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Effects of Life Course Transitions on the Quality of Relationships Between Adult Children and Their Parents

Parents and children are connected throughout their lives. Each generation experiences life course transitions, and these, in turn, influence the lives of the other generation. Using data from the 1987–1988 and 1992–1994 waves of the National Survey of Families and Households, we examine how life course transitions experienced by each generation affect changes in the adult child-parent relationship. There is substantial variability in child-parent relationships. Approximately one fifth of relationships deteriorate, and one fifth improve over this time period. Results indicate that parental divorce and declines in parents' health lead to deteriorating child-parent relationships. Problems in a child's marriage also strain the adult child-parent relationship. Gender has an important mediating effect on intergenerational relations, as evidenced by the differential effects on son-mother and daughter-father relationships of having children, changing work hours, and increasing distance.

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Each generation is bound to fateful decisions and events in the other's life course.

Glenn Elder (1985, p. 40)

With few exceptions, the lives of parents and their children are connected in significant ways as long as both generations are living. Because of linkages across generations, it is likely that life course transitions experienced by members of one generation will have consequences for members of the other (Elder, 1985; Elder, Caspi, & Downey, 1986). For example, changes in an older parent's health or marital status are expected to have consequences for the lives of his or her adult children. Similarly, if an adult child marries, divorces, has a child, or loses a job, his or her parents' lives may be affected. In this study, we examine how life course changes in both generations influence the quality of the relationship that adult children have with their parents.

Most adult children report having a good relationship with their parents. However, as we will show, there is variation in the reported quality of relationships, and relationships are not static. Some adult child-parent relationships improve; others deteriorate. We are interested in how life course transitions and other individual characteristics are related to changes in the quality of intergenerational relationships. What happens to a relationship when a parent is widowed or suffers a decline in health? What happens when a child divorces or has a baby?

Previous studies have used cross-sectional data to examine how factors such as health and marital status are related to the quality of the child-parent relationship, to contact, and exchange. We use findings from this literature to formulate some expectations about how life course changes affect intergenerational relationships. However, this study goes beyond previous research in three ways. First, we examine changes over time in the quality of the adult child-parent relationship. Second, we consider the impact of life course transitions on child-parent relationships. Rather than looking at the effects of marital status or health status on the relationship, we examine effects of changes in these statuses. Third, we take into account transitions in both the adult child's life and the parent's life. With this perspective, we expect to provide a clearer picture of the ways that intergenerational relationships change in response to life events.

TRANSITIONS AND INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Background

Reuben Hill's (1958) classic conceptualization of how stressors affect relationships within a family and the extension of his model by McCubbin and Patterson (1983) provide a useful starting point for this study. They argue that stressors such as death, illness, divorce, and unemployment alter relationships between family members. For example, the illness or unemployment of one family member may require others to fill new roles, which they find stressful. Similarly, the addition or loss of a family member may disrupt existing family roles and require readjustments. Conversely, life changes that are viewed as positive may improve relationships.

We argue that transitions in the lives of either generation may create or alleviate stress in child-parent relationships, even when the generations do not coreside. Recent studies have made clear that parents and their adult children tend to maintain close and supportive relationships with each other throughout life. When children experience needs, parents often provide assistance (Crimmins & Ingegneri, 1990; Ward, Logan, & Spitze, 1992). When aging parents need help, adult children frequently become their caregivers (Eggebeen, 1992; O'Bryant & Morgan, 1990). Further, parents report that they are affected by the successes and failures of their children (Hagestad, 1986; Mutran & Reitzes, 1984; Pillemer & Suito, 1991). Because intergenerational relationships tend to involve

obligation and affective closeness, we expect that the perceived quality of these relationships will be influenced by significant life changes in either generation.

The literature on intergenerational relationships provides useful direction in our search for life course transitions that might affect the quality of child-parent relationships. The transitions that we examine relate to health, marital status, childbearing, employment, and geographic mobility. We develop a rationale for focusing on these particular transitions in the literature review. Note, however, that much of the literature that we cite deals with other dimensions of intergenerational relationships, such as contact, conflict, social support, and caregiving. Because the relationship between the perceived quality of a relationship and these other dimensions of the relationship may not be straightforward and because the literature contains some contradictory findings, it is not reasonable to formulate clear hypotheses linking each life course transition to changes in relationship quality. Thus, in some cases we do not hypothesize how transitions (such as changes in geographic proximity or childbearing) may affect relationship quality, but we simply argue that possible linkages should be examined.

Most studies examining factors that influence adult child-parent relationships have relied on cross-sectional data. Some recent studies, however, have begun to explore changes in relationships over time. Roan and Raley (1996) report that a mother's widowhood leads to an increase in visits, calls, and letters from children. Thornton, Orbuch, and Axinn (1995) found that, as children age from 18 to 23 years, their relationships with parents tend to improve. (Larger improvements occur in relationships with mothers than with fathers.) These researchers suggest that intergenerational relationships may improve when children move into early adulthood because the children experience positive changes in employment, marriage, and parenthood. They do not, however, actually examine the effects of these transitions on child-parent relationships. In our analysis, we examine the effects of changes in the child's life that may be stressful as well as positive, and we consider effects of transitions in the parents' lives, as well.

