Intergenerational solidarity: A review of three theories and their evidence
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Intergenerational solidarity

In this paper, I will review the literature on solidarity between generations within the family. The concept refers to exchanges between parents and their grown-up children. Formally, we can define solidarity as doing something for someone else that is a benefit to the other (and according to some definitions, also a cost to you). The more specific focus is on the degree to which children provide support to their elderly parents and vice versa. Hence, the focus is on support in both directions.

Three types of support can be distinguished:
(a) Practical support that generations give each other. Examples are helping parents with household tasks, caring for parents when they are ill or disabled, or parents helping children by babysitting the grandchildren. Hence, this type of support refers to services.
(b) Financial support that generations give to each other. Examples are the money that parents give to children when they are studying or the financial support they give them when they are buying a home. Inheritances are also included in this category.
(c) Social support. This form of support includes important things like visiting parents and giving them advice and attention. This form of support is less clear in the sense that the cost element is ambiguous. Contact, for example, is something that parents enjoy, but it is not per se a cost to the child. This form of support is included nonetheless, since it also is an indicator for all sorts of poorly measurable and idiosyncratic forms of support.

The focus here is on intergenerational relationships in a western context, which is rather different from the case of developing countries. In developing countries, the role of children as a form of old age security is far more important than it is in western
societies. For example, financial support to parents is rare in western countries, but it is common in developing countries. Similarly, coresidence of parents and adult children is also rare in highly modernized countries, but it is common in many developing countries (and also in southern European countries). One of the more important claims in the literature is that the flow of intergenerational exchange has been reversed as societies become more modern. So in developing countries, the flow is upward, whereas in highly developed countries, the flow is downward.

This also suggests that the topic has become less important to study in the western context. This was indeed the general view in the literature, but the ageing of the western population has put this issue back on the academic agenda. The well-being of the elderly has become an increasingly important issue in the current literature, and in this context, the family has emerged as one of the more important potential sources of well-being, next to having a good health and a decent pension. For many older persons in the west, having a good relationship with one’s children is probably as important if not more important than their pension. Moreover, studies also suggest that the practical support that children give leads to better mental and physical health. And finally, informal care—by neighbors, family, and friends—has often been regarded as an important addition to the more formal and more expensive types of care. Whether the family can actually play this important role, is also debated, however. Many authors argue that even though the demand for family support has increased, it has in fact become less likely that families will actually support their parents. These authors largely point to increasing levels of individualism on the one hand, and to rising levels of women’s employment on the other hand.

The focus of this research is on solidarity between generations within the family. A related topic is solidarity between generations or age groups outside of the family. This is obviously a different issue, but there may be similarities as well. One idea is that social norms of solidarity toward parents may be generalized to elderly persons in society at large. We do not know if this is true, but this may be an interesting topic to study.
Research issues

Next to describing the patterns of intergenerational solidarity in western societies, there are two main issues in the literature. The first main goal of the literature has been to study the validity of theories of intergenerational support. The second goal of the literature has been to examine the consequences of intergenerational relations for the well-being of the elderly (and their children).

Theories of intergenerational support

In the literature, there are three quite different arguments about why people support their parents. The first one regards support from a rational choice framework and looks at intergenerational support as a form of exchange. The second one finds the basis of support in altruism rather than selfish exchange. The third one focuses on social norms as the basis for support.

These three theories are interesting in that they are emphasized in different segments of the literature and that they rely on different models of behavior. In the sociological literature, all of the three theories have been used in practice, but the theory of social norms is the most uniquely sociological. The economic literature on intergenerational relations is more scarce, but in so far as it exists, it uses a rational rather than a normative model of men. Therese has been debate in this literature about whether people are selfish or altruistic, but it is always assumed that they are rational, not normative. The psychological literature, finally, emphasizes all three theories.

In my view, the main challenge is to compare the validity of these three theories. Hence, we should take a pluralistic perspective on reality by testing alternative theories. Ultimately, one would like to quantify the relative importance of the three mechanisms for understanding intergenerational solidarity. In practice, this will be difficult, but it is still possible to formulate testable and competing hypotheses on the basis of the three theories.

In comparing the theories, I treat the demand for support as given. In other words, I assume that there is some demand for support or attention. Moreover, in the empirical
models, it is important to control for demand factors, such as the health status of the parent and whether or not the parent has alternative sources of support.

