Meeting Filial Responsibilities in Brothers-Only Sibling Groups

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Objectives. This research examined how sons in brothers-only sibling groups meet the needs of their elderly parents.

Methods. 49 pairs of brothers without sisters whose parents were 74 years of age or older participated in open-ended interviews to explain how their parents' needs were met. Inductive analysis of interviews identified elements of these brothers' approaches.

Results. Brothers were in routine contact with and performed "masculine" services for their parents. Brothers acted independently and expected to be asked rather than volunteering help to their parents, except during times of crisis and transition. They defined their parents as self-sufficient, even when their parents' situations were precarious, and acted to reestablish their parents' independence when it was threatened. They viewed their parents' use of informal networks and formal services as appropriate. Brothers' wives provided "gender-appropriate" services. Wives' levels of involvement appeared to be a function of the quality of their relationships with their parents-in-law. Wives who helped were part of a support network.

Discussion. Brothers' goals of maintaining or reestablishing independence for their parents matches most parents' wishes to be independent and not to burden their children. The brothers' goal of self-sufficiency for their parents precluded their wives being the sole providers of support to their parents.

Traditionally, sons have been much less likely than daughters to be included in research on parent care. When they are, their contributions are compared with those of daughters, and sons are found wanting: sons report providing fewer services, devoting less time, and being in contact with their parents less often; when sons do provide social and instrumental support, they report feeling less burdened than daughters by the experience (Crawford, Bond, & Balshaw, 1994; Hamon, 1992; Montgomery, 1992; Mui, 1995; Stoller, 1983). Among explanations for variations in observed gender differences are the size and gender composition of the sibling group (Coward & Dwyer, 1990; Dwyer & Coward, 1991; Spitze & Logan, 1990; Uhlenberg & Cooney, 1990; Wolf, Freedman, & Soldo, 1997), the gender of the parent who requires care (Lee, Dwyer, & Coward, 1993; Stoller, 1990), and the needs of the parent (Montgomery & Kamo, 1989). Observed gender differences are not reduced by much, if at all, when these variables are controlled. Researchers have concluded that gender by itself explains most of the variance (Finley, 1989; Lee, 1992; Silverstein, Parrott, & Bengtson, 1995; Spitze & Logan, 1990).

However, a number of researchers have suggested that the consistent finding of gender differences may be an artifact of the services about which respondents are asked: typically, these include such types of help as bathing, dressing, toileting, shopping, doing laundry, preparing meals, doing housework, managing finances, and providing transportation (Horowitz, 1992; Miller & Cafasso, 1992). Dwyer and Coward (1991) write that such tasks "are heavily weighted toward those activities frequently performed by women" (p. S267). Adding tasks that men are more likely than women to perform might improve the position of sons relative to daughters (Horowitz, 1992; Kaye & Applegate, 1994). The fact that gender differences are absent in research on attitudes toward filial obligations (Wolfson, Handfield-Hones, Glass, McClaran, & Keyserlingk, 1993) suggests that the specific tasks included might explain the apparent difference in their enactment.

In addition, much of the literature suggests that when daughters are unavailable and sons must assume responsibility for parent care, it is sons' wives who actually perform the requisite tasks (Finch, 1989; Horowitz, 1985; Lye, 1996). Montgomery (1992) writes, "Certainly, the integral role of daughters-in-law in parent care is widely acknowledged" (p. 70). To examine sons' contributions of care to their elderly parents without also attending to the contributions of sons' wives would be misguided.

Through its design, the research reported here makes sons' contributions of care to their old parents visible. Respondents are pairs of brothers who have no sisters. This removes the option of comparing sons with daughters and requires focusing on sons' contributions in their own right. In addition, the research is qualitative. Sons responded to open-ended questions in order to explain to an interviewer what they, their brothers, their wives, and their sisters-in-law did with and for their parents.

Following a description of the research design and re-
METHODS

Our sample's 49 pairs of brothers had no sisters and had at least one noninstitutionalized parent aged 74 or older. One widowed father had moved to the assisted living section of a retirement community in which he had resided for over 10 years. Using advanced age rather than health status as the only criterion for the parents was intended to include a variety of situations faced by members of older families instead of only those in which parents require hands-on care. Advanced age ensured that brothers at least would have considered potential problems if they were not already dealing with them.