Health

Several studies suggest that a change in parental health impacts the child-parent relationship. Studies of caregiving find that caring for an infirm

parent can be a stressful activity (Stoller & Pugliesi, 1989). Further, demands of providing care compete with family and work responsibilities, thereby creating additional stress (Soldo & Myllyluoma, 1983). Finally, parents receiving care from their adult children often struggle with the issues of dependency and role reversal (Chappell, 1991). This increasing dependency is associated with parents feeling resentment and distress (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1986; Coyne, Wortman, & Lehman, 1988; Pyke & Bengtson, 1996). Because both parent and child experience stress when the parent's health declines, we expect that a deterioration in parent's health will have a negative effect on the quality of the relationship. Conversely, improvements in health are expected to be associated with improved quality of relationships.

One additional note on effects of health change on child-parent relationships concerns the role of gender. Daughters are more likely than sons to provide care for disabled parents (Brubaker & Brubaker, 1992; Dwyer & Coward, 1991), and daughters tend to experience more stress and burden as a result of parental illness (Montgomery, 1992). Therefore, we expect that changes in health will have a greater effect on relationships between daughters and parents than between sons and parents.

Marital Status

A number of studies have examined the effects of both the parents' and the adult child's marital status on intergenerational relationships. The most consistent finding is that divorce in later life adversely affects child-parent relationships (Aquilino, 1994; Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991; Cooney, 1994). Parental divorce frequently produces strain in relationships with children (Umberson, 1992) because even children not living in the household are subject to the hostility and upheaval often associated with this transition (Aquilino, 1994; Pett, Lang, & Gander, 1992). We expect that children's relationships with parents will tend to deteriorate if the parents divorce.

There is evidence, however, that relationships of dyads with different gender configurations may be affected differentially by parental divorce. First, several studies suggest that divorce is more disruptive of child-father relationships than child-mother relationships (Amato & Booth, 1996; Aquilino, 1994; Cooney, 1994; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). It seems that fathers are more likely than mothers to be blamed for the di-

vorce. Second, the gender of the child also may be related to how intergenerational relationships are affected. Both Aquilino and Cooney found that negative effects are stronger for daughter-father relationships than for son-father relationships. Amato and Booth report that parental divorce reduces the closeness of sons to mothers, but not of sons to fathers. A study of college students found that daughter-mother relations actually improved following divorce and that daughters had great empathy toward their recently divorced mothers (Cooney, Smyer, Hagestad, & Klock, 1986). Despite some inconsistencies in the literature, we expect that daughter-father relationships are the most vulnerable when parents divorce and that daughter-mother relationships are the least vulnerable.

Adult children are more likely to see their parents' marriage disrupted by death than by divorce. How is a child's relationship with a parent affected by the transition to widowhood? There is no evidence that widowhood adversely affects the relationship between children and mothers, and in some cases the relationship may be strengthened (Eggebeen, 1992; Roan & Raley, 1996). On the other hand, widowed fathers have been found to receive less emotional support from children than married fathers, and they are more likely to be isolated than widowed mothers (Marks, 1995). Aquilino (1994) found that fathers' widowhood has negative consequences for daughter-father relationships, but not for son-father relationships. Therefore, we expect that negative effects of a transition to widowhood are limited to the daughter-father relationship.

Although less studied than parental divorce, a child's divorce also may have negative consequences for intergenerational relationships (Hagestad, 1988). Umberson (1992) found that, compared with married children, divorced children reported receiving less social support from their parents and experiencing more strain in relationships with their mothers. In another study, both divorced and unmarried children perceived receiving less support from their parents than married children (White & Peterson, 1995). Children typically rely on kin for socioemotional support when they go through a divorce, but the divorce is likely to add stress to relationships with parents. Parents may be disappointed with children who are unsuccessful in marriage, and economic problems associated with divorce may increase distress for parents who feel some responsibility for helping their children. Remaining unmarried in adulthood also may interfere with close intergenerational relationships (Pillemer

& Suito, 1991; Speare & Avery, 1993). In general, we expect that children who divorce or remain unmarried will see relationships with parents deteriorate more often than children who are continuously married.

Children who are married do not, of course, necessarily have satisfying marriages. Little attention has been given to the possible effects of the quality of the marital relationship on intergenerational relationships. However, happiness in one relationship is likely to carry over to other relationships. Booth and Amato (1994) found that children are more likely to report being close to parents who report a high quality marriage. We expect, therefore, that a deterioration in the quality of a child's marriage will adversely affect relationships with parents.

Childbearing

It commonly is assumed that the birth of a child, particularly the first one, brings daughters closer to their mothers. Results from one small study provided support for this position (Fischer, 1981). However, subsequent studies, using larger and sometimes representative samples, generally have not found a positive effect of parenthood on the relationship that adults have with their parents. Having children tends to reduce the frequency of contact that adults have with their parents (Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994; Rossi & Rossi, 1990) and has either a negative effect or no effect on intergenerational exchanges (Starrels, Ingersoll-Dayton, Neal, & Yamada, 1995). A study in Boston found that daughters reported less rewarding relationships with their mothers when they had children (Baruch & Barnett, 1983). Past research does not provide an adequate basis for predicting how transitions in childbearing might affect child-parent relationships, nor whether effects differ by the gender configuration of the dyad. Nevertheless, we are interested in exploring whether or not childbearing has a positive or negative effect on some relationships.

