

A Distant Closeness: Intimacy Between Parents and Their Children in Later Life

By Karen L. Fingerman

“We used to be closer.”
“He’s too busy to
spend as much time with
me as I wish.” “We talk a
lot, but never about our
personal problems.” Such
statements might seem to

come from people who experience little intimacy in the relationships they describe. Yet, these parents and offspring actually share a deep and rich sense of understanding. Throughout adulthood, members of different generations separate and establish stronger boundaries, and, still, their relationships grow closer. Intergenerational ties introduce the paradox of a distant intimacy.

Parents and adult offspring report strong ties (Antonucci and Akiyama, 1987). Yet, this closeness involves psychological distance. For example, as offspring pass through early and middle adulthood, their relationships with their parents tend to improve (Hagestad, 1987; Umberston, 1992), and during this same period, parents and children also report an increasing sense of the other party as a unique individual with flaws, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities (Blenkner, 1963; Labouvie-Vief et al., 1995; Birditt et al., 2000). Although in other relationships, recognition of the other party as an individual might lead to greater self-disclosure and mutuality, the sense

*In intergenerational
relationships, a paradox.*

of one’s parent or child as an individual adult like oneself leads to a decrease in these typical markers of intimacy. Rather, in strong intergenerational ties, each party realizes that the other

party has different needs and limitations requiring a new degree of distance. Parents cease to try to direct their children’s affairs, and children seek to protect their parents from worry. In this case, distance improves the relationship and can be said to serve as a bridge to a different kind of intimacy.

As adults age, their relationships with individuals from other generations become increasingly important. Many elderly adults are widowed, divorced, or single; some 40 percent of men and 80 percent of women over age 75 have no spouse (Administration on Aging, 2000). For these older adults, a grown child may be the primary social contact (Fingerman, 1996). Intimacy in this tie shapes the older adult’s sense of social embeddedness and enhances well-being.

This paper addresses the complexities of intimacy between parents and children in late life, including reasons that the parent-child tie is an important repository for intimacy, the characteristics of intimacy between parents and chil-

dren in late life, and factors that may enhance or hinder this intimacy. Also included are tips for understanding intimacy between parents and offspring from a clinical perspective.

INTERGENERATIONAL TIES

Although the term *generation* can be used to describe people who were born during a specific time period, here, the term refers to relatives who are on the same rung of the family ladder. Parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, aunts and nephews, parents-in-law, and children-in-law are separate generations; sisters and brothers, husbands and wives, and first cousins are not. Older adults possess an array of intergenerational ties. Sons, daughters, daughters-in-law, sons-in-law, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, great-grandchildren, stepchildren, and partners and former partners of offspring may play an important role in an older adult's life.

Certain relationships, however, lend themselves more readily to intimacy. Intergenerational ties vary based on the number of links between an older adult and a relative. A relationship with a child involves a single or direct link, whereas a relationship with a niece does not. The older adult is linked to a niece through a sibling, to a daughter-in-law through a son, and so forth. Relationships that are indirectly linked implicitly involve a third person and tend to be less insular than relationships that are directly linked. Of course, there is a degree of individual preference in the matter; one older adult may share a deep bond with a nephew, another may share an intimate tie with a grandchild. For a variety of reasons, however, the parent-child relationship tends to provide more opportunities for intimacy than other intergenerational ties.

Most intergenerational relationships are offshoots of the parent-child relationship in some manner. For example, a grandchild's parent influences the tie to the grandparent (Troll, 1985; Thompson and Walker, 1987; Fingerman, 2000b). Further, parent-child ties have a longer history than other intergenerational ties, and this history contributes to their sense of closeness in late life. Moreover, offspring feel a sense of obligation to care for aging parents that may

not be felt by grandchildren, nieces, nephews, or in-laws (Silverstein, Parrott, and Bengtson, 1995). These qualities of the parent-child tie make it a unique resource for intimacy in older adults' lives.