Pairs of brothers were recruited through their elderly parents after advertisements placed in community and campus newspapers yielded no respondents. In recent interviews with very old community-dwelling persons, one of the authors' colleagues had included a question about the gender of their children. Parents in the colleague's study who had at least two sons and no daughters were asked for permission to contact their children. In addition, a registry of elders who had volunteered to participate in research at a university was tapped. These elders were asked whether their families met the criteria and, if they did, for permission to contact their sons. They also were asked if they knew anyone whose family might qualify and, if they did, for permission to call them. This recruitment method likely accounts in part for the relatively high social class of the respondents and the high percentage of couples among the respondents' parents. The elders typically were very helpful and very few of the sons who were contacted refused to participate in the study. These brothers, then, were not a random sample; neither were they self-selected or selected because they were described by their parents or by themselves as caregivers to a dependent parent.

Prior to the interview, respondents completed a written questionnaire that asked specific questions about each member of the family (e.g., age, marital status, number of children, occupation, location, and health status). Information collected in the written questionnaire provided a great deal of contextual information. Each brother then spoke independently with a different interviewer either in person \( (n = 57) \) or, for those who lived out of town, over the telephone \( (n = 41) \). The interview was primarily open-ended and designed to encourage the brother to describe his family's situation. The first question asked the respondent to describe the current situation of his parent(s). Seventeen additional questions were asked. Interviewers were trained to treat the interview as a "guided conversation" (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) and took notes as near to verbatim as possible. Interviews were not tape-recorded so that time and resources could be used to include more families. In analysis, attention was focused on what was said rather than how it was said. More subtle distinctions and interpretations would have been possible had transcriptions of the interviews been available. Most interviews lasted approximately an hour. Each respondent was paid $20 for his participation.

Responses were typed into family files, with brothers' answers to questions juxtaposed. The data were analyzed qualitatively. For this article, attention focused on how brothers met and divided filial duties. The most fruitful questions in the interview guide were the initial description of a parent's situation and responses to three questions: "When it comes to providing for your parent(s), how do you think you have divided the responsibilities?"; "Do you think you have divided tasks in this way?"; and "Do you think you have divided tasks in this way?" Brothers also were asked to describe the participation of their wives and sisters-in-law. All information that was related to what was done for parents and how brothers assessed one another's contributions, as well as all references to in-laws were collected in three separate files.

In addition, one file comprised references to other members of the parents' networks, including relatives, friends, neighbors, and formal services. The entire interview was coded rather than coding only answers to specific questions. Analysis entailed moving back and forth between coded segments and the interviews to gauge the validity of the argument presented here as it was developed inductively (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

The 98 participating brothers ranged from 37 to 70 years of age, with a mean age of 50.5 years. Eighty-six were married at the time of the interview, and 72 had at least one child. On a 7-point scale of occupational status, almost all were coded in the three highest status categories. Almost half had graduate or professional training, and an additional 28 had graduated from college. Nonemployed brothers were unemployed \( (n = 5) \) and retired \( (n = 10) \). As a group, these men were relatively advantaged, although a range of social class memberships and backgrounds was represented. Forty-eight families were White; one was Black. Some reference to religion was made in 46 families: 20 were to Protestant churches; 2 to Catholic churches; 8 to Jewish organizations; and 17 to churches with no denomination specified.

Thirty-two sibling groups comprised only the two brothers who were interviewed. Twelve included one additional brother and five included two additional brothers. Implicated in our findings, then, are 120 brothers. In 23 families, both parents were living; in 21 only the mother and in 5 only the father. The median age of the parents was 80.8 years. In 18 families (37%) at least two brothers lived within an hour's drive of their parents; in 20 families (41%), only one brother lived within an hour's drive; and in 11 families (22%), no brother lived within an hour's drive. One brother shared a residence with his widowed mother, and one brother lived with both of his parents. In 2 families, the widowed mother lived with her son, his wife, and their children. In 9 families, the parent(s) did not live in the Cleveland metropolitan area; a few lived seasonally in the Sunbelt. On a 4-point scale, approximately 20% of the brothers described their parents' health as "excellent," 40% as "good," 32% as "fair," and 8% as "poor." On the same scale, 25% described their parents' memory as "fair" or "poor." Slightly less than half of the parents were described
as financially “comfortable” with the rest almost equally divided between “very well situated” and “enough to get by.”

**Brothers’ Contributions to Parents**

Brothers who lived near their parents were in telephone and face-to-face contact with them at least twice a month, in most cases much more often. Brothers and parents shared holidays, weekly dinners, church services, leisure activities such as vacations, golf, and fishing, and sporting events in which grandchildren participated. Some brothers called their parents as often as daily or several times a week; these were proximate brothers more often than nonproximate (“My brother calls him once a week. I call him twice a week.”). Almost all of the brothers who did not live near their parents visited them and invited their parents to visit them at least once a year if not more often. They were available to assist in times of crises such as hospitalizations (“After the hysterectomy, we both spent time with her. My brother got off work and I said I’d fill in when he couldn’t be there.”) and transitions (“My brother helped with the move. During the last eight weeks he was working in Cleveland once a week and he stayed with Mother. He spent a lot of time with her. He had at least a few hours a week to help her with packing.”).