Employment and Geographic Mobility

Like the literature on childbearing, the literature on the effects that employment or geographic distance have on child-parent relationships is too sparse to justify formulating hypotheses. Nevertheless, there are hints that these variables could play some role. Hagestad (1986) noted that parents are affected by their children's accomplishments, so a failure such

as unemployment could have a negative effect on relationships. This might apply to relationships between sons and fathers, especially because they identify with each other through work (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Increasing commitment to work has a negative effect on the amount of contact between adult daughters and their parents and could weaken the quality of this relationship.

Geographic proximity is strongly associated with frequency of intergenerational visiting and exchange of social support (Connidis & Davies, 1990; Dewit, Wister, & Burch, 1988; Lawton et al., 1994; Litwak & Kulis, 1987; Silverstein & Litwak, 1993). One might expect, therefore, that changes in distance would influence the quality of relationships. However, Rossi and Rossi (1990) did not find that geographic distance was a predictor of affective closeness. Cooney (1994) found that greater distance was associated with higher intimacy between divorced mothers and their daughters. With no clear expectations, we will simply explore whether changes in employment status or geographic distance are related to changes in child-parent relationships.

Gender

In any study of intergenerational relationships it is important to consider how gender may mediate child-parent relationships (Booth & Amato, 1994; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Several differences by gender have been found in previous studies. First, females are more involved than males in maintaining intergenerational relationships (Hagestad, 1986; Spitze & Logan, 1990), and mothers frequently mediate the relationship between daughters and fathers (Aquilino, 1994; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). With greater investment of females in family relationships, it is not surprising that both sons and daughters report more positive relationships with their mothers than with their fathers (Thornton et al., 1995). Second, same-sex dyads tend to differ from cross-sex dyads. Children often identify more strongly with the parent of the same sex and find it easier to share activities and interests with that parent (Aquilino, 1994; Lamb, 1981; Lee, Dwyer, & Coward, 1993). The daughter-mother relationship is found to be closer than the other dyad types. There is good reason, therefore, to examine the consequences of life course transitions separately for each type of gender configuration.

TABLE 1. MAPPING SCHEME FOR THE CHANGE IN RELATIONSHIP QUALITY VARIABLE

National Survey of Families and Households Time 1 Value	National Survey of Families and Households Time 2 Value		
	No Change	Improvement	Deterioration
1	0, 1	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10	
2	1, 2, 3	4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10	0
3	3, 4, 5	6, 7, 8, 9, 10	0, 1, 2
4	4, 5, 6	7, 8, 9, 10	0, 1, 2, 3
5	5, 6, 7	8, 9, 10	0, 1, 2, 3, 4
6	7, 8, 9	10	0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
7	9, 10		0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8

Other Variables

Although our focus is on the effects of life changes, several stable characteristics also may have consequences for relationships. The number of siblings a child has may be relevant because siblings can mediate the relationship between a child and her or his parents. Having more siblings may have a negative impact on how close adolescents are to their parents (Kidwell, 1981), but having more siblings seems to strengthen relationships in later life (Uhlenberg & Cooney, 1990). Parent's age and the age difference between parent and child could be related to changes in the quality of relationships over time. Relationships may improve when children mature, but a large age gap may reduce the likelihood of generations sharing common interests and activities. Finally, we introduce race as a control variable because some studies have found stronger ties to mothers in Black families than in non-Black families (Lawton et al., 1994; Mutran, 1985).

METHODS

Data

Data for this study come from two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The first wave was conducted in 1987–1988, and the second wave was conducted approximately 5 years later (1992–1994). The first wave included a nationally representative sample of adults aged 19 and older who were living in the United States. The sample for our study includes all adults with at least one living parent at the time of the second wave. There are 5,760 respondents with mothers living and 4,261 respondents with fathers living.

The dependent variables measure change between waves in the quality of the child-parent relationship reported by children. In the first wave respondents were asked, "How would you de-

scribe your relationship with your mother?" The same question was asked about fathers. Possible responses ranged from 1 (*very poor*) to 7 (*excellent*). In the second wave, respondents were asked similar questions, but the scale was changed, ranging from 0 (*really bad*) to 10 (*absolutely perfect*). Given the distribution of relationship quality in the two waves, we identify a range of values from NSFH2 that are considered to be equivalent or similar to each value from NSFH1. The mapping scheme for the change in relationship variable is shown in Table 1. In order to determine whether the results obtained with this scheme were reliable, we tried two other ways of defining the change in relationship quality. The other two schemes provided us with similar results (not shown here). Although various schemes define change differently, as long as the mapping rules are applied consistently, any change in relationship can be viewed as change relative to others. The dependent variable is constructed as a trichotomy with categories for those who experienced an increase in relationship quality, those who experienced a decrease in relationship quality, and those who experienced no change in relationship quality. We use a multinomial logit model to compare those who reported an improving relationship and those who reported a deteriorating relationship with those who reported no change.

Variables

Several independent variables measure transitions experienced by the parent or the adult child over the 5 years between interviews. These variables are constructed by comparing responses to similar questions at the two points in time.

Changes in parent's health. This is measured by a question that asked at both waves how a respondent would describe his or her mother's (father's) health on a scale from 1 (*very poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). The change in parent's health is measured by three

dummy variables: no change in health (the reference category), decline in health, and improvement in health. If parent's health is rated the same at both waves, there is no change in parent's health. Otherwise, health is considered to have declined or improved, depending on the direction of change.

