

EXPECTATIONS AND OBLIGATIONS IN ADULT CHILD-AGEING PARENT RELATIONSHIPS

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Kelsey Jones
Macquarie University

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The Respect for Seniors campaign run through St Ives Uniting Church aims to promote a culture of respect for seniors in the community as a means to prevent elder abuse. Part of this project aims to better understand how respect can be promoted through mutual understanding and exchange of ideas. This research project explored adult children's expectations of their ageing parents and the obligations felt by ageing parents to their adult children, to gain insight into how perception of roles and expectations may impact the quality of the adult child-ageing parent relationship.

Introduction

A considerable amount of research is available on adult children's obligation towards caring for their ageing parents, however little focuses on what adult children expect in return. The degree of reciprocity between adult children and their ageing parents has obvious implications for relationship satisfaction and individual well-being (Hamon 1988). Perceived reciprocity between ageing parents and their children has been associated with the exchange of intergenerational support, however, where there are imbalances, this has shown to have a negative effect on relationship quality (Schwarz, Trommsdorff, Albert & Mayer 2005). These areas of imbalance are important areas for future study, as a poor relationship and unrealistic expectations of the parent by an adult caregiver have been identified as potential indicators for elder abuse (Cohen, Halevi-Levin, Gagin & Friedman 2006). As such, more evidence on the expectations and roles of ageing parents could help to improve adult child-parent relationships.

Adult children's expectation of their ageing parents is not readily available in literature on gerontology or adult relationships. Mancini & Bleiszner (1989) recognise that there is generally social and legal consensus determining what parents should provide their children, such as physiological provisions, safety, emotional warmth and socialisation. There are no clear parameters for adult children but it is presumed that the relationship changes with age. It is suggested that need for emotional warmth and socialisation may be similar, however physiological and safety provisions may change as children are able to meet their own needs or receive support elsewhere. Further exploration is needed to determine adult children's needs and what they seek from their ageing parents.

One expectation that has received limited attention is inheritance. A study by Deloitte (Rowlingson & McKay 2004) found that only 35% of the population surveyed expected an inheritance from their

parents. A further 46% also said that they would rather their parents spend money on themselves. Rowlingson & McKay (2004) suggest that people are reluctant to expect inheritance assets and are more likely to see it as a bonus rather than something that is guaranteed to happen. Low expectations maybe a result of future insecurity over whether or not the inheritance may be used up by the parent to pay for care or other items, and who else may be in line to receive assets. This result should be considered limited to the population surveyed in the United Kingdom, as cross cultural research has suggested that people from different cultural backgrounds may vary in their inheritance expectations due to sibling order, gender and age (Nauk 2010).

The notion that younger people have different expectations on inheritance is supported by Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Lockenhoff & Cartensen 2004), which states that individuals are guided by the same essential set of socioemotional goals throughout life, however the relative priority of different sets of goals changes. The source and direction of change are seen as stemming from perceptions of time. Having an anticipated ending influences more salient goals such as the desire to have a meaningful life, to have emotionally intimate social relationships, and to feel socially interconnected. In other words, what we pay attention to reflects the goals we want to achieve. Research on older and younger groups of adults in Australia (Goodnow & Lawrence 2008) suggest that young adults gave their priority to family heritage and the preservation of things, which is line with the expected orientation towards future needs and interests. Older adults gave more priority to family feelings, family harmony and individual rights, which is in line with their expected orientation to social connectedness and positive feelings. In this way, there may be potential mismatches between adult children's expectations and ageing parents felt obligation based on their immediate goals.

Research has found that older people feel obligation to others financially (Cheal 1983), and are more likely to give help to their children rather than receive help (Riley & Foner 1968). Ageing parents are still a major source of emotional support for their adult children in some circumstances. For example, a study of widowed women found that their ageing parents were their most crucial source of support, to the extent that large amounts of support from others or their own children were virtually ineffective in comparison (Bankoff, 1983). This suggests there may still be a major role for ageing parents in the provision of social and emotional support to their adult children. However, both emotional and financial support is affected health and economic status of the ageing parent (Atchley & Miller 1980), thus provision of assistance to adult children must vary greatly between families.

The provision of help and support through the parenting role is an interesting from a social identity perspective, as parenting does not terminate at any specific age. In a study by Mancini & Blieszner (1987), 75 % of older parents said that they maintained a parenting role, however 75% also said that they did not need the role at that time and did not rely on their children a major source of

identity. Some continuities identified in the study for older parents included the provision of love, interest in their children's activities and welfare, exchanges of assistance and advice, and for some, continued financial support of their children. For older parents, norms expressed were open communication, interested but non-interfering involvement in adult children's lives and maintenance of own independence. In other words, an older person in a parenting role may need to juggle appropriate closeness and autonomy with their adult children. Again, this reflects a balance for ageing parents of meeting their adult children's expectations whilst also looking after themselves.