Brothers also provided services to their parents. The kinds of tasks they did for them were “gender appropriate”: They rarely cooked, cleaned, did laundry, or provided hands-on care. Exceptions were the two unmarried brothers who shared a household with a mother and parents, respectively, and one married brother whose mother lived with him, his wife, and children. If parents needed types of help that are historically considered “women’s work,” the services usually were provided by someone else.

Brothers who lived near their parents and those who visited from other locales mowed lawns, changed storm windows, cleaned gutters, shoveled snow, fixed light switches, repaired lamps, attended to plumbing problems, and painted and sided houses. The need for these services was affected by the type of housing in which parents lived. For parents who were unable to drive, proximate (“My brother calls him once a week. I call him twice a week.”) brothers provided transportation and ran errands. Brothers also managed money and provided financial advice. Proximate brothers helped with checkbooks and paid bills. Several brothers provided parents with money to meet living expenses.

From the descriptions of their interactions with their parents, it was clear that the brothers were providing instrumental and emotional support; in explaining to an interviewer what they did for their parents, however, they often downplayed the importance of their assistance (“I just visit her. While I’m there, if something needs [to be] fixed, I’ll do it”; “I do minor repairs, plumbing, around the house.”). By using adjectives like “minor” and “little,” the brothers presented their contributions as inconsequential to them and their parents.

In response to the question, “How has having (an) old parent(s) affected your plans in recent years?,” some brothers said that they had foregone jobs in different locales and delayed retirement moves (“We wouldn’t move as long as she’s alive.”). Some said that they planned vacations in such a way that a brother or someone else was available to their parents in their absence (“I don’t like to vacation out of town the same time as my brother.”) or used their vacations to visit parents (“I’ve spent every Christmas of my life at home. The last two or three years I haven’t wanted to, but I always have. A lot of times that was my vacation.”).

Most of these brothers, then, had ongoing relationships with their parents. They interacted with their parents regularly and provided “masculine” types of help and “gender-neutral” services such as transportation and errands on a regular basis, but described their contributions as relatively insignificant. To some degree major changes in their own lives and their use of free time were made with their parents in mind.

**Parents in Charge**

Even brothers who were in frequent contact with their parents expected to be asked for help rather than to volunteer their services:

- We both take her shopping, any place she wants to go. Whoever she can find first is asked to take her.
- If she needs to go someplace and she doesn’t have transportation, one of us will always take her, or arrange for transportation. There’s no set schedule. It’s as the need arises.

Parents were described as orchestrating the brothers’ contributions to them: “She’s very smart. She’ll piecemeal the work. She’ll divide it up, give me something to do, and save something for my brother to do.” Even during relatively difficult transitions, brothers expected parents to ask for assistance: “When my father died eight years ago, she went on to independent living. I don’t think she started leaning on us for more support.” Because their contact with parents was on the telephone, nonproximate brothers had to rely on their parents to tell them if they needed assistance, but proximate brothers were in a position to monitor their parents’ circumstances. Both, however, viewed their parents as capable of making decisions about their lives, including how their sons should be involved.

**Brothers or Sons?**

Rather than coordinating their interaction, brothers interacted with their parents independently. This is a logical outcome of their taking direction from their parents. When discussing routine contact with his mother, one brother said:

- I’ll call my mother and ask, “Have you heard from them [brother and wife]?” At times she’ll say, “Not in a month.” At times it’ll be, “Yesterday.” I think my mother probably has had some dry spells, doesn’t hear from either of us. Other times she has feasts, hears from both of us. It’s not something we schedule and maybe we should. We haven’t sat down and said, “Call then, so a week doesn’t go by…”

The same point is emphasized in another son’s description of what occurred when his mother needed help after surgery:

- When she had her first hip done, she was in the hospital for ten days. I went and took care of her for about a week when she got out. When she got her second hip done in May, my older brother came up to look after her for a week or so. I was actually surprised he came up the second time to take care of her. I would have but due to circumstances there was no way I could. I was surprised he found the time to do that.
Thus, the brothers did not routinely discuss with one another what they were doing with and for their parents, but acted independently.

Health crises and major transitions in their parents’ lives, however, galvanized brothers:

We both talked to the doctor. We made decisions jointly to make sure what needed to be done to take care of her. I took care of getting her a Lifeline to have some security. The normal things for her well-being we discuss if we feel it’s necessary to discuss.