Changes in parent's marital status. This is measured by four dummy variables: still married to respondent's other parent (reference category), married to other parent at first wave and widowed between waves, married to other parent at first wave and divorced or separated between waves, and not married to other parent at first wave.

Changes in child's marital status and marital relationship quality. This is measured using responses to questions about marital status and the quality of the marital relationship at both waves. We construct a set of seven variables: those who were not married at the first wave and got married between waves, those who were married and had a good marital relationship at both waves (reference category), those who were married at both waves and whose good marital relationship turned poor, those who were married at both waves and whose poor marital relationship turned good, those who were married and had a poor marital relationship at both waves, those whose marriage ended between waves, and those who were not married at either wave. We did not consider multiple transitions between marital statuses here. Note, though, that approximately 5% of our sample experienced more than one marital transition.

Changes in child's parenthood status. This is measured by four dummy variables: those who had no children at either wave (reference category), those who had a first child between waves, those who already had at least one child at the first wave and had additional children between waves, and those who already had at least one child at the first wave and had no additional children between waves.

Changes in child's work status. This variable is based on full-time, part-time, and no employment at the time of the two interviews. Full-time is defined as 30 hours or more per week, and part-time is fewer than 30 hours per week. If work status was full-time at both waves or part-time at both waves or if the respondent was unemployed or out of the labor force at both waves, there is no change in work status (reference category). Respondents who changed from working full-time to part-time or to

not working at all or from part-time to not working at all experienced a decrease in work. Respondents who changed from not working to working or from working part-time to working full-time experienced an increase in work.

Changes in distance between child and parent. Respondents were asked at both waves how many miles away from their mother or father they lived. Those who lived with a parent were assigned a distance of zero. If parents were still married to each other, we set the father's distance equal to the mother's distance. We considered a change in distance that was less than or equal to 25% closer or farther away to involve no change in proximity (reference category). If distance increased by more than 25%, then proximity decreased, and if distance decreased by more than 25%, then proximity increased. We also ran models with a distance measure that included in the reference category a change of 50% or less. The results did not differ.

In addition to the change variables, we include several demographic variables that were measured in the first wave: parent's age, age gap between parent and respondent, respondent's number of siblings, and respondent's race or ethnic category (White, Black, Hispanic, other). Table 2 presents the means of the dependent and independent variables. On average, the children in this study are young adults with middle-aged parents.

RESULTS

As expected, at both waves adult children reported having better relationships with their mothers than with their fathers. The gender of the child, however, made little difference. Sons and daughters were similar in their reports of relationship quality with their mothers, and men reported only slightly better relationships with their fathers than women reported. Taking into account the change in scale, there was little change over the 5 years in the average quality of relationship with either parent. However, this aggregate stability masks substantial variability in individual relationships. Fully 40% of child-parent relationships changed over the 5 years. Approximately one half of those improved, and one half deteriorated.

Cross-sectional Analysis

Before turning to longitudinal analysis, we briefly examine results from a cross-sectional analysis of relationship quality at Wave 1. Because most previ-

TABLE 2. MEANS OF VARIABLES

Variable	Sons		Daughters	
	Mothers (<i>n</i> = 2,318)	Fathers (<i>n</i> = 1,706)	Mothers (<i>n</i> = 3,442)	Fathers (<i>n</i> = 2,555)
Relationship quality with parent				
At National Survey of Families and Households Time 1 ^a	5.88	5.48	5.85	5.25
At National Survey of Families and Households Time 2	7.98	7.31	7.95	7.19
Improvement	0.20	0.22	0.20	0.25
Deterioration	0.18	0.20	0.18	0.18
Same	0.62	0.58	0.62	0.57
Demographic characteristics				
Parent's age	59.07	59.48	58.69	59.11
Age difference	25.88	28.54	25.52	28.25
Siblings	3.05	2.90	3.21	3.09
White	0.79	0.80	0.75	0.76
Black	0.13	0.13	0.17	0.16
Hispanic	0.07	0.06	0.07	0.06
Other	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02
Parent's health status				
Parent's health better	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.10
Parent's health worse	0.22	0.20	0.22	0.22
Parent's marital status				
Parents married to each other at both waves	0.43	0.57	0.41	0.54
Parent widowed between waves	0.07	0.03	0.06	0.04
Parent's marriage ended between waves	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.03
Parents not married to each other at Time 1	0.47	0.36	0.51	0.39
Child's marital status and relationship				
Got married between waves	0.17	0.18	0.14	0.16
Married at both waves, good at both	0.30	0.28	0.25	0.26
Married at both waves, good to bad	0.08	0.07	0.07	0.07
Married at both waves, bad to good	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.04
Married at both waves, bad at both	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.06
Marriage ended between waves	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.10
Not married at either wave	0.25	0.27	0.34	0.31
Child's parenthood status				
First child	0.14	0.17	0.09	0.12
Additional child(ren)	0.15	0.16	0.17	0.20
No new children	0.45	0.38	0.59	0.52
No children	0.26	0.29	0.15	0.16
Child's employment status				
Works more	0.07	0.08	0.17	0.19
Works less	0.08	0.06	0.13	0.13
Proximity to parent				
Closer to parent	0.26	0.24	0.28	0.26
Farther from parent	0.33	0.31	0.33	0.30

^aScale for National Survey of Families and Households Time 1 was 1–7; for National Survey of Families and Households Time 2 it was 0–10.

ous research has made use of cross-sectional data, this analysis is considered a starting point from which we can compare results with those from our longitudinal analysis. For this analysis, we use OLS and include the following variables: parent's health (measured on a 5-point scale where higher numbers indicate better health), parent's marital status (parents not married to each other vs. parents married to each other), child's marital status and relationship quality (currently married with relationship other than good, previously married, or never married vs. currently married with a good relationship), child's parenthood status (child

younger than 19 years old in household vs. no children), child's employment status (part-time employment or no work vs. full-time work), and distance from parent. The basic demographic characteristics are the same for both the cross-sectional and longitudinal models. Results from the cross-sectional analysis are shown in Table 3.