It is not necessary for the elderly parent to be biologically related to the "child" to experience a sense of kinship and intimacy. A stepchild whose parent remarried in early life may view the stepparent as mother or father by the time that person has reached old age; the "step" aspect to the relationship is less meaningful after forty years than it was after four months. Traditionally, African American older adults often treat fictive kin as their own offspring. Nieces, nephews, or unrelated younger adults from a church or community may serve in the role of a grown child (Burton, 1995; Johnson, 1995, 1999). By contrast, grown children may feel little connection to a stepparent who married their widowed parent late in life (Ganong and Coleman, 1999). In late life, intimacy may exist between individuals who define themselves as parent and offspring, regardless of "objective" features of this tie. It should be noted, however, that a majority of older adults in America today do have at least one biological child. Approximately 85 percent of European Americans over the age of 60 have at least one living child; these rates are somewhat lower for African Americans and higher for Hispanic Americans (Administration on Aging, 2000).

CHARACTERISTICS OF INTIMACY

Intimacy is not an inherent feature of parent-child ties in late life, but rather is cultivated by certain parents and offspring who are able to derive such benefits from their relationship. Most research on intimacy has focused on its characteristics, such as self-disclosure and a sense of oneness. At a more general level, however, intimacy involves a closeness that is beneficial to both parties. Intimacy provides a sense of security and belonging, a perception that one is cared for deeply (Reis and Shaver, 1988). Aging parents and offspring who have intimate ties experience this general, beneficial feeling in their relationship, but the characteristics of their intimacy differ from characteristics of intimacy in other types of relationships.

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Several traditional features of intimacy, such as mutuality and validation of the self, take a different form in the parent-child tie than in other social ties. Other characteristics of intimate ties, a merging of identities and sexual contact, for example, are absent in the intimate tie between aging parent and adult offspring (Miller and Lefcourt, 1982; Moss and Schwebel, 1993). Intimacy between aging parents and grown children is defined by two characteristics: recognition of the other person as an individual with strengths and weaknesses, and a deep concern for the other party's well-being. These characteristics shape other features of this particular intergenerational intimacy.

Self-disclosure is often viewed as a means of enhancing intimacy. Unlike romantic partners who share their personal problems to build intimacy (Pasch and Bradbury, 1998), parents and children who experience intimacy in late life have a clear sense of what is appropriate to disclose and what is not. Intimacy involves parents' and children's respect for the other's investment in them; parents recognize that their offspring care and are concerned for them, offspring recognize that their parents deserve to be free of worry. Their disclosures are shaped by this recognition. This is not to say that intimacy precludes discussion between parents and children in old age. Parents enjoy hearing about their offspring's day-to-day affairs and feel included in their lives through stories about work and family. Offspring enjoy hearing about their parents' earlier years and experience their own history through these stories (Fingerman, 2000a). Indeed, when parents or children fail to talk about their daily life with the other party, the other party may feel excluded (Fingerman, in press). Rather, parents and offspring in intimate relationships demarcate boundaries around what they disclose out of respect for the other party.

Self-validation has also received attention as a key aspect of intimacy (Reis and Shaver, 1988). This aspect of intimacy between parents and children in late life further reflects the developmental history of the parent-offspring tie. In early life, the relationship between parent and infant involves a complete symbiosis, a state of oneness. Throughout childhood and adolescence, the child moves toward autonomy and