Now, when my father was real sick, we all got together and talked about what nursing home he should go into. Three of us, I think, went out and viewed nursing homes together and decided which one [was best].

When father passed away two years ago that was the only time I discussed Mother with my brothers, mostly the one here in town. He and I see each other about once a week and talk about finances. We never discuss what would happen if Mother got sick. If that happens we will take care of it then.

Except under conditions of crisis and impending transitions, then, brothers tended not to act as a team but rather to act as sons, each responding directly to their parents’ requests for assistance.

**Self-Sufficient Parents**

Brothers described parents in stable situations as “self-sufficient” even when their equilibrium was very precarious. A brother who lived 30 miles from his parents described their current situation:

My mother has a degree of memory problems that are very frustrating to her. There’s a lot she wants to remember. Physically, she does not get around as well as my father. She uses a cane occasionally. She broke her hip several years ago. She moves slowly. I suspect if she did move more or better, because of the memory problem, she might lose track of where she was. My dad is aging very well. He’s working part-time, which is full-time to most of us. He’s involved in several organizations on a volunteer basis. I think he’s having a ball. I think his only real concern is my mother’s health.

His brother, who lived 500 miles from his parents, said that their mother “had been diagnosed as having dementia within the last six months.” Nevertheless the parents were described by the proximate brother as “completely self-sufficient as yet.” His brother also saw no immediate problem. That the current stability was transient was disregarded. (Evidence that the stability was only temporary comes from the deplorable state of their parents’ apartment, on which the lease would expire within the coming two years). In another family, one brother described his widowed mother:

She can get her own groceries and stuff, not a big grocery trip, but if she needs a quart of milk or something she can walk to the store. She doesn’t drive anymore or anything like that. But I think she’s self-sufficient. I don’t know what you’d call self-sufficient, but I think she is.

Most of these brothers focused on the present, in which problems were under control, rather than on past problems that had been solved or on problems that might occur in the future. When crises occurred or changes in parents’ circumstances required action, the brothers focused on the immediate situation, solved the problem, and defined their parents as independent again. They were oriented almost exclusively to the present and pointed to how well their parents were doing. They did not ruminate about the precariousness of the situation. As a result, brothers could describe parents who were far from independent but whose situations currently were stable as self-sufficient.

Parents’ situations, of course, did not remain stable. When changes in functional health status, marital status, and friendship networks undermined their parents’ sense of self-sufficiency, brothers helped to make their parents’ circumstances once again match their abilities. This sometimes involved brothers’ giving their parents more assistance, particularly if the time period or task required for extra support was bounded; if it was not, other sources were tapped. A brother whose father recently had been diagnosed as demented said, “My father always handled financial affairs. I advised my mother to take control of the situation and now I’ve suggested a financial planner.” His action enabled his mother to remain independent of him.

A brother described the circumstances surrounding his mother’s recent move from Cleveland where her more-proximate son had been a 4-hour drive away:

When Mother lived in Cleveland, she had an emergency call button that she had to push twice a day that went to the police department. She was very close to her church, two blocks away. There were people there who knew her well and could help her. If there was a problem in the evening, the pastor lived nearby. She had resources she could draw on, for example, the maintenance man at church. She had very close contact with those people. She had a housekeeper who came once a week.

The mother also had friends whom she transported in her car. These circumstances made it feasible for her to continue to live alone, even though she had numerous health problems. However, she decided to move to a retirement apartment approximately an hour’s drive from one of her sons and a 10-minute drive from the recent widow of her third son:

Besides the unsteadiness on her feet there are some other things that bother her. She has had some problems with her feet. She also has some problem with her heart—sort of an arrhythmia. The doctor has given her medication for it that has contributed to the unsteadiness. She has also had a balance problem. She was living alone in a large house that had three floors. It was getting to be a rather heavy job taking care of it. She had a big yard, with a lot of huge trees. In the fall there were a lot of leaves to get up. In the wintry time there was the ice and snow problem. Last winter she fell three times in the house. She was not hurt, but it alarmed her to an extent. I had an uncle, my father’s brother-in-law, who died a year and a half ago, the last immediate family in the Cleveland area. My mother has no brothers or sisters left in the Cleveland area. Of the three sons, one died a year ago. That’s what brought the decision to move: No family there and fear of falling or getting sick in the house with no one there. It was a very difficult decision for her to make.

Note that the brother stressed that this was his mother’s decision. He also stated that she had found the retirement complex. This mother, then, whose situation became in-
creasingly precarious, moved to maintain self-sufficiency, a move her sons both facilitated and approved.