Parent's age has a positive effect on men's and women's relationships with both their mothers and fathers. As other studies suggest, this probably indicates that child-parent relationships tend to improve as both generations age. The age gap between generations has a significant effect on only

TABLE 3. OLS REGRESSION OF RELATIONSHIP QUALITY WITH PARENT AT NATIONAL SURVEY OF FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS TIME 1

Independent Variable	Mother		Father	
	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters
Demographic characteristics				
Parent's age	0.018**	0.016**	0.024**	0.032**
Age difference	-0.004	0.000	-0.012	-0.013*
Siblings	0.040**	0.038**	0.036**	0.025*
Black ^a	0.478**	0.422**	-0.010	0.188*
Hispanic	0.330**	0.172*	0.170	0.192
Other	0.396*	0.173	0.443	0.144
Parent's health status	0.310**	0.303**	0.410**	0.462**
Parents not married to each other ^b	-0.246**	-0.173**	-0.880**	-0.997**
Child's marital status ^c				
Married, relationship less than good	-0.460**	-0.359**	-0.306**	-0.500**
Previously married	-0.220**	-0.305**	-0.202*	-0.331**
Never married	-0.137	-0.392**	-0.238*	-0.341**
Child's parenthood status ^d				
	-0.080	-0.229**	-0.062	-0.048
Child's employment status ^e				
Part-time	0.077	-0.061	0.042	0.012
Unemployed	0.044	0.063	-0.101	0.041
Proximity to parent (log)	-0.021*	-0.030**	-0.039**	-0.040**
Intercept	3.926	4.159	3.393	2.723
R ²	0.090	0.084	0.152	0.196
n	3320	4646	2336	3300

^aReference category is non-Hispanic White. ^bReference category is parents who are married to each other. ^cReference category is currently married, relationship good. ^dReference category is no children. ^eReference category is full-time employment.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

the daughter-father relationship, where greater age differences are associated with poorer relationships. Those with more siblings report having better relationships with their parents than those with fewer siblings. Race and ethnicity mainly affect the relationship quality with the mother. Black and Hispanic men and women are more likely to report good relationships with their mothers than their non-Hispanic White counterparts. Black women also report better relationships with their fathers. Parent's health has a strong and positive effect on the adult child-parent relationship. Consistent with other studies, children whose parents' health is good are more likely than others to report that they have good relationships with their parents.

On the other hand, children report more negative relationships with a parent who is not currently married to their other parent. This negative effect on relationships is especially strong for fathers who are not married to mothers of the children. A child's marital dissolution also has a negative effect on all adult child-parent relationships. With the exception of never-married sons, adult children who are not married (never married, divorced, or separated) have worse relationships with their mothers and fathers than happily married children. Furthermore, men and women who rate their marital rela-

tionships more negatively are more likely to report poor relationships with their parents than the happily married. Having children has a significant effect on relationships in only one case. Women with children are more likely to have poor relationships with their mothers. Employment status has no significant effect. Finally, adult children who live farther away from their parents are less likely to report good relationships with their parents.

The analysis of cross-sectional data finds a number of factors that predict the quality of adult child-parent relationships. Most of these factors have been noted in previous studies. A cross-sectional perspective, however, cannot adequately deal with the dynamic nature of relationships. Longitudinal data are needed to examine whether or not the quality of relationships change in response to life course transitions in both generations. Therefore, we turn to an analysis based on changes occurring over the 5 years between Wave 1 and Wave 2 of the NSFH.

Longitudinal Analysis

In this section, we examine the change in relationship quality between waves. Results of the multinomial logit models predicting the change in sons' relationships with parents are shown in Table 4,

and results of the models predicting the change in daughters' relationships with parents are shown in Table 5. We first ask whether individual characteristics predict improvement in or deterioration of relationship quality over time. Parent's age tends to stabilize daughters' relationships with their mothers and fathers. In other words, daughters with older parents are less likely to experience any change, for better or worse, in their relationships. The age gap between parents and children has little effect on change in adult child-parent relationships, with the exception that men's relationships with their fathers are less likely to deteriorate if the father is much older than the son. Relationships are more likely to be stable between Black children and their mothers than between non-Hispanic White children and their mothers.

The first change variable considered is parent's health. Changes in parent's health have a consistently strong effect on men's and women's relationships with both parents. All adult child-parent relationships benefit from an improvement in the relevant parent's health. In addition, women are more likely to report a deterioration of the relationship with either parent if that parent's health declined between waves. Men are more likely to report a deterioration of their relationship with fathers whose health declined.