individuation (Erikson, 1950). Yet, in early adulthood, parents remain heavily invested in their offspring's behavior and see the offspring's achievements as a reflection on their own abilities as parents (Ryff et al., 1994; Fingerman, 2000a). When offspring are in their 30s, however, they may achieve "filial maturity," an acceptance of their parents' weaknesses and foibles (Blenkner, 1963; Birditt et al., 2000). Likewise, parents may achieve an increased sense of offspring as full-fledged adults (Nydegger, 1991). As a result, parents and children are able to feel close in ways that were not previously available in their relationship. The early vestige of "oneness" in the relationship negates the need for a deep sense of intertwined lives as part of the intimacy of late life. Whereas romantic partners perceive relationship growth through an increasing sense that their identities are merging, parents and adult offspring perceive relationship growth through an increasing sense that each possesses an independent identity. Parents experience intimacy from the sense that their offspring are a part of themselves that will outlive them. The independence of the offspring enhances this perspective. Likewise, offspring view the parent as an aspect of themselves that preceded them. Their increased sense of the parent as an autonomous being enhances this perspective. Intimacy between parents and offspring in late life includes a sense of self-validation, steeped in a sense of identity over time.

The definition of "mutuality" is also less rigid in the intimate tie between parent and child in late life than in other social ties. Meeting another party's needs can contribute as much to intimacy as feeling that one's own needs are met (Reis and Shaver, 1998). By late life, parents and offspring alike derive a sense of intimacy from helping the other party (Fingerman, 2000a). A sense of equity is derived from a lifelong commitment rather than immediate reciprocity. As mentioned previously, some older adults develop ties to younger adults who act like offspring, but these relationships lack the history associated with parent-child ties. For these relationships to acquire intimacy akin to that found between parents and children, they must be free of a balance sheet of exchanges. The generosity of giving between parent and child in

late-life intimacy stems from a sense that each party deserves to be helped. When parents are relatively healthy, they are as likely to assist their children with day-to-day tasks as they are to receive assistance.

At the end of life, aging parents may incur physical declines that shift the balance of exchanges in this tie. Offspring who care for their aging parent can find this experience moving and enriching (Walker et al., 1989) or they can find it stressful (Zarit, Reever, and Bach-Peterson, 1980). Although physical contact is often considered a key element of intimacy (Register and Henley, 1992; Moss and Schwebel, 1993), it is not clear that physical contact involved in bathing, feeding, or helping an aging parent use the toilet enhances intimacy. Rather, daily care may undermine the mutual recognition of the other as an independent adult. The parent's reactions to the child's caregiving efforts have not been well investigated. Parents who receive this care with dignity may experience an increased sense of closeness from their children's ministries. This issue warrants further examination.

In summary, the characteristics of intimate ties between parents and offspring in late life are different from the characteristics of other intimate ties. This distinction reflects shifts the parties experience as they grow older. In early adulthood, individuals kindle intimacy through personal disclosures of their fantasies, anxieties, and emotions (Reis and Shaver, 1988; Register and Henley, 1992). By late life, when parents are elderly and offspring are middle-aged, the need to define oneself in intimate ties is no longer prominent. Instead, intimacy involves recognition of the other party as a full-fledged adult like oneself and is shaped by concern for one another. This intimacy can be more rewarding than the intensity of emotion parents and offspring have experienced in early life. In late life, intimacy feels more voluntary, more reciprocal, more mutual, and more controllable than the closeness that is demanded when offspring are young.

INTERGENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Intimacy between parents and offspring in late life is further distinguished by the fact that each party possesses his or her perspective on

this tie. In other relationships, intimacy may involve a shared recognition of closeness, but this is not the case in parent-child ties. As noted elsewhere, parents and offspring occupy different positions in their relationship and are at different stages of development throughout life; their relationships often include "developmental schisms" that disrupt the tie (Fingerman, 1996). Just as gender helps us understand differences in husbands' and wives' experiences in the marital tie, intergenerational position (parent or child) helps explain differences in how the parent-child tie is experienced.

Across the lifespan, parents tend to hold a more positive view of the parent-child tie than do their offspring (Fingerman, 1995). Parents have invested a great deal in their offspring and are biased toward viewing these offspring in favorable terms. By contrast, offspring are concerned with their own affairs and with ties to their own children and spouses; their parents may not be as central in their lives. Given these intergenerational differences, intimacy in this tie is not a reciprocal experience at an absolute level, but rather involves a level of closeness that each party finds acceptable.