A brother in another family began his description of who did what for his widowed mother by saying, "Well, there are no contributions. She’s been fairly independent up until now." Since his mother had been injured in a one-car accident a year earlier, she had not been able to drive: "It really limited her ability to be mobile. It changed her lifestyle immensely." Late in the interview, he said that after her accident his mother had stayed with him and his wife for three weeks and that she had had "the visiting nurse, those auxiliary services." He described what he currently did for his mother, who was again living in her single-family home 40 minutes away:

The day-to-day things of looking after her I do. I’ve done a lot of yard work for her but I’m really trying to encourage her to run her own life. I try to encourage her to be more active, less dependent than she already is. I go there two or three times a week. I try to avoid a regular calling schedule. I don’t want to get into that. I call about every other day. There’s a retarded man in the neighborhood who does her lawn work. I used to do it all. For her best interests, we make her as independent as possible. My wife and I are willing to help her with anything she can’t do. For financial things, she’s independent. She basically handles her financial affairs on her own. Complicated bills I help her with, Medicare. I try to get her to handle things. For example, the state is trying to pull her license. They did pull it. I let her call first. We didn’t get an acceptable answer, so I called to see what could be done to get her license.

This brother’s contributions, then, were intended to re-establish his 85-year-old mother’s independence, which, of course, reduced her need for his services. Evidence that he was thinking primarily of his mother’s well-being comes from his resistance to what he perceived as pressure to say that his mother was a problem: "It probably sounds very self-effacing to say it, but I don’t consider it responsibilities. It’s really a payback for me for the things she’s done for me. It’s a joy for me to do it. I don’t look at it so much as responsibility." In a different family, the parents, aged 86 and 92, had recently moved into a retirement community. The entrance fee was the equivalent of 75% of the proceeds from the sale of their home in an affluent Cleveland suburb. Both brothers were pleased with their parents’ decision, even though it clearly affected their inheritance.

Some situations, however, were difficult to put right because parents did not accommodate to changes. Brothers found this very frustrating. A pair of brothers despaired that their parents would ever adjust to retirement. One said:

They are both basically in good health. They are affluent. They are basically unhappy, not with each other, but they are not happy to be old. They are both depressed. That is their primary problem. My father requires more activity than he can find. They drink too much in trying to deal with this problem. They are basically lonely and bored. They have lost all of [their] joie de vivre and lack energy and initiative to do anything.

In an attempt to fix this situation, he and his wife had "encouraged them to get therapy." Although his parents followed the advice, neither went for long. At the time of the interview, he said that he and his brother were "not angry with them anymore, although we have lost respect for them." Nevertheless, both brothers continued to spend time with their parents regularly, but one said, "We see them as a filial obligation. Sometimes we have a good time." Unlike many brothers, they said that they discussed their parents’ situation frequently. Most brothers did not describe their parents as being this recalcitrant.

Parents’ Support Networks

Throughout the interviews there was evidence of support networks developed by parents that preserved their independence from their sons. The mother who moved from Cleveland (described in the previous section) had an extensive network. One nonproximate brother said that if his parents had needs, "They are being met by a cast of thousands." He doubted that his brother, who lived near his parents, would be called first in an emergency because his parents had friends his age in the immediate neighborhood. Another pair of brothers, neither living in the same town as their widowed mother, described an extensive network that included their mother’s two sisters and a sister-in-law as well as many friends that she had known since high school. A widowed mother who had had a stroke that “affected her mobility slightly” paid the custodian in her condominium building a monthly fee to drive her in her car. Both proximate brothers saw this as an acceptable solution to her transportation needs, although they also provided some transportation. The size of her friendship network was emphasized by one of the brothers, who said, “She has so many people paying attention to her sometimes you have to call her three or four times. You think something’s wrong and she’s just out.”

Housing for the elderly in its many forms functions as a support network. One pair of brothers described their parents’ moves: first into an apartment, then to an apartment for senior citizens, and most recently to an assisted-living apartment. Except during each move, the brothers’ contributions remained approximately the same because the resources available to their parents increased, making it possible for the brothers to continue to describe their parents as self-sufficient. One brother whose 86-year-old father lived in a retirement community said:

I think that’s one of the most important things an older parent can do for his adult children—stay as independent as possible in a place where they’re taken care of—pay for their own care and yet be close enough where he can see his family. And that way no one has to feel guilty or mad that someone isn’t doing something.

The two brothers lived near their father. They both saw him almost weekly at lunch, invited him to their homes regularly, and one saw him at church once a week. They knew someone on the staff of the retirement community who would get in touch with them if there was a problem. One brother said, “We really don’t do anything for him as far as I’m concerned. We offer a lot but he doesn’t accept. He wants to do it all himself as long as he can.” The brothers, then, saw this situation as ideal. Such settings preserve parent-child relationships by ensuring that parents remain self-sufficient.