The dissolution of parents' marriage tends to have detrimental effects on adult children's relationships with their parents, especially with their fathers. Men and women whose parents' marriage ended between waves are more likely to experience a deterioration of their relationship with their father than women and men whose parents re-

TABLE 4. COEFFICIENTS FOR MULTINOMIAL LOGITS OF CHANGE IN SONS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH MOTHERS AND FATHERS

Independent Variable	Mother		Father	
	Better	Worse	Better	Worse
Demographic characteristics				
Parent's age	-0.013	0.007	-0.018	-0.000
Age difference	-0.020	-0.019	-0.015	-0.030*
Siblings	0.016	0.008	0.012	0.044
Black ^a	-0.696**	-0.597**	0.110	-0.004
Hispanic	-0.367	-0.358	0.163	-0.105
Other	0.233	0.249	0.828	0.086
Parent's health status^b				
Parent's health better	0.570**	-0.276	0.621**	0.043
Parent's health worse	0.020	-0.017	0.061	0.360*
Parent's marital status^c				
Parent widowed between waves	0.192	0.503*	0.252	0.596
Parent's marriage ended between waves	-0.365	0.381	-0.004	1.127**
Parents not married to each other at Time 1	0.214	0.484**	0.432**	0.443**
Child's marital status and relationship^d				
Got married between waves	0.345	0.111	0.340	0.222
Married at both waves, good to bad	-0.303	0.645**	-0.203	0.645
Married at both waves, bad to good	0.270	-0.184	0.018	0.056
Married at both waves, bad to both	0.472	0.210	0.376	-0.471
Marriage ended between waves	0.238	0.338	-0.046	-0.624*
Not married at either wave	0.340*	0.192	0.164	-0.052
Child's parenthood status^e				
First child	-0.322	0.080	-0.019	-0.193
Additional child(ren)	0.412*	0.356	0.073	0.151
No new children	0.169	-0.125	-0.045	0.127
Child's employment status^b				
Works more	0.392	0.091	0.514*	0.212
Works less	-0.041	0.025	-0.276	0.456
Proximity to parent^b				
Closer to parent	0.148	0.062	0.022	0.062
Farther from parent	0.164	0.326*	0.068	0.256
Intercept	-0.408	-1.624	0.035	-0.834
Log likelihood	4016.88		2914.93	
<i>n</i>	2228		1568	

^aReference category is non-Hispanic White. ^bReference category is no change. ^cReference category is parents still married to each other. ^dReference category is married at both waves, good at both. ^eReference category is no children.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 5. COEFFICIENTS FOR MULTINOMIAL LOGITS OF CHANGE IN DAUGHTERS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH MOTHERS AND FATHERS

Independent Variable	Mother		Father	
	Better	Worse	Better	Worse
Demographic characteristics				
Parent's age	-0.015*	-0.015*	-0.012	-0.021*
Age difference	-0.010	0.009	0.003	0.006
Siblings	-0.014	-0.037	0.028	-0.026
Black ^a	-0.098	-0.473**	0.293	0.057
Hispanic	0.217	0.035	-0.167	-0.227
Other	0.422	0.143	-0.279	0.159
Parent's health status^b				
Parent's health better	0.467**	-0.119	0.465**	0.136
Parent's health worse	-0.114	0.428**	0.009	0.305*
Parent's marital status^c				
Parent widowed between waves	0.379*	0.272	0.354	0.749**
Parent's marriage ended between waves	0.121	0.473	0.107	0.834**
Parents not married to each other at Time 1	0.250*	0.301**	0.457**	0.197
Child's marital status and relationship^d				
Got married between waves	0.339*	0.295	0.395*	0.216
Married at both waves, good to bad	0.246	0.795**	0.074	0.380
Married at both waves, bad to good	0.759**	0.154	0.618*	-1.254*
Married at both waves, bad at both	0.670**	-0.045	0.509*	-0.404
Marriage ended between waves	0.350*	0.707**	0.290	0.558**
Not married at either wave	0.483**	0.377**	0.186	0.288
Child's parenthood status^e				
First child	-0.226	0.062	0.058	0.428
Additional child(ren)	0.230	0.067	-0.090	0.420*
No new children	0.212	0.210	0.121	0.349
Child's employment status^b				
Works more	-0.178	-0.003	-0.125	0.308*
Works less	0.149	0.283*	0.312*	0.171
Proximity to parent^b				
Closer to parent	-0.020	0.115	-0.002	-0.235
Farther from parent	0.250*	0.181	0.256*	0.067
Intercept	-0.688	-1.233	-0.947	-0.782
Log likelihood	5975.41		4417.97	
<i>n</i>	3319		2358	

^aReference category is non-Hispanic White. ^bReference category is no change. ^cReference category is parents still married to each other. ^dReference category is married at both waves, good at both. ^eReference category is no children.
 p* < .05. *p* < .01.

mained married to each other. The negative effects of parental marital disruption need not result from divorce only. Widowhood also may lead to a deterioration of relationships between the adult child and parent. Daughters whose father became widowed between waves are more likely to report a deteriorating relationship with their father. At the same time, sons whose mother became widowed between waves are more likely to report a deteriorating relationship with their mother, and sons' relationships with mothers continue to deteriorate long after their parents' marital dissolution. In contrast, daughters whose mother became widowed between waves are more likely than other daughters to see their relationship with their mother improve.