From a developmental perspective, I have found that offspring experience a greater sense of discontinuity in this relationship across adulthood than do parents. Middle-aged children describe the emotional qualities of their relationship as continuous over time—they still love their parents, care about their parents' opinion, and feel guilty when their parents disapprove. Yet, as parents enter late life, offspring worry about them, and wish to do more for them. Shifts in these aspects of the parent-child tie are more salient to offspring (Fingerman, 1997). As will be discussed, intergenerational discrepancies can prevent parents and offspring from experiencing a sense of intimacy in their tie in late life. Indeed, many factors enhance or hinder older adults' ability to derive benefits from intimacy with offspring.

FACTORS INFLUENCING INTIMACY

Not all parent-child relationships in late life are likely to be intimate. Indeed, there appear to be general differences in the types of relationships that are most intimate. For example, the gen-

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der of each party plays an important role in determining the quality of a parent-child tie. Men and women have different types of relationships with their children throughout life and into old age (Rossi and Rossi, 1990). Women's intergenerational ties tend to be characterized by greater emotional intensity than men's intergenerational ties (Troll and Fingerman, 1996). Therefore, mothers and daughters seem to experience more intimacy than fathers and sons.

Further, the parent's marital status may contribute to the quality of the relationship with offspring. Single older parents, particularly widowed women, turn to a child for companionship, emotional support, and a closeness that the child may or may not reciprocate (Morgan, 1989; Fingerman, in press). As will be discussed, offspring have their own daily concerns and competing demands that may render a parent's desire for closeness burdensome. A parent's unmarried status can allow increased closeness, but can also create conditions that offspring resent. It is unclear whether the offspring's marital status contributes to the level of intimacy between parents and offspring in late life (Fischer, 1986; Sutor and Pillemer, 1999; Fingerman, 2000a). As offspring grow older, they may develop a more sophisticated relationship with their parents, regardless of whether they themselves marry. Indeed, an offspring's gay partnership or a particularly close friendship may prompt the type of maturation that encourages recognition of the parent as an individual.

Surprisingly, geographic distance does not seem to determine whether a parent has an intimate tie with a grown child (Rossi and Rossi, 1990). In fact, 70 percent to 80 percent of older adults have at least one adult child who lives within an hour's drive, and they see such offspring about once a week (Shanas, 1980; Lin and Rogerson, 1995). Therefore, having a child in close proximity is so common that it cannot explain why one older adult has an intimate relationship with a child and another does not.

However, systematic differences do exist with regard to the type of offspring who remain near their parents. About a third of offspring live within an hour's drive of parents. Offspring who move away from parents tend to have more education than offspring who remain

nearby and tend to move for career reasons (Booth et al., 1991; Climo, 1992; Sweet, Bumpass, and Vaughn, 1988). Contact is necessary for intimate ties rather than proximity *per se*. Technological advances of the past 50 years such as cheaper long-distance telephone rates, increased air travel, and electronic mail allow frequent contact between parents and offspring who reside at a distance. Although parents and offspring who reside at a distance cannot actively participate in one another's day-to-day lives, they may still experience a sense of intimacy.

It would be inappropriate to discuss parent-child ties in adulthood without considering culture and ethnicity. Parents' and children's sense of their relationship reflects their expectations, their sense of obligation, and their beliefs about how this relationship fits into their lives. These factors are shaped by culture. For example, parents and grown offspring whose cultural beliefs support involvement in one another's daily lives are likely to build intimacy by disclosing to one another different types of information compared to parents and offspring in the dominant American culture, which does not support such involvement. Intimacy itself needs to be considered from the perspective of the individuals involved in the tie.