Throughout these interviews, then, the brothers referred
to a network—sometimes informal, sometimes formal, sometimes a combination—that contributed to their parents' independence. Brothers did not expect to be the sole source of support for their parents. One brother said, "We do what we're capable of doing. I think it's a terrible mistake to do something you're not capable of because then you wind up feeling frustrated instead of useful."

DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW

There was clear evidence that daughters-in-law participated in these networks in "gender-appropriate" ways. They were the kinkeepers and did "emotional labor." Proximate daughters-in-law provided meals when their parents-in-law came to dinner and nonproximate ones provided more extensive services during visits. Proximate daughters-in-law assisted with such things as shopping, meal preparation, and hands-on care. In response to the question of how things might be different if he had a sister, one respondent said, "I guess it would be easier for me. If she were around here, she could do the shopping and things. The way it works out, my wife does all those things for her." One pair of brothers lived on either side of their mother. One of them said:

My brother's wife does everything. She's a nurse and anything related to physical well-being she does. She takes her to the doctor, shopping for clothes, visits her, and takes her to visit her friends. She sees that she takes her medication properly. My wife listens to my mother a lot. She takes turns in helping with housework. Mother talks things out emotionally with my wife. [My wife] visits her at her house.

In these brothers-only families, wives apparently were involved with their parents-in-law in traditionally female ways, acting as kinkeepers and providing emotional support as well as housework, meals, shopping, and, occasionally, physical care.

Brothers reported variation in the levels of involvement of parents and daughters-in-law in one another's lives. In an earlier study of sisters, Matthews and Rosner (1988) placed primarily sons-in-law in older families on a continuum from active support of their wives' efforts through indifference to antagonism. The same continuum is apparent in the brothers' descriptions of how their wives and sisters-in-law dealt with their parents. Some in-law relationships were described as being very close ("My wife and mother get along splendidly. She views my mother as a good friend."). In others, parents-in-law were tolerated ("I don't think she looks forward to their visits all that much and that affects the number of times we get together, but there's not a bad schism or anything."). In others, ties between in-laws were described as considerably less cordial ("We have the same problems with my mother not getting along with my wife today as when we were first married."). Not surprisingly, the level of involvement of a daughter-in-law in kinkeeping, as well as in emotional and instrumental support, seemed to be related to the quality of her tie to her parents-in-law.

In some families none of the wives was portrayed as being fond of her parents-in-law. In other families, there was variation. The nonproximate brother in one family said:

My mother and my wife are very good friends. They talk in addition to what I do, at least once a week, sometimes two to three times a week. She's a great support. My brother's wife is the bane of our existence. She provides negative support. My brother basically shows up once a week at my parents' apartment without his family. My parents won't visit his home.

In some families all wives were described as being fond of their parents-in-law. One brother said, "It might as well be her parents, the ways she treats them." His brother described his own wife in a similar way: "They get along tremendously." Brothers' wives who tolerated their parents-in-law were described as supporting their husbands' interactions with their parents. Those who were genuinely attached to their parents-in-law became part of their networks so that the relationship between the in-laws was no longer mediated by their husbands. One mother had moved to a retirement apartment complex near her son, but even closer to the widow of her oldest son. Her son said that his brother's widow was "regarded by Mother as a daughter."

Even daughters-in-law who were described as providing assistance to their parents-in-law participated in support networks. They did not act alone. In one family, an employed daughter-in-law, who also was enrolled in a graduate program, provided extensive in-home care to her physically needy but cognitively intact mother-in-law. The mother initially had moved from her home to a retirement apartment complex. Soon after the move, she was hospitalized. The three brothers, the sister-in-law, and the mother decided to forego a nursing home in favor of moving the mother to the home of the only proximate brother, where she would receive care supervised by her daughter-in-law, who was a nurse. To accommodate her responsibilities, the daughter-in-law both reduced the number of hours she worked outside the home and the classes she took. To make up for the wife's loss of income, the mother's "estate" was tapped to pay the college tuition of one of her grandchildren, although one of her brothers-in-law described it as a "salary." In addition, the brother with whom the mother lived said that he and his children assisted his wife with her mother's care, which included clearing her lungs every few hours ("Four of five who live here can do that."). The mother was eligible for state-supported adult daycare, which provided aides and licensed practical nurses who came in periodically to perform specific tasks, including sitting with the mother so the family could go out. For an upcoming vacation during which he and his wife would be out of the country for two weeks, the brother was considering whether his mother could fly to another state to stay with one of his brothers for a month or whether a temporary stay in a nursing home near her former residence would be better. This daughter-in-law, then, was the primary but not the sole caregiver. She was part of a network comprising both family members and formal services. How the daughter-in-law felt about these arrangements cannot be ascertained with these data. Her husband said, "I feel guilty letting my spouse assume more of the responsibility but, like my wife said, I don't feel guilty for long." He also said that he had assured his mother that if her care became too much of a burden, they would move her to a nursing home. Some daughters-in-law did a great deal for their parents-in-law, but because their husbands generally saw
networks of support as appropriate and promoted the self-sufficiency of their parents, even willing and able daughters-in-law were precluded from being sole caregivers.