Even when the parents' marriage ended before the first NSFH interview, this dissolution contin-

ues to affect the direction of change in adult child-parent relationships. Daughters' relationships with their mothers and sons' relationships with their fathers could have either continued to decline or to improve in the 5 years between waves. However, after a decidedly negative short-term effect of parental marital dissolution, daughters' relationships with their fathers who were not married to their mothers at Wave 1 improved. These results are probably due, in part, to the lower initial relationship quality at Wave 1. In fact, results from regressions of relationship quality at Time 2 indicate that both sons and daughters whose fathers were not married to their mothers at Time 1 still report lower relationship quality with their fathers than children whose parents remain married (results not shown).

Changes in an adult child's marriage may affect the quality of the child's relationships with his or her parents. Women who got married between waves are more likely to report an improvement in their relationships with their mothers and fathers. A recent parental divorce harms children's relationships with their fathers only, but the end of a child's marriage leads to poorer child-parent relationships for daughters only. Women whose marriages ended between waves of the NSFH were more likely to report declines in relationships with both their mothers and their fathers than were women who remained married to the same spouse and had a good marital relationship. However, it is not only a child's divorce that produces strain in the adult child-parent relationship. Changes in the quality of a child's marital relationship are also important. Compared with happily married men and women, those whose marital relationship deteriorated over the 5 years are more likely to report a decline in the quality of their relationships with their mothers. For men, a decline in marital quality also is associated with a decline in relationship quality with their fathers. On the other hand, women whose marriages improved during this time are less likely to have relationships with their fathers that deteriorate and more likely to have relationships with their mothers and fathers that improve.

Finally, remaining single is associated with instability in the adult daughter-mother relationship. Compared with their happily married counterparts, women who are not married at either wave are both more likely to report improved relationships with their mothers and more likely to report deteriorated relationships with their mothers. For men, being single at both waves is associated with an improved relationship with their mothers. An unexpected finding is the positive effect of being unhappily married on daughters' relationships with mothers and fathers. Likewise, men whose marriages ended between waves are less likely to report a deterioration of relationships with their fathers. These children may have already experienced low relationship quality with their parents, and there may be room only for improvement. Still, daughters who divorced or remained single have poorer relationships with their mothers at Time 2 than happily married daughters (results not shown).

Changes in the child's parenthood status have little effect on sons' relationships with fathers or on daughters' relationships with mothers. However, having an additional child increases the likelihood

that a son's relationship with his mother improves. By contrast, there is a negative effect of having additional children on women's relationships with their fathers.

The effect of changes in the child's employment status varies by the child's gender. Women who increased their work hours have a greater likelihood of a decline in the quality of relationship with their father than women whose work hours did not change. Women who work less are more likely to have an improved relationship with their fathers. In contrast, men who increased their work hours are more likely to experience an improvement in their relationships with their fathers, compared with men whose work hours did not change. In addition, women who work less are more likely to experience a decline in relationship quality with their mothers.

Changes in proximity to the parent have less of an effect than expected, and the effect is not always in the expected direction. An increase in distance is associated with a decline in son-mother relationships but results in an improvement in daughter-father and daughter-mother relationships.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Changes in the Parent's Life

Previous studies have clearly documented that adult children often provide support to their aging parents when these parents experience difficult life changes, such as declining health or widowhood. Following the lead of Reuben Hill (1958), it also seems likely that the increasing dependency of parents creates stress for the children and that this stress interferes with the enjoyment of the child-parent relationship. Results from our analysis provide substantial evidence that adverse life changes for parents take a toll on how children view their relationships with parents.

When a parent's health declines, there is a tendency for children to report that their relationship with that parent deteriorates. This is especially true for daughters, who are more likely than sons to be involved in caring for dependent parents. On the positive side, there are also situations in which the health of parents improves over time. In all possible combinations of child-parent relationships, improvements in the child's perception of relationship quality occur when the parent's health improves.

A second example of how change in the parent's life may affect child-parent relationships involves stress introduced by the disruption of the

Parent
health

Parent divorce

parent's marriage. Children may provide support to parents who experience divorce or widowhood, but children also may find that the quality of their relationships with these parents is harmed by this change. The adverse effects of parental divorce are especially strong for the relationships between adult children and their fathers. This is consistent with several previous studies (Aquilino, 1994; Cooney, 1994; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). However, although the effect of parental divorce on both the son-father relationship and the daughter-father relationship is negative, its effect is stronger on the son-father relationship. In fact, parental divorce is the strongest predictor of negative changes in the adult son-father relationship. Although both daughters and sons may blame their fathers for a parental divorce, sons may feel additional stress if they are expected to take up some of their father's roles in the family.

Changes in the Child's Life

Not only do adult children support their parents in time of crisis, but parents also are a resource for their children in times of need (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Nevertheless, problems in a child's marriage may create strain in child-parent relationships. Children who experience a decline in the quality of their marital relationship may bring tension into other family situations or may neglect altogether other family obligations. Divorce does not negatively affect sons' relationships with their parents but has a strong negative effect on daughters' relationships. Divorce may ease a stressful situation for men without creating new economic stresses. In contrast, divorce produces a drop in economic status for most women, especially when children are involved. Economic problems could strain adult child-parent relations either because of dependency (if help is given) or because of resentment (if help is not given). Alternatively, it may be that a successful marriage is more a measure of a woman's success than a man's success. In this case, divorced daughters may feel that they are a disappointment to their families. Another possible explanation is that tension between a woman's parents and her husband may contribute to a decline in her relationships with both parents and husband.