Of course, having a grown child is an obvious precursor to this form of intimacy in late life. Adults find themselves childless in late life for three reasons: They never had children, their children have died, or they are estranged from their children. Rates of childlessness have varied at different historical periods. In 1990, some 22 percent of adults over age 85 (who were of childbearing age during the Great Depression) reported never having had a child, compared to 8 percent of adults in their 60s (who were of childbearing age during the baby boom) (Himes, 1992). Over the years, adults who have no children of their own may establish strong ties to substitute kin such as a niece or nephew (Connidis and Davies, 1992; Koropecj-Cox, 1998). Some older adults, particularly those over age 85, may have outlived their children (Johnson and Barer, 1997). This group must strengthen other intergenerational ties at a stage of life when their energy and resources are waning; they may find this task daunting. Finally,

although most older adults describe positive relationships with their offspring (Rossi and Rossi, 1990), a small number of them feel estranged from their grown children. For example, divorced fathers may find themselves distanced from their offspring in late life (Webster and Herzog, 1995). Such older adults may be in particular need of counseling.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

As the social fabric continues to shift, increasing numbers of adults are likely to enter old age with no spouse or romantic partner and with an adult offspring as their most important social tie. This tie can provide an older adult with a sense of closeness and being cared for and validation of self. In sum, older adults' needs for intimacy can be met in this relationship, and this intimacy can enhance their well-being.

The two key features of the parent-child relationship that must be met for the parties to reap the rewards of intimacy in late life—recognition of the other party as an adult like oneself, and mutual concern for the other party's well-being—have been described. The ability to distance oneself and to accept the other party's limitations is, as has been said, a necessary precursor to true intimacy in this tie. Clinicians should work with aging parents and offspring to achieve these abilities.

Furthermore, it is important for therapists to acknowledge intergenerational discrepancies in perspectives on the relationship. When an older parent desires more closeness than a grown child is willing to provide, the child is likely to feel intruded upon, to resent the parent, and to push away (Fingerman, in press).

Parents should be encouraged to seek out same-aged peers to discuss their health problems or their adjustment to widowhood. Offspring can offer an older parent validation of the past and concern about the future, but may not understand present life circumstances.

Clinicians also need to recognize that the offspring's view of the relationship is not the "objective" view. Although offspring can achieve a sense of their parents as individuals by midlife, they also remain in the child role in the relationship. Offspring are particularly sensitive to the new demands they face (Fingerman, 1997).

For example, many offspring are frustrated by their parents' failure to care for themselves adequately (Fingerman, 1996). If offspring can be assisted to empathize with their parents' emotional weaknesses, they may gain greater insights into the embarrassment a mother feels over using an oxygen tank in public or the anxiety a father experiences with regard to a medical test. This empathy can facilitate intimacy in the tie.

The greatest barriers to intergenerational intimacy involve situations in which the parties feel criticized or judged by the other. In early life, parents are charged with the task of socializing their children with regard to the rules of the larger culture. If parents persist in trying to change their offspring in adulthood, however, offspring may push them away (Fingerman, 1996). Likewise, if offspring depend on their parents for emotional and instrumental help at a time when the parents wish to be freed of these demands, their relationships suffer (Cohler, 1983). Culture shapes parents' and offspring's acceptance of the other's advice or demands. The issue is not one of absolute levels, but of achieving a distance that is comfortable for both parties, a distance that allows each party to care about the other in a genuine manner. Clinicians need to be sensitive to variation in acceptable distance in this tie.

Finally, clinicians may work with older adults who cannot achieve intimacy in their ties with offspring because their offspring are not available. Offspring who are drug-addicted or in jail, for example, or who have estranged themselves present challenges for their parents. At the end of life, it is unlikely that such parents and children will achieve the type of intimacy that involves mutual recognition and mutual concern. Indeed, older adults who harbor deep concerns about their children may find these concerns detrimental to well-being, rather than beneficial. In these cases, ties to substitute kin or intimacy in other relationships should be encouraged.

In summary, as parents and offspring grow older, their ability to care for the other party as an individual facilitates intimacy in their ties. Parents and offspring who experience an intimate tie have a strong sense of the other's limitations and accept the other party's faults without taking these faults personally (Finger-

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