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What are the most common themes of conflict between aging parents and their adult children? Six types emerged in a qualitative analysis of Longitudinal Study of Generations survey data: conflicts over (1) communication and interaction style; (2) habits and lifestyle choices; (3) child-rearing practices and values; (4) politics, religion, and ideology; (5) work habits and orientations; and (6) household standards or maintenance. There were generational differences: parents most often listed conflicts over habits and lifestyle choices, whereas children cited communication and interaction style. These results suggest a new agenda for gerontological research: intergenerational conflict in the context of solidarity within aging families.
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Types of Conflicts and Tensions Between Older Parents and Adult Children

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What are the principal themes of conflict between aging parents and their adult children? Over the past decade many studies have advanced our knowledge concerning cross-generational cohesion, solidarity, and exchanges of support in aging families; however, little research has focused to date on conflicts in these relationships. We know that conflict, as well as solidarity, is part of any intergenerational relationship over time (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1995), and that conflict may become a dominant theme of some aging families (Kuypers & Bengtson, 1990; Preston, Gardner, Royal, & Bengtson, 1997). The purpose of this study is to explore the dimensions of conflict in older parent–adult child relationships and to develop a typology of conflict issues from reports of both generations. Our work, based on a community-based, nonclinical sample, addresses two issues: (1) What are the central types of conflict reported between aging parents and midlife children? (2) Are there differences between older and younger generations in the types of conflicts reported?

Background of the Problem

Research on later-life family relationships has not adequately addressed questions about conflicts for several reasons. First, conflicts in later-life families are often perceived as relatively unimportant, particularly when compared to levels of conflict reported earlier in the family life course (between teenaged children and parents, for example). Related to this is the fact that parents' reports of their relationships with their children tend to be more positive than their children's reports at all stages of the life course, as reflected in the "intergenerational stake" hypothesis (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971; Giarrusso, Stallings, & Bengtson, 1995; Hagestad, 1987). Almost 30 years ago, Winch (1971) hypothesized a life course trajectory of family relationships in which conflict in families is highest during the adolescent years followed by more "sentimentally colored" relationships in the later years. Even in clinical settings, where the therapeutic relationship encourages candid disclosure, there seems to be considerable reluctance from older parents to report areas of conflict with their children (Mancini & Blieszner, 1989).

A second reason that research on conflict in aging families remains underdeveloped concerns conceptual and operational difficulties: What *is* conflict, and how can it be measured or evaluated? For example, Straus (1979) notes that conflict has been used to describe three different phenomena in analyses of family interaction and violence: (1) the collision of individuals' agendas and interests; (2) individuals' tactics or responses to conflicts of interest; and (3) hostility toward others. Without clear specification of the construct, investigations into conflict in older parent–adult child relationships may obscure rather than illuminate relational issues.

Third, most research on conflict in parent-child relationships takes a quantitative approach—documenting frequency, intensity, or duration of conflict—which may mask the phenomenological, qualitative aspects of relationship conflict. For example, the Conflict

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Tactics Scale (CTS), developed by Straus (1979) as a measure of intrafamily violence, is the most widely used measure of conflict within families. The CTS and similar survey measures have provided significant insights into the intensity of conflict between young or adolescent children and their parents—from low to high on a unidimensional scale—and how individuals within these families respond. However, this approach leaves unexamined the *issues* around which conflict occurs, how various issues affect relationship quality, or how such issues might predict intensity or duration of conflict.

What seems lacking to date in research on families and aging is a clear classification scheme regarding types or issues of family conflicts. Without such a classification scheme to direct investigations, systematic knowledge development will be difficult.

In family studies involving adolescents and their parents, conflict has most often been used either as an explanatory variable or as the outcome of family interaction. As a result, family conflict is most frequently conceptualized as a unidimensional construct—conflict measured as magnitude, from low to high on some scale. This approach leaves the dimensions or themes of conflict unexplored. A few researchers have documented various components of conflict, and have investigated multiple domains of conflict issues in parent-adolescent relationships (Galambos & Almeida, 1992; Montemayor, 1983; Papini & Sebby, 1988; Smetana, 1989). Inquiries into antecedents of child-parent relationships have also included: satisfaction with others' enactment of family roles (Johnson, 1978); parental rejection (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Huck, 1994; Whitbeck, Simons, & Conger, 1991); parent hostility (Conger, McCarthy, Yang, Lahey, & Kropp, 1984); unequal treatment of children by parents (Bedford, 1992); ideological differences (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971); participation in household chores, appearance, politeness, finances, and substance abuse (Galambos & Almeida, 1992); and parental management strategies (Dishion & Loeber, 1985; McCord, 1979; Miller, McCoy, Olson, & Wallace, 1986). However, no attempts have been made to consolidate these issues into a framework that will provide the basis for systematic empirical exploration into the relative salience of such issues across a wider range of age groups.

Methods and Procedures

Our data on older parent–adult child conflict are based on the 1991 (Wave 4) data collection of the University of Southern California Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG). In 1971, the original sample for the LSOG was selected randomly from a study pool of three-generation families (see Bengtson, 1975, 1996, for details). The sample pool was drawn from a random selection of possible grandfathers who were members of a pioneering southern California HMO with a membership of 840,000, many of whom were union steelworkers. Surveys were mailed to the grandfathers, their spouses, adult children, and adolescent or young adult grandchildren older than 16. This cross-sectional study evolved into a longitudinal investigation in 1985 when the original respondents were relocated. The now four- and five-generation families involved comprise a primarily White, economically stable, middle- and working-class sample. In 1991, the 20-year longitudinal response rate from the original 2,044 respondents was 60%. Results from this study are similar to distributions from national probability samples on attitudes, contact, and cohesion, as reported in Acock and Bengtson (1980); Bengtson (1996); Glass, Bengtson, and Dunham (1986); Roberts and Bengtson (1993); and Silverstein and Bengtson (1991).

Building a Typology of Conflict Issues

Our analysis focuses on the comments written into the 1991 mail-out survey (N = 1,137) by parents (G2 children of the original grandfathers) and their (G3) adult children. The parent generation had a mean age of 62 (N = 496) and their adult children averaged 39 years (N = 641). Thus, we are examining concerns expressed by a parental generation born during the Depression years and their children who grew up influenced by the Sixties. They responded to the following question at the end of a section of forced-choice items about intergenerational solidarity (see Bengtson, 1996):

> No matter how well two people get along, there are times they disagree or get annoyed about something. In the last few years, what are some things on which you have differed, disagreed, or been disappointed about (even if not openly discussed) with your child (or parent)?

We reviewed the 1,137 returned surveys in order to identify those containing comments that reflected conflicts or hostility toward the other generation as a first step in developing the conflict typology. A word-processed document was set up for each family into which all responses to the question were typed. Thus we could compare parents' and adult children's comments, and sort them under various thematic headings. We printed these thematic files and used paper copies for analysis.

We read and reread responses, grouped and regrouped general categories, initially looking for themes that have been used to categorize adolescent-parent conflicts (Galambos & Almeida, 1992; Smetana, 1989). Three coders worked independently to code all responses. Originally we identified 12 themes of intergenerational conflict; however, numerous passes at test coding indicated that we could reduce the categories to 6 types and still adequately capture the flavor of responses. These are summarized in Table 1. The 6 types that emerged relate to conflicts about: (1) communication and interaction style; (2) habits and lifestyle choices; (3) child-rearing practices and values; (4) work habits and orientation; (5) politics, religion, and ideology, and (6) household standards or maintenance.

To test the final scheme, two coