

The Aged, Family and Friends

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*The relationship of older persons to their children and to friends was examined in a recent study, *The Aged, Family and Friends*. The study, based on a survey of 1,200 older residents of the Cleveland metropolitan area, was financed in part by the Research Grants Program administered cooperatively by the Social Security Administration and the Welfare Administration. The following abstract was made by the author and is presented verbatim.*

WE HAVE POSED the general problem of older people's use of family and friends as functional substitutes for one another. Or the extent to which the aged compensate for limited contact with children by increased association with neighbors. Does low involvement with family generate high involvement with friends? Is compensatory substitution a universal principle? Does it operate selectively under special conditions for particular groups? Under what circumstances does it appear? Does it effectively reduce people's emotional dependence on their children?

Previous analysis showed that children are older people's principal reference group, and that neighbors are definitely more significant than other friends. Consequently, the salience of children implies that older people probably develop considerable emotional dependence on children, and our theory indicates that this should increase as the active social world of the aged contracts. Indeed, the comparative importance of the family as a reference group should grow with the correlates of age, especially the loss of major social roles and group memberships.

Furthermore, if older people's social networks are viewed as a whole, the various groups of which they are composed may be alternatives which function as substitutes for one another.

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If this is the case, then limited contact with children should ostensibly be compensated by greater contact with friends. And if people seldom see their children and the resulting frustration raises emotional dependence on them, then more neighboring should relieve the frustration and reduce the emotional dependence on children. Implicitly, too, as friendship opportunity increases, this emotional dependence should decline.

Briefly, we developed the following hypotheses: interaction with family and friends should be inversely related to each other; emotional dependence on children should be inversely related to residential concentration of the aged; compensatory neighboring should be directly related to such residential concentration; emotional dependence should increase with children's absence; and high role loss should generally intensify these relationships.

Against this background, the actual findings departed sharply enough from these expectations to repudiate our basic premises and the resulting frame of reference. For none of our hypotheses were supported as general principles. Some were consistently invalid while others were only selectively true.

First, although measured by conventional sociological attitudes and perspectives, emotional dependence turned out to be strictly a psychological variable quite independent of sociological factors. Emotional dependence on children was not particularly related to differences in age or sex, although social class differences were reducible to contrary sex patterns. Deviations from uniform dependency distributions appeared among middle class women (whose profile showed a normal bell-shaped curve) and working class men (who were polarized in a sharp U-shaped curve of high and low dependence). Further, emotional dependence was not significantly increased by widowhood and marital disruption, by serious deterioration of health, by living arrangement (living alone or with others) even in the face of extended illness and the absence of children, or by comprehensive role losses. Accord-

ingly, the loss of roles did *not* increase people's contact with their children. Nor did the absence of out-of-town children heighten emotional dependence—and emotional dependence did not govern residential proximity to children. Indeed, people whose children were geographically the least accessible and who were most vulnerable to crises of illness because they lived alone were somewhat less emotionally dependent than those who were not similarly disadvantaged. Thus, emotional dependence tends to be stimulated by contact with accessible children, not by the frustrating absence of inaccessible ones.

However, although we expected emotional dependence to be sensitive to various objective changes in the person's life situation, particularly significant role losses, this did not materialize. There was no major change in emotional dependence with increasing age and its correlative decrements. In other words, emotional dependence is essentially independent of structural determinates, including general declines of participation and objective competence, alienation because of widowhood and so on. But it also has nothing to do with such social psychological factors as women's specialization in emotional rather than instrumental relationships, the frustration from absent children and the family's increasing salience with the attrition of other associations. People basically adapt to and accept the objective vicissitudes of old age without greater emotional dependence on children when their misfortunes cannot be attributed to children's indifference or rejection. Thus, emotional dependence is a fairly stable psychological feature of people's intimate relationships which is relatively unaffected by external, objective changes in life. In this sense, it looks like a basic, enduring feature of personality organization, probably throughout adulthood, which remains insensitive to the structural changes in older people's positions and social networks. Therefore, even in old age, emotional dependence on children can only be construed as a subjective psychological attribute rather than an objective sociological effect.

Further, regardless of emotional dependence, people naturally see local children far more often than those who are out of town. But within the constraints which distance of children imposes, higher emotional dependence does stimulate parents' contact with children. This

effect is relatively sharper among people with non-local than those with local children. Hence, proximity sets limitations on degree of contact, and within these, emotional dependence governs interaction.