**Exchange**

The first theory assumes that giving support is a cost for the giver, and receiving support is a benefit for the receiver. Given this, the theory argues that intergenerational relations can be seen as exchange relations. The exchange can take three different forms. The most common form of exchange is delayed exchange. Parents invest in children when the children are young and when the parents are older, they ‘pay back’ their parents by giving them support and attention. Hence, parents give first and children return later in the life course. In other words, intergenerational transfers are a life course phenomenon. This form of exchange also has an insurance element: The investments are made early in life in order to receive support when problems arise during old age. A problem with this form of exchange is the uncertainty that parents have about whether their children will actually pay them back later in life. The rational exchange model has not direct solution for this. We will come back to this point later.

A second form of exchange occurs when children give support to elderly parents in order to receive money or property when their parents die. This is studied in the economic literature on bequests. It is called prospective exchange, and it is of course another form of delayed exchange. The only difference is that children give first so that parents do not have uncertainty about whether they will get the support they expect. Hence, in the first type of life course exchange, the parents ‘pay’ up front, in the second type, they ‘pay’ afterwards. A more subtle problem that arises in the latter case is that parents need to make a threat to disinherit their children or a specific child, and that this threat needs to be credible.

A third and also common form of exchange is direct exchange. This occurs when parents and children exchange different goods more or less at the same time. One example is the exchange of services and social support. For example, parents take care of the grandchildren in exchange for the visits and attention they obtain from their children. There is also the possibility of exchange of financial and non-financial
forms of support. Parents can give money to their children when they are old in order to receive more household help or more attention from the children.

It is important to recognize that the basis for support in the exchange perspective is based on a negative correlation between the resources of parents and children. Only then is exchange be possible.

The exchange approach has yielded several concrete hypotheses which can be tested.

*Hypothesis 1: The support of parents to children decreases over the life course and the support of children to parents increases over the life course*

The evidence for this is rather weak. Research shows that the support that parents give declines, as predicted, but the support of children does not really increase very much. One would have expected the balance between giving and receiving to reverse somewhere in the life course, but the point of reversal occurs very late in the parental life course (if at all). Of course, it is difficult to make strong claims here because it is difficult to measure all the types of support that are given, let alone, to weight them properly. Nonetheless, it remains an important observation that parents continue to give to children at a very late age.

*Hypothesis 2: The more parents have invested in children when the children are young, the more support they receive from the children when the parents are old*

This hypothesis has rarely been tested directly, largely because data on the elderly usually do not contain data on the investments that were made all through the life course. And of course, even you have such data, you would still need to control for the current resources that parents give to children. The crucial element is that the support parents obtained is linked to the earlier flow of support, and that has been difficult to establish.

There is much indirect evidence, however, for this hypothesis. For example, fathers who divorced when their children are young have lower opportunities to invest in their children than divorced mothers. Research shows that this is indeed the case,
divorced fathers (who did not have custody) receive much less support than divorced mothers (who did have custody). Other research has shown that the degree to which fathers see their children after divorce is greater when they contributed more to household tasks and child care during the marriage (in comparison to their wife). This is also evidence in favor of exchange, although it cannot be ruled out that the effect is spurious, due to the fact that such fathers simply enjoyed their children more than other fathers.

Hypothesis 3: The more property parents have, the more support and attention they receive from their children

This hypothesis comes from the notion of prospective exchange. It has been tested in the economic literature on bequests and has also been studied in some sociological studies. Research shows that the degree of wealth of the parent is positively correlated with the degree of attention that they obtain from their children—a remarkable result. This is found only for multiple child families where threats to disinherit a specific child are believed to be more credible. More indepth studies also suggest that children who care more than other children get a larger share of the inheritance of the parents or get specific privilges when dividing the durables of the parents.

Hypothesis 4: The more type A support that parents give to a child, the more type B support parents receive from that child

This hypothesis has also been tested, for instance by relating the stream of support in one direction to the stream of support in the other direction. Basically, what has been done is to correlate giving and receiving. All studies show that this correlation exists, but there are several problems with such a test. One problem is that there can be underlying factors that affect both streams of support, which would make the correlation spurious. However, most studies include a range of control variables to tap such influences, and this does not make the correlation go away. Another problem is that reports on giving and receiving are usually from the same person, which may introduce bias in the estimates. For example, people may have tendency to bring these things into agreement with each other. A step forward in this literature would be to introduce some dynamics in the model. For example, one could test a model in which
streams of support at one point in time are related to all streams of support at a prior point in time. Another step forward would be to measure giving to parents by asking children and to measure giving to children by asking parents. This requires multi-actor data.

