Introduction: Finding Balance in Caregiver Research

Baila Miller, PhD, M. Powell Lawton, PhD
Symposium

Positive Aspects of Caregiving

Editor's Note: This collection of articles is the result of a symposium presented at the 1995 Annual Scientific Meeting of The Gerontological Society of America. The session was chaired by Betty J. Kramer, and the discussants were Baila Miller and M. Powell Lawton.

Introduction: Finding Balance in Caregiver Research

Baila Miller, PhD¹ and M. Powell Lawton, PhD²

The articles in this symposium provide an important examination of a corrective focus in caregiver research: the positive elements in caregiving that sustain family involvement. Even more importantly, the articles, taken together, include references to both positive and negative appraisals of caregiving, thus highlighting the integration of caregivers’ lives, rather than the fragmented interpretations so often found in research literature. The value of focusing on positive elements are aptly summarized in Kramer’s review of the caregiving gain literature: caregivers express positive feelings; clinicians can benefit from such knowledge; positive elements may affect quality of care; and such knowledge can benefit theories of caregiver adaptation. The themes underlying this symposium are the importance of integration of theory and empirical research and the ways in which knowledge about positive aspects of caregiving contributes to our theoretical knowledge. Each study, explicitly or implicitly, adds to clarifications in the dominant theoretical paradigm of caregiving, the stress/adaptation framework derived from psychological stress and coping models. These clarifications will be addressed as each article is briefly summarized. In addition, two of the articles help fill in gaps in our knowledge regarding the caregiving dynamics of important subgroups: adolescents and husbands.

Kramer’s article (Gain in the Caregiving Experience: Where Are We? What Next?; pp. 218–232) sets the stage by reviewing 29 studies of positive gain published since 1974. She observes the tendency to conceptualize personal gain as an “appraisal” of caregiving, distinctions between such appraisals as events versus role attributes, and inconsistent findings. She offers some suggestive evidence that the predictors for gain and caregiving strain or distress outcomes are somewhat unique, raising questions to the “opposite sides of the same coin” argument. She also details methodological difficulties in this research area that are similar to those plaguing much of caregiving research, such as reliance on samples of convenience, inattention to subgroup analysis, cross-sectional samples, and varying measurement strategies. Most importantly, however, Kramer proposes a conceptual framework in which the appraisal of positive role gains and role strains are viewed as intervening processes in understanding negative and positive indicators of well-being in caregiving. Unfortunately, the other articles do not illustrate gain as an intervening variable, but rather provide clues about determinants of positive gain as a dependent variable. Thus, much testing of the conceptual model remains.

¹Address correspondence to Baila Miller, PhD, Joseph and Florence Mandel Alzheimer’s Caregiving Institute, Mandel School of Applied Social Service, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH 44106-7164.
²Edward and Esther Polisher Research Institute, Philadelphia Geriatric Center, Philadelphia, PA.
Potentially relevant predictor variables are suggested by the Beach, Kramer and Farran articles. Beach provides the first examination (to our knowledge) of the positive reactions of adolescents in families caring for a person with dementia in “Family Caregiving: The Positive Impact on Adolescent Relationships” (pp. 233–238). Drawing on qualitative interviews with 20 adolescents, she reports such positive experiences as increased sharing of activities with siblings, greater empathy for older adults, increased mother and adolescent bonding, and a tendency to select empathic peers for support. These findings remind us of the need to incorporate more family-system variables in our models. We need to develop stronger methodological tools to incorporate information from multiple family members in our research questions and analyses. Stress/adaptation models in gerontological research tend to be individualistic in nature; more attention could be given to models drawn from family relations theories, such as McCubbin and McCubbin (1989).

Kramer’s study of 74 husbands caring for wives with dementia drew on the conceptual model of adaptation proposed in this symposium (see “Differential Predictors of Strain and Gain Among Husbands Caring for Wives With Dementia,” pp. 239–249). Once again, stressor variables showed no predictive power for understanding caregiver gain. Rather, husbands who reported the highest appraisals of personal gain were those who were less educated, more satisfied with their social participation, in better health, and those who reported using problem-focused means of coping. Characteristics defining the caregiving situation, with the exception of the coping measures were unrelated. The negative association of education with personal gain again deserves special notice.

Do more highly educated persons have higher expectations of their own and others’ behaviors in relation to caregiving? Are they more invested in other roles, and thus more likely to resent the intrusiveness of caregiving in their lives? Or, do the exigencies of daily life among the less well-educated enable them to accept the demands of caregiving more as a matter of course? Is caregiving only one of many demands (perhaps one of the more benign demands) their sometimes difficult lives make on them? It may be that positive appraisals of gain are more related to attributes of endurance than of rewards.

Farran’s article, “Theoretical Perspectives Concerning Positive Aspects of Caring for Elderly Persons With Dementia: Stress/Adaptation and Existentialism” (pp. 250–256), emphasizes the spiritual dimension of positive gain. To say, as we did early in this commentary, that the symposium “adds to clarifications in the dominant theoretical paradigm of caregiving, the stress/adaptation framework . . .” may appear inconsistent as we ponder Farran’s plea for an existential view of caregiving and its positive and negative aspects. In fact, in true existentialist style, she helps define the stress model by positing a model based on meaning, responsibility, and choice. Those of us who work comfortably in the linear stressor-coping-outcome tradition can probably fit her key concepts into stress theory. There is no need for such reduction, however. Farran’s major message is that there is, in fact, a complex of phenomena that lies beyond positive and negative outcomes. This assertion takes us into the realm of ethics, where a concept like “meaning” takes on the characteristics of a moral absolute more than a way of coping. She also refers to empirical research that has taken on the task of measuring meaning. It seems very likely that this contribution will stimulate further research designed to understand how caregivers (and others under stress) go about pursuing their life goals in the face of many different mixes of positive and negative subjective outcomes.

In sum, these articles provide a challenge to the continued development of paradigms of caregiving research that can encompass positive and negative dimensions of a complex human experience. We must not forget, however, a possible negative aspect of a research concentration on positive aspects of caregiving. The emphasis on caregiver burden had a policy-relevant dimension by drawing attention to the need for additional service resources to mitigate family burden and prevent early institutionalization. A new emphasis on positive aspects of family care may be used to support policy makers who believe that families should shoulder the care of impaired elders without additional societal resources. The search for knowledge clearly demands that all outcomes be explored, but also that the scientist take some responsibility for the appropriate use of the knowledge gained.

References

Received November 1, 1996
Accepted November 6, 1996