, daughters were likely to describe discontinuities in terms of the tasks they must now perform for their mothers. In keeping with the family gerontology literature, their perceptions of continuity seem to reflect continued nurturance their mothers provide as well. In this study, the overarching themes middle-aged daughters conveyed seem to reflect a sense that their relationship with their mother is continuous, but that their role is enhanced to include features it did not previously have. Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that researchers interested in caregiving in later life and in family relationships across adulthood are tapping different dimensions of women's experience at mid-life.

NOTE

1. Participants were also asked about the term "role reversal" and whether or not they had experienced a role reversal with their mothers. Open-ended responses did not vary as a function of responses to that question.

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