

The division of parent care between spouses: a question of the household division of labour?

Introduction

Women have traditionally provided most eldercare. A rich body of literature has repeatedly found that daughters are more often involved in caring for their parents than sons (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Stoller, 1990); that they are more often primary caregivers than sons (Soldo, Wolf and Agree, 1990; Stoller, 1990); and that they are more often involved in the more intensive caring activities (Horowitz, 1985; Soldo et. al, 1990).

Single children are more likely to become informal carers than married children (Henz, 2006; Stoller, 1983), but because of the demographic patterns, the majority of parent carers are married children.

Increasing rates of female employment can cause conflict with informal caring. If informal caring is to be sustained in the coming decades, caregivers will need more formal and informal support. A primary source of informal support might be the spouse. Past research has elaborated the key role that wives play in their husbands' informal caring. Horowitz (1985) found that wives were more often involved in the care for the husband's parents than husbands were in the care for the wife's parents. The discussion about the involvement of children-in-law has sometimes described sons-in-law as merely assisting their wives (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Qureshi and Walker, 1989), whereas other research did not find any difference in sons-in-laws' and daughters-in-laws' involvement in parent care (Ingersoll-Dayton, Starrels and Dowler, 1996). Little is known about the circumstances under which spouses cooperate in providing informal care and about the principles under which couples organize their provision of informal care.

Finley (1989) has conceptualized couple's division of informal care for elderly parents as a type of family division of labour, similar to housekeeping and child care. From this framework, Finley derived four hypotheses about the possible reasons for men being less engaged in providing informal care, relating to competing demands and roles; socialization; the power dynamics of the couple; and specialization of men and women in different tasks to maximize the well-being of the family as a whole. Finley's empirical analysis found little support for any of the hypotheses. Possible reasons could include that the study was limited to care provided for co-resident mothers, a rather small sample, and a lack of detail in some covariates.

My paper will discuss the conceptualization of informal caring as family labour, pointing out commonalities and differences to other forms of family labour. Hypotheses about

the division of informal caring will be based on time-availability considerations; on the relative resources of the spouses, and their joint resources. The empirical part will establish husbands' and wives' contribution to parent care and estimate multivariate models for sons-in-law's and daughters-in-law's provision of parent care.

Data and Methods

The research uses data from the 1985, 1990, 1995 and 2000 waves of the British General Household Survey (GHS) (Office for National Statistics, 1988-2006), each providing a representative sample of the British adult population. In the four selected years, the surveys have asked all adult household members about informal caring at the time of the interview. The combined data set contains 20335 couples, 2214 of which include at least one spouse who provided informal care for a parent or parent-in-law at the time of the interview.

For each dependant, all surveys asked about eight types of help or care provided: personal care; physical help; helping with paperwork or financial matters; other practical help; keeping him/her company; taking out; giving medicines; keeping an eye on him/her to see he/she is all right.

The large probability sample of caring couples allows comparatively detailed analyses of their caring patterns. It is possible to carry out separate analyses by gender and relationship.

First results

In the GHS, the wife's mother was most likely to receive any help from the couple (N=1185) followed by the husband's mother (N=774), the wife's father (N=448) and the husband's father (N=317). The pattern corresponds to known distributions of informal caring: mothers receive more care from children than fathers, mostly because fathers are more often cared for by their wives (Arber and Ginn, 1991); other possible reasons include differences in filial obligation, health problems, or assertiveness in expressing care needs (Ingersoll-Dayton et. al, 1996). The wife's parents received more help and care than the husband's parents, as has also been reported in US studies (Lee, Spitze and Logan, 2003; Shuey and Hardy, 2003).

Within couples, natural children were considerably more often involved in the care for their parents than the children-in-law. At the same time, however, between 40% and 47% of elderly people received care from both spouses. Among the eight tasks studied, personal care and physical care displayed relatively low shares of joint caring whereas there was rather little variation in the division of the remaining tasks. The two tasks also stand out as being the only ones where caring differed depending on who is the care recipient, e.g. whether it was her mother or her father.

The more hours of informal care were provided by the child, the more likely it was that the son-in-law or the daughter-in-law, respectively, were also involved, and the more hours of informal care they provided. However, sons-in-law were less likely than daughters-in-law to be involved in care for parents-in-law, and those who were involved provided fewer hours of care. Both own and spouses labour-market status influenced whether the child-in-law provided any informal care.

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