DISCUSSION

Sons in these brothers-only sibling groups were in regular contact with their parents and performed “masculine” services for them, although they described what they did as relatively inconsequential. They expected their parents to tell them when they needed assistance rather than waiting for them to volunteer, and they tended to help their parents independently of one another, except during times of crisis and transition. Brothers defined their parents as self-sufficient as long as their situations, even if precarious, were stable. Proffered help was intended to return their parents to a state in which they were as independent from their sons as possible. The brothers did not expect to meet all of their parents’ needs; they saw the use of informal networks and formal services as acceptable solutions to problems that undermined their parents’ independence.

These findings support the charge that brothers’ absence as providers of parent care in research is at least partially a result of the way it is measured. By equating parent care with a specific set of tasks that women are more likely than men to perform, much of what men actually do for their parents is rendered invisible. Abel (1990) argues that using lists of tasks to assess contributions is particularly inappropriate for daughters, but these findings suggest that it is inappropriate for sons as well. Our findings do not fundamentally challenge previous findings that, compared with daughters, sons provide fewer services, devote less time, are in contact less often, and feel less burdened when they assist old parents; the findings reported here do, however, suggest how such results may be produced. Miller and Cafasso (1992) write, “Because of the individualized nature of caregiving, greater emphasis on narrative description may illuminate the meaning of gender in the context of everyday life” (p. 506-507). Narrative description in these brothers-only families provides clues to how men’s approaches to filial obligations make sons appear less caring than daughters.

Hamon (1992) argues that sons have a higher “caregiver threshold.” She suggests that brothers do not “drop out of caregiving roles as needs of aged parents escalate” but that their “involvement is dependent on parents’ reaching a specific level of need” (p. 95). Findings reported here are consistent with her argument. These brothers described their interactions as extraordinary only when their parents’ current situations were unstable, a relatively short period of time if efforts to reestablish self-sufficiency were successful. This may account for the finding that helping parents increased sons’ but not daughters’ feelings of distress (Spitze, Logan, Joseph, & Lee, 1994). When these brothers defined what they did for parents as “help,” instability characterized their parents’ current situations. Brothers also indicated that crises may occur any number of times when parents are old. A linear, downward trajectory of their parents’ abilities was not assumed by brothers when their parents required their services. Instead, they acted to reestablish their parents’ independence.

The brothers profiled here tended to meet their filial responsibilities without consulting one another. Routine, collective action was atypical except when a crisis or transition occurred. This contrasts sharply with the practices reported in a study of pairs of sisters, who were described as mobilizing into “a ‘parent-care system’ in which decisions regarding what actions were required were more likely to be made in concert” (Matthews & Rosner, 1988, p. 187). Very few of these brothers-only sibling groups could be described as having “mobilized.” In sibling groups that included only one sister, sisters found their brothers’ refusal to work in concert with them so annoying that they were unwilling to see their brothers’ contributions as genuine (Matthews, 1995). These pairs of brothers, however, presented their independence from one another as appropriate. In the earlier study, brothers in sibling groups that included at least two sisters were reported by sisters to participate “sporadically” and in “circumscribed” ways unlike sisters who participated “routinely” and as reliable “backup” (Matthews & Rosner, 1988). Even in the absence of available sisters, the contributions of brothers reported here seem circumscribed and sporadic. The pejorative connotations of these labels, however, become obvious: They are another way of saying that brothers act independently and accept direction from their parents.