In terms of our major concern, *there is no general principle of compensatory association whereby parents see friends specifically to counteract any limited contact with children.* Children are more salient than friends to older people and they do see them more often. But, there is absolutely no inverse relationship in the frequency of the two sets of associations, nor does neighboring increase among non-local parents whose children are least accessible. Hence, no general compensatory principle relates associations with children and friends. They operate independently and quite separately in the organization of older people's relationships.

However, *compensatory association does emerge among particular groups under certain conditions.* We distinguish specifically compensatory relationships from other neighboring by three criteria: (1) with less frequent contact with children, the compensating group does more neighboring than others; (2) such neighboring is inversely related to association with children; and (3) the compensating group's surplus neighboring increases inversely with contact with children.

Compensatory association does not appear specifically on the basis of age, sex, loss of health or widowhood. However, it does crystallize among *local* parents with comprehensive role loss. This presumably indicates that ritualistic or infrequent contact with accessible local children results in a sharp sense of deprivation which parents with high role loss attempt to compensate through greater association with neighbors. But people without local children do not respond to their absence in the same terms. Because their separation results from objective conditions, they have lower expectations of distant children. However, *highly* dependent parents with children out of town generally display very strong compensatory relations with friends. This produces the paradox that those who are most emotionally dependent on children and least oriented to neighbors still become most involved with them when their children live elsewhere.

Furthermore, the opportunity for friendships inherent in residential density of the aged results

in extremely strong compensatory associations in the working class. When they see comparatively little of their children, they capitalize on favorable conditions and substitute neighbors. But density has no general effect on compensation in middle class areas. This class difference is not affected by children's residence. High role loss does not intensify compensation in the working class, but despite fragile data, it does seem to induce compensation among middle class parents with local children. Hence, there is a basic social class difference in the exploitation of possible substitutes for missing family relationships which are found in areas of greater concentration of the aged.

Thus, specifically compensatory neighboring presumably occurs under definite conditions. Local parents with high role loss and non-local parents with high emotional dependence are prone to use neighbors in lieu of children. Similarly, the friendship opportunities in Dense areas stimulate compensation in the working class and among middle class parents with high role loss. But insofar as densely settled buildings which favor neighboring of the aged are so scarce, relatively few older people can avail themselves of the potential social supports that they offer, whether the substitution of neighbors for children or the sheer friendship and mutual aid of peers.

Finally, emotional dependence stimulates compensatory association. But in its turn, such neighboring absolutely does *not* reduce people's emotional dependence on their children. Indeed, emotional dependence remains high. It is not only independent, but remains impervious to the influence of other associations, the structure of the social environment, and different combinations of contact with both children and friends.

This analysis has carefully documented a series of weak or negative relationships which generally ran counter to theoretical expectations. But this by no means dismisses them as inconsequential. Quite the contrary. We have firmly established that in old age, relationships with children and relationships with friends constitute two completely *independent systems*. They are different role sets which normally do not impinge

upon the older person in reciprocal fashion. Not only are they independent ties, but friends are not functional equivalents of the family. Under special and restricted conditions, the aged may use neighbors as *alternatives* to children, but only in an interactional sense. They are alternatives only in the context of *social activity*. They are not relational equivalents of missing children. For whatever supports and satisfactions compensatory associations engender, the sentiments they develop are not comparable in kind or degree to those derived from children. While the compensatory orientation to friends may arise from emotional dependence, it does not reduce emotional dependence. Hence, the social activity is not an adequate substitute, and friends are simply alternative activity partners. Thus, relations with children are a self-contained system which no external factors affect. Its relational currency or medium of exchange has no equivalent and cannot be counterfeited. Hence, whatever integrational supports may be built into a system for older people, this particular relationship cannot be duplicated nor can another effectively stand in its place.

Insofar as filial relationships spring from the most central social roles, this particular finding may be but a specific expression of a larger generalization: *there may be no effective substitutes for the loss of any major social role except the succession to an equally central status which is more highly valued and rewarded*. Consequently, strategies to relieve basic status loss in old age through such devices as Golden Age clubs or glamorizing retirement leisure are fundamentally bankrupt. Hobbies, fishing and parties may supplement earning a living, raising a family, running a home and doing the world's work in middle age. But there are no meaningful replacements for such significant losses in old age. No structural alternatives adequately compensate for widowhood, retirement, physical senility or dependence. And, if no effective restitution is achieved, the same principle may apply with equal force to any major status loss, such as divorce, early occupational obsolescence and similar social stigma, throughout adult life.