Gender

We find strong support for the argument made by Alice and Peter Rossi (1990), Gunhild Hagestad

(1986), and others that gender plays a central role in studies of intergenerational relationships. Each of the four possible dyads (daughter-mother, son-mother, daughter-father, son-father) is unique. In the discussion of the effects of change in health and marital status, we already noted variations by gender. Several additional examples further illustrate ways in which gender makes a difference. First, having a child has a positive effect only for the son-mother relationship. It is somewhat surprising that a daughter's relationship with her mother is not affected by the birth of a child. It may be that identification with the mother role is no longer the sole or primary connection between daughters and mothers. Moreover, having a child has a negative effect on the daughter-father relationship. Having a child tends to reduce contact between daughters and fathers (Rossi & Rossi, 1990) and seems to affect how daughters view their fathers.

Another example of gender differences relates to the effects of changing work hours. Sons' relationships with their fathers improve when they increase their hours at work. In contrast, daughters' relationships with their fathers deteriorate when they increase their work hours and improve when they decrease their work hours. This may be due to fathers' different expectations of desirable careers for daughters and sons. Fathers expect and desire their sons to succeed at work. When sons do not succeed and when they perceive that their fathers are disappointed, the relationship may be strained. Expectations of fathers for their daughters' careers, on the other hand, may be quite different. More ambitious daughters may relate less well with their fathers because they feel unsupported. These daughters also may be faced with a tradeoff—having to choose between work and family.

The divergent effects of increases in distance on son-mother and daughter-parent relationships provide yet another example of gender differences. An increase in geographic distance, compared with no change in distance, increases the likelihood of a decline in the relationship between sons and mothers but leads to improved relationships between daughters and both parents. Distance may present more of an obstacle to maintaining a close son-mother relationship because sons, in general, take less initiative in kin relationships. In contrast, daughters do not need and, in fact, may not prefer frequent physical contact with their parents in order to maintain a good relationship. This finding is unexpected but may be explained by the possibility that parents often continue to act like parents even when their children are grown up. This is es-

Gender + work - relations w/parents

Divorce, marital problems of children

pecially the case for fathers and daughters, who may feel as though their independence is stifled by living close to their fathers. Living farther away from their parents increases daughters' ability to pursue freely the activities they want to pursue.

Other Family Members

Another theme emerging from our analysis is the potential benefit of having additional family members to help mediate child-parent relationships. In the cross-sectional analysis, having more siblings is consistently and positively associated with higher quality relationships with parents. In addition, in the cross-sectional analysis both sons and daughters report having better relationships with mothers and fathers when those parents are married to the child's other parent. There are different explanations for these findings, but a plausible one involves the advantage of having additional family members to mediate the child-parent relationship. For example, one child might serve as a mediator when a sibling has differences with a parent. Siblings also may help to increase parental involvement with children of the opposite sex, especially daughters with fathers (Harris & Morgan, 1991). In addition, it is likely that a mother often facilitates the relationship between a child and his or her father. The negative effect of a parent losing a spouse on the child-parent relationship supports this interpretation. Daughter-father and son-mother relationships suffer when a parent is widowed. This finding is consistent with Aquilino's (1994) finding of a differential effect of widowhood on daughters' and sons' receipt of support. It appears that the son-mother relationship is mediated by the father, and the daughter-father relationship is mediated by the mother. Combined with the findings on the effects of divorce, it seems that the adult child-father relationship is enhanced when the father lives with the child's mother.

Cross-sectional and Longitudinal Results

Finally, we note the basic congruence of cross-sectional and longitudinal results. In general, interpretations from cross-sectional findings are consistent with those from longitudinal findings. In both analyses, parents having good health, parents remaining married to each other, and children having good marriages are associated with more positive child-parent relationships. However, there are several complexities that may be missed if we focus solely on cross-sectional data. From longitudinal

data we see that the negative effect of parental marital disruption is strong but may either continue or weaken. At least some children whose parents were not married to each other at Time 1 actually experience an improvement in their relationships with their parents by Time 2. In addition, changes in the quality of the son's marital relationship have greater effects on the son-parent relationship than a marital disruption. Cross-sectional data do not show any employment status effects, but longitudinal data indicate that changes in employment hours may affect adult child-parent relationships. A good example of the benefits of longitudinal design can be seen by looking at the effect of distance. We can see from cross-sectional data that children living farther away from their parents tend to have weaker relationships with parents. However, with longitudinal data, we can look at whether children or parents moved farther away, and we find that for daughters this does not cause relationships with their parents to decline.

One limitation of this study is that relationship quality is reported from the perspective of adult children only. Data limitations prevented the pursuit of this question from the perspective of the parents. However, we might expect different results from parents because we know from previous research that parents tend to rate relationship quality higher than children, and this also may mean that relationship quality from their perspective would be less sensitive to the impact of transitions.

Our findings suggest that intergenerational relationships are vulnerable to the stresses and strains produced by life changes affecting either generation. Because the roles and expectations of child-parent relationships vary by gender, the effects of any particular life course event may affect dyadic relationships differently. Future studies need to devote more attention to ways in which child-parent relationships develop and change over the entire life course and to the factors that lead relationships to improve or deteriorate.

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