In later life, ageing parents may have fewer prescribed roles as they retire and become less responsible for their children (Erickson & Dempster-McClain 2000). Rosow (1967) extends this to suggest that the later years of adulthood are a time of rolelessness. In a study (Erickson & Dempster-McClain 2000) of role identities in a retirement community, participants were found to have considerable variation in their perceived roles. Most of the married individuals saw themselves in the role of husband or wife (spouse identity), whereas for most other roles there was not a consistent identification of occupying that identity (such as friend, volunteer or citizen). Older adults who had children, regardless of the frequency of contact, continued to see themselves in a parent identity. These results suggest that regardless of the kind of relationship older adults have with their children, they will continue to see themselves as the parent. This may have implication for the adult child's expectation of their behaviour and requires further study. Alternatively, older people, despite their closeness with their children, may feel obligated to maintain social closeness with the child despite relationship quality. In other words, they will act in the role whether they are close with their children or not.

This interrelationship between ageing parent's perceived role, felt obligations and how this meets children's expectations of their parents, warrants further study. Whilst we have some indication that ageing parents do feel obligations to provide financial and emotional support, the evidence is mixed. Further exploration of ageing parent's roles and specific felt obligations would assist in examining how adult children's expectations are met. Conversely, more information is needed on what adult children expect from their parents to examine reciprocity between the generations. As demonstrated, understanding the dance of reciprocity in intergenerational relationships has important implications of the quality of relationship.

This study explored the interrelationship between expectations and obligations and the roles that ageing parents have which may affect their relationships with their adult children.

Methodology

A focus group was conducted with 12 participants from the Kuringai area in Sydney. The majority of participants were members of the St Ives Uniting Church. Participant ages ranged from 40 to 80 years of age. The majority of participants were from English speaking Caucasian backgrounds, with one participant from an eastern European background. Gender representation was equal amongst the group.

Focus group structure was based on Berg (2001). Participants were asked a series of questions based on the initial research questions provided.

Results

A major theme throughout the focus group was of the role of ageing parents to provide emotional support through role modelling, coaching and emotional availability. When asked to describe adult children's expectations of ageing parents, participant's responses were themed around expectations of general availability and personal support. Money was also mentioned by one participant. The expectations of ageing parents and their need for aged care as they grew older were also discussed. Participants explored how some adult children expect parents to make it easier to care for them as they age, through moving closer to the adult children and leaving their own home and community:

"I think people are much more conscious now of the need for caring for parents, probably because we are living longer. Um, but I certainly know, just from personal experience, people are a) very concerned about the problem that parents are going to present to them, but more widely people are just concerned about how their parents are going to cope and how they will help them cope. So there's two sides to that one. Those who are frightened about what's going to happen, particularly if there is an element of peculiarity [sic] in relation to what's happened, the other one is when they say why don't you come and live closer to us, we've got a permanent stake in this location, you're over there, can't you come to us, town-wise, state-wise and country-wise. Come over closer to us."

“That’s like my mum, back when she was Perth. Her friends had died. She had gotten to the stage where she was, on her own. So she was encouraged to live back with my sister in Brisbane. But she wasn’t happy there, she wasn’t in Perth, but what can you do?”

Participants discussed a number of instances where ageing parents were expected to move closer to their adult children and had experienced negative consequences as a result. Examples were given where adult children asked ageing parents to move over to them and the adult children passed away unexpectedly, leaving the parent isolated in a new community without any social connections. Examples were also given where adult children moved suburbs and interstate a number of times and the parent was expected to relocate to wherever the adult children lived.

These examples of expected relocation were discussed in the context of negative consequences and added stress for the parent as they aged.

When asked about felt obligations as ageing parents towards their children, participant responses were reluctant and often indirect. Generational differences were raised as an important factor in differing obligations felt by ageing parents towards their children. Participants discussed their difference in independence from their children as compared to previous generations of parents who were more reliant on their adult children for support.

“We have been involved as part of the generation that has ensured that our retirement processes, are much better and much more independent than our parents were.....We’ve got this whole generation of nursing homes which have gotten better and better and better and more expensive and more expensive and more expensive and they’re available to us and we’ve told our children don’t you worry about us, we’re going to be alright because we’ve prepared ourselves.”

Participants raised the concern that they felt obligated to be as independent from their children as possible and not rely on them unnecessarily.

Similarly to expectations for emotional availability, some participants reported that they felt obligated to provide emotional support to their adult children. This was however, tempered with great caution in being emotionally available at the right times and not becoming over-involved where it was not welcome.

“I think there is a very fine line, because I had to learn when to give advice and when to be there and when to back off.”

"I found out that I enjoyed my mother's company because she never advised me unless I asked for it, but she always listened. When my sons were first married, I found that were still like mine, and I used to tell them what to do, but I found I had to do what my mother did and just listened."

"You need to actually learn what they want."

"I'd like to support some of these statements particularly of being there for them, particularly as adult children they will come across some particularly family areas; we can't do anything to help them but that's quite obvious. Many years ago we realised that as our children grow up and had families, you do things in a different way to us, there's nothing you can do to change that, they don't need our advice anymore they tell us what they are going to do, and sometime you bite your tongue, and sometimes you can say have you thought of this or thought of that..."