**Altruism**

The exchange approach is a very interesting approach to family life, but has also received criticism. This criticism not only comes from the sociological literature where assumptions of rational choice are often criticized, but also from the economic and psychological literature. The problem lies in the notion that people are selfish in intimate and personal relationships. Most people would not feel comfortable with this principle. For example, if I wanted to pay my mother for her help with babysitting my daughter, she would feel uncomfortable. She would say that she did it for me and for my daughter. Similarly, if you would ask your parents to pay you money after your visited them, this would be regarded as a joke or as an insult (depending on your parents sense of humor). These two examples are about money, but the criticism also applies (albeit perhaps less) to the exchange of other types of support. These examples suggest that selfishness may not be so important in family relations.¹

A competing theory holds that the way people behave in relationships depends on the type of relationship. In non-affective relations, people would behave selfish, and in affective relations, people would behave altruistically. Altruism means doing something for others because one is concerned with the welfare of others. Most of the literature on altruism comes from social psychology, but there has also been economic work on altruism, especially by Gary Becker. In economic terms, altruism means that the utility of others is incorporated in ego’s own utility function.²

¹ Defenders of the exchange perspective have noted that exchange can still work in affective relationships, but in a less explicit and less calculative form. For example, it is regarded as strange if you receive money from your parents when you helped them, but it is not strange if you get a larger present from them than usual at some other occasion. Similarly, it is strange to pay your mother for babysitting, but it is not strange if you give them a present.
² The argument about altruism has most often been made for parents, but it can also been made for children. There can be a biological basis for altruism, in which case it is plausible to expect only parents to be more altruistic.
Testing the theory of altruism has been difficult. Some authors have compared exchanges of parents and children and note that parents give more than children, even at very high ages of the parent when they need the support of their children the most. Some authors regard this as evidence for altruistic behavior on the part of parents. Another approach has been to ask people how balanced they think the relationship is. This generally confirms that parents feel that they give more than that they receive. This is soft evidence for altruism on the part of parents.

There are also more promising approaches to altruism, however. Several testable hypotheses can be derived. The first one is the following:

*Hypothesis 1: Parents give more to children who have fewer resources than to children who have more resources*

The underlying reasoning is that the children with few resources benefit more from this extra support than the children rich in resources. Hence, the utility of the poor child is increased more and this is attractive for an altruistic parent. Research has tested this using data on the value of bequests to children. Early research (from Tomes—a Becker collaborator) suggested that the higher the income of the child, the lower the bequest the child received. Hence, poor children seem to get more than rich children, in line with the model of altruism. A problem was that poor children may also perform more services to parents and get more in return for these services. Controls for this, however, did not change the original result.

Later studies, however, used better data (i.e., data from tax records containing all the children of a deceased parent) and were unable to replicate these results. These studies showed that the effect of the child’s earnings on the size of the inheritance was only very small. Research on other financial transfers (inter vivos transfers or simply gifts) also did not confirm the altruism thesis. The financial need of the child did not increase the size of the financial gift from parents (conditional upon the parent giving). Hence, altruism does not seem to lead to a horizontal redistribution of economic resources among children, as the altruistic model predicts. The findings are somewhat controversial, however, and the debate on this issue is not yet closed.
Can this line of reasoning also be applied to transfers in the opposite direction, from children to parents? This has not been done, but it can be an additional way to test the theory of altruism. A problem here, however, is that parents are often together, so that it may be unclear to which parent the support is flowing. For that reason, we can look at parents who are separated. This will give a sharper view of how children divide their support. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2: Children of divorced parents given more support to the parent with the fewest resources**

The resources of the parents can be measured by looking at a range of demand-side factors. The availability of alternative sources of support (i.e., remarriage) is also an important issue here. Each time, the comparison needs to be within a family between parents. Of course, it is also important to control for prior investments (after divorce, fathers have generally fewer investment possibilities). One way to address this, is to look at parents who divorced after the children left home—in these cases, fathers will probably not have invested much less than mothers.