With the exception of ordinary “masculine” services such as yard work and financial advice, brothers expected their parents to ask for assistance. Brothers did not appear to “monitor” (Matthews & Rosner, 1988) their parents or engage in “protective caregiving” (Bowers, 1987) to the degree reported for daughters. Tannen (1990) writes, “The act of protecting frames the protector as dominant and the protected as subordinate” (p. 36). She explains:

Insofar as offering or giving help serves the needs of the one helped, it is a generous move that shows caring and builds rapport. But insofar as it is asymmetrical, giving help puts one person in a superior position with respect to the other…the fact of giving help may seem to send the metamessage “I am more competent than you,” and in that sense it is good for the helper. (p. 32)

Tannen argues that for women offers of help show care, but for men they are likely to be interpreted as adversarial because they insinuate status difference into a relationship. Waiting to be asked rather than offering to help, then, may be evidence that these brothers view their relationships with their parents as egalitarian (Nydegger & Mitteness, 1996) or even that their parents have more status than they. It may also explain why when brothers did help their parents, the goal was to make their relationship symmetrical again and why brothers felt comfortable with parents receiving assistance from informal networks and formal service providers. Ironically, sons’ “failure” to provide as much help to parents as daughters may be evidence of how much they care rather than how little.

Women’s responses to caregiving are the standard against which men’s are judged (Walker, 1992). Spitze and Logan (1990), for example, in a paper that gauges the relative advantage to elderly parents of daughters versus sons, conclude, “In the future, when one- and particularly two-child
families are the norm, parents’ relations with sons and daughters-in-law may come to resemble more closely those they have today with adult daughters” (p. 248). Similarly, Montgomery (1992) concludes that “sons are unlikely to alter their parent-care activities . . . women must seek a way out of their tasks other than through sharing those tasks with men” (p. 82). In both cases, the authors assume that the approach of daughters to parent care is better than that of sons. Implicitly, they are arguing that to make genuine contributions, sons would need to do what daughters do.

Seelbach (1984) suggests that filial responsibility ideally has “an important preventive dimension” (p. 93) that promotes the independence of aging parents. He contends that the tendency of adult children to assist their parents too much and too early leads to their premature dependence. Daughters may be more likely than sons to be guilty of this tendency. Lee, Netzer, and Coward (1995) report a direct, positive correlation between services to elderly parents and their level of depression. Similarly, Silverstein, Chen, and Heller (1996) found that “oversupport” to old parents is more harmful than “undersupport” and conclude that “support from adult children is psychologically beneficial at moderate levels and psychologically harmful at high levels” (p. 978). These studies suggest that a feminine style of parent care may in fact be more harmful to parents than a masculine one. The arbitrators of this debate, of course, are elderly parents whose perspective, with few exceptions (Aronson, 1990; Talbott, 1990), is conspicuously absent. Parents rarely are asked whether they approve of the way their children meet their needs, but there is strong evidence that parents want to remain independent and avoid becoming burdens to their children. These brothers’ approaches to caring for their parents at the very least respect these wishes. The danger for parents is that they are not “monitored” but are instead expected to be able to assess their own situations and ask for assistance.

Brothers described their wives as participating in these families in “gender-appropriate” ways, acting as kinkeepers, doing emotional labor, and providing services. The level of involvement of wives did not appear to be a simple function of the needs of their parents-in-law, however, but of their histories as members of their husbands’ families. In-law ties ranged from very close to hostile, and kinkeeping, emotional labor, and provision of services ranged from the purely symbolic to hands-on care. The assertion that “sons commonly provide personal care and practical support for their elderly parents through the use of their wives’ labour rather than their own” (Finch, 1989, p. 40) suggests more uniformity than is apparent in these 49 brothers-only families. Clearly, in American society there is a great deal of latitude with respect to how wives participate in their in-law families (Goetting, 1990).

Horowitz (1992) writes that men who are identified as primary caregivers for the purpose of research “are likely to be somehow different from their nonparticipating counterparts” (p. 134). This undoubtedly applies to daughters-in-law as well. Coward, Horne, and Dwyer (1992) report that only 8% of caregivers identified by elderly persons in the 1982 National Long-Term Care Survey were daughters-in-law and conclude that both sons-in-law and daughters-in-law “were relatively minor actors in the overall composition of the helping networks” (p. 24). The research reported here implicated daughters-in-law who had the opportunity to provide services to old parents-in-law rather than only those who were defined as primary caregivers. It revealed variety in the ways wives apparently participated in their in-law families, even when they were the only women in their husbands’ generation. These brothers’ approach to meeting their parents’ needs through promoting self-sufficiency appeared to preclude wives from providing extensive services to their parents-in-law. Daughters’ approaches may be more likely to draw in their husbands. Findings from a recent study of middle-aged adults indicate that sons-in-law may provide more services than daughters-in-law to their parents-in-law (Spitz et al., 1994).

The findings reported here are not definitive. The brothers who participated in this research are not a random sample. They are members of brothers-only families. They are relatively advantaged with respect to social class. They have very old parents, a high proportion of whom are surviving as couples, which may contribute to the brothers’ not working together (Wolf et al., 1997). Nevertheless, these findings provide useful clues to why sons are routinely reported to do less than daughters for their elderly parents.

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