Participants were reluctant to discuss their obligation to provide an inheritance to their children, and although one participant was comfortable acknowledging that her children expected an inheritance, the rest of the group did not disclose any information in this regard. The group did, however, discuss the felt obligation to treat children equally through the provision of financial support whilst alive. The group discussed instances of one adult child being in greater need for financial aid than their siblings and the consequences felt by the ageing parent if financial aid was provided unfairly.

"It isn't an issue, why is it an issue. But the portion I have given her has been taken out of her inheritance. And the others are in no financial need. If they were I would do the same for them. But they're not. And I don't care because I am not going to be there. They can fight amongst themselves if they want but I won't be here."

"But I've had instances on each side of the situation where the family says to the parent, my sister is in greater need than I am at the time, but why don't you give her some money and we'll take what we'll need later. Then there's been other cases where people who are better off have said don't you dare give her any money because I'll expect the same from you even though the circumstances are vastly different. So you've got a sort of threat to the parent. I've never advocated that pure equality situation."

The group was asked to outline their roles in the community. Responses included coach, volunteer, church member, Probus Club member and student. Spouse and parent were not mentioned as roles by the group without further prompting. The need to have other roles besides parenting roles was seen as important by some members of the group, so as not to rely or burden their adult children to have to monitor their activities and keep them busy. In other words, some of the ageing parents recognized the importance of maintaining their self identity for the children's sake.

"I think one thing we can do for our children is keep ourselves occupied in this sense, that when you say goodbye to them at family dinners they might be thinking gee what about mum, she lives on her own what are we going to do about her. Even though she's at home and she's doing this and that."

"Older parents need a life of our own."

"And the children want us to have a life of our own."

Participants were also asked about shifting roles as they see their own need for increased levels of care. Tensions were described in adult children-ageing parent relationships where the ageing parent tried to maintain independence from their adult children. Some examples were provided where ageing parents lied to doctors or refused physical or lifestyle assistance to maintain their independence.

"I know this lady who she said to the doctors, oh yes my daughters come every day, when they really didn't."

Limitations

The level of disclosure around expectations or obligations of inheritance within the group was limited. Future research on inheritance expectations and financial issues could be explored using different methods, such as anonymous surveys or one-on-one interviews to reduce socially desirable responses. Anonymous surveys could also work to increase sample size and allow for greater generalisability to the population. It is recognised that for the purpose of developing local community interventions, purposeful sampling of participants is important to be able to generalise to the unique population from which the sample came.

This focus group asked questions of participants as both adult children and ageing parents. At times, participants varied between responding from the perspective of adult children or as ageing parents. Future research on adult children-ageing parent relationships should separate these two variables into separate focus groups. This will assist in further exploration into perspectives from both adult children and their parents.

Conclusion

It was confirmed in the focus group that participants felt that adult children's expectations of their ageing parents centred on the provision of emotional support. As children grow and have their needs met elsewhere, there is possibly less expectation on the parent to meet their physiological and material needs. The expectation for inheritance was not discussed at length in this group and is possibly best explored using one-on-one interviews to reduce provision of socially desirable or moderated answers as a result of the group environment.

One expectation which featured heavily in the group discussion was around the expectation for ageing parents to minimise the burden of care for their adult children. A number of examples were provided of adult children's expressed expectations for parents to move closer to them so that it could be easier to care for them. As ageing parents, the group expressed a general dislike for this notion due to their sense of independence and the potential negative consequences for moving on their sense of place and their financial situation.

In concordance with the literature on ageing parent's obligations, group responses indicated that parents feel obligation towards their children financially and emotionally. Again, disclosures on obligations to provide an inheritance was avoided by the group and this is possibly best explored in other research formats. The provision of financial assistance that was equally spread among siblings was discussed and responses indicated that equal provision of financial aid was important to both parents and their children.

Research has previously indicated that ageing parents identify with their role as a parent above other roles they may hold (Erickson & Dempster-McClain 2000; Mancini & Blieszner 1987). This focus group identified that they maintained other roles, however this was generally seen to fulfill the purpose of maintaining independence so as to reduce the burden of care felt by the child. This could possibly suggest that participants in this group did feel that their primary role was as a parent, however due to the felt obligation to maintain independence, these parents placed importance on maintaining other roles also. This independence was also expressed when discussing tensions in role

changes as parents age, as the group reported instances where ageing parents were reluctant to give up their independence and family tensions ensued.

These findings suggest there was general consensus that the provision of emotional support is an expectation and obligation. Other areas of expectation and obligation, such as provision of inheritance, would need to be explored further to ascertain where differences may lie through the use of different research methods. In particular, expectation and obligation of inheritance was avoided as a topic and may suggest that this area may cause discomfort and tension amongst families if discussion is not facilitated around these issues. Similarly, themes of maintenance of independence and strategies to reduce burden of care for children suggest that interventions which encourage increased communication and realistic expectations in adult children-ageing parent relationships would reduce the risk of elder abuse.

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