Another way to test the notion of altruism for the support to parents is by looking at the couple level. When people provide support to parents, they often do this as a couple. Since couples have two sets of parents to give this support to, they need to distribute their support and this enables us to test an hypothesis:

**Hypotheses 3: Couples give more to the spouses’ parents with the fewest resources.**

**Norms**

The debate about altruism and exchange has sometimes been framed as a zero-sum game: If a study does not support a hypothesis based on exchange, it must be altruism; similarly, if a study does not support a hypothesis based on altruism, this is regarded as evidence for exchange. This is not necessarily correct, however, because there is also a third factor which may motivate people in their behavior toward family members, that is norms.
Norms are widely acknowledged rules about how to behave. Several norms play a role in family relations. The first is norms of kinship obligation. This is the rule that one should care for one's family members in times of need. Moreover, this care should not depend on what one can gain out of the relation or on what one has gained out of the relation in the past. In other words, kinship norms are unconditional.

There is a clear variation in the strength of obligations across the type of kin. Empirical research has used vignettes to assess this. This research shows that obligations are weaker for genetically more distant kin and weaker for in-laws than for own family. This is as one would expect. Norms are also weaker for ascendants (upward) than for descendants (downward). The obligation toward own parents—what is often called the norm of filial obligation—is the second strongest norm, after the obligation toward children. Another interesting result from the vignette studies is that there is much agreement on the ranking of these obligations both among individuals and among the types of occasion to which the obligation applies. Note however, that this research applies to a single society and a single point in time.

A second norm is the norm of reciprocity. This is the norm that you should give back what you received (and also, in the degree to which you received). This is a more general norm, but is also relevant in family relationships. As discussed earlier, in the exchange theory, there is the risk for parents that their investments are not paid back later in life when they need the support. One way to solve this is through the norm of reciprocity. In other words, norms of reciprocity make delayed exchange possible.

Where do these norms come from? People acquire kinship norms in the process of socialization. This means among other things that these norms are transmitted by parents when the children are young. In a sense, parents transmit norms that secure their investments. Next to parents, these norms are transmitted by institutions such as the school and the church. Family norms are often believed to be internalized, which means that people act according to the norm even when there are no sanctions. In other words, children feel an obligation to support, and if they do not support or if they do not return the investments, they have a tendency to feel guilty.
The two norms discussed above are norms that yield an alternative and more sociological explanation of why people support their parents. Research has shown that many people hold these norms, but there can also be important variations across actors. First, there are signs that the strength of kinship obligations has become weaker over time because the value climate in our society has become more individualized. This means among other things, that other and conflicting norms have arisen. One example is the norm that people should care for themselves and should be able to be independent has become more important. Many older people think that they should be independent. A second frequently made observation is that kinship norms vary from society to society. For example, kinship norms are stronger in the more collectivistic countries like Italy than in more individualistic countries like the Netherlands. Third, there are also variations within a society. Some subgroups in society have stronger norms of filial obligation than other subgroups. This applies most clearly to differences between ethnic groups—Turks and Moroccans have stronger feelings of filial obligation—but these differences are partly a reflection of differences between countries. There are also differences between educational groups, however. For example, there is a to be a tendency of the higher educated to be less strongly in favor of norms of filial obligations.

How strong is the empirical evidence for the theory of norms? Most of the evidence is purely descriptive: Researchers try to establish the norm by presenting attitude items to respondents. Basically these questions directly ask for the degree to which respondents feel an obligation. This is soft evidence for two reasons. First, they may give an answer that is socially desirable, without actually feeling the obligation. Second, feeling an obligation is not enough, we also need to show that it is a guidance for behavior.

In terms of behavior, it is also difficult to test the norms. After all, norms of filial obligation have the same implication for behavior as the theory of altruism. Similarly, reciprocity norms have the same implication as the theory of exchange. So the only way we can test the norms is to examine the empirical relationship between norms and behavior. This is reflected in the following hypothesis:
Hypothesis 1: The more people adhere to kinship norms, the more support they give to their parents

Research has shown that there is a positive correlation between the two: People who have stronger feelings of obligation are more likely to visit and support their parents. This is not strong evidence, however. The main problem is that people can have adjusted their attitudes to bring them in line with behavior. Because norms are measured via attitude items, this is a problem. The causal direction remains unclear. Hence, dynamic designs are needed to test this hypothesis, and these designs have rarely been used. The few studies that do use this design do find affirmative evidence, however.

A drawback of most empirical work on norms is that authors use the norms of the person and relate this to the behavior of that person. Since the norms are measured via attitudes, this line of research basically studies the attitude-behavior link, and this is not necessarily evidence for the operation of norms. After all, norms are the expectations of others. Rather than measuring the attitudes of the individual, we should therefore measure the attitudes of other actors and relate these to the behavior of ego. This brings a multi-actor design to the study of norms. I give two examples of this:

Hypothesis 2: The more people are socialized into kinship norms when they were young, the more they later support their parents

This is an alternative way of testing the theory, but this has rarely been done. Two designs can be used for testing this. The first uses retrospective measures of how children were socialized into family norms. The second uses sibling models to assess the overall influence of family background on support behavior.

Hypothesis 3: The stronger the kinship norms of one’s parents and siblings, the more a person will support his/her parents.

Due to a lack of multi-actor data, this hypothesis has also not often been tested.
Consequences

Another important question in the literature is the question of whether parents benefit from the support and attention they obtain from their children. Various consequences have been studied: (a) for well-being, (b) for mental health (closely related to well-being, e.g., depression), and (c) for physical health. In each case, the issue is whether receiving support increases the well-being and health of the parent. Hence, the hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 1: The more parents receive from children, the greater their well-being

This seems a sensible argument, but the research results are not fully convincing. There are studies showing the expected positive effects, but there are also studies showing no effects or even negative effects.

The studies are complicated by the reverse effects, i.e., the effects of health and well-being on received support. If parents with the poorest health also receive the most support, any possible positive effect of received support will be suppressed if there are not good controls for prior levels of well-being and health. The differences in the outcomes across studies are probably also a result of the differences in the research design used.

There is also some evidence for nonlinear effects. More specifically, some authors find that increasing levels of support lead to reductions in depression, but at higher levels of support, the effects turn around. Very high levels of support appear to increase depression. The argument here has been that too much support makes people feel incompetent and less independent, which may reduce well-being.

It is also possible that there are more subtle effects, especially if you look at other theories. The theory of reciprocity makes somewhat different predictions. From this theory, one would first expect that receiving less than one gives will be detrimental for one’s health. This is closely related to the first hypothesis. A somewhat less intuitive prediction has to do with the situation in which parents receive more than they give. This can occur, for example, when an elderly person is very ill and unable
to give support in return. According to the rational exchange perspective, this should not lead to a decline in well-being for the receiver. However, according to the normative theory, this will also be perceived as an undesirable situation because it goes against the norm of reciprocity. Hence, parents will feel guilty and incapable when they receive too much, and this may lead to a decline in well-being. Hence, an alternative hypothesis is:

\textit{Hypothesis 2: The more unbalanced the relationship with children, the lower the well-being of parents}

If we only find an effect of underbenefiting, this would support a selfish theory on intergenerational relations. If we also find an effect of overbenefiting, this would be evidence for a normative perspective. Recent psychological studies on intergenerational relations so far suggest that both overbenefiting and underbenefiting reduce well-being. Hence, this is evidence for the second hypothesis.

There are also studies on the other side of the coin: How the giving of support affects the well-being of the giver. Mostly, this research focuses on the adult child giver. Here too, competing theories can be used. If we use the rational exchange framework, we can argue that giving support is a cost to the giver. Giving support can be stressful, especially in cases where the support is intensive (e.g., daily care) and where it is combined with the support of one’s own children. This is known as the problem of the sandwich generation. From this, we would expect the following hypothesis:

\textit{Hypothesis 3: Children who give more support to parents have a lower level of well-being than children who give less support}

There are also authors, however, who argue that giving support is not a pure cost to the giver, but may also contains benefits. From the theory of altruism, one would also expect that the giving of support increases a person’s well-being because support increases the well-being of others. Similarly, from the theory of normative solidarity, one would expect that those who give support feel good about themselves, whereas those who fail to support where this is needed, may feel guilty. This leads to the exact opposite prediction:
Hypothesis 4: Children who give more support to parents have a higher level of well-being than children who give less support

What is the evidence on these issues? The perspective of the giver has been studied less often than the perspective of the receiver. Moreover, the studies that have been done on the giver are often cross-sectional. Up till now, however, the evidence does not point in the direction of altruism: some studies show that intensive care for elderly parents is positively associated with the child’s depression and stress levels, other studies show null effects. This does not mean that no positive effects of giving exist, they can simply be too weak in comparison to the cost effects. A better design would be to measure the costs of helping and to estimate effects of helping on well-being after controlling for these costs. The theory of altruism then would predict a net positive effect on well-being.

Selected references

*Literature on social and instrumental support*


**Literature on financial exchange**


**Literature on parental divorce and widowhood on support**


**Literature on consequences of intergenerational exchange**


**Support in developing countries (a few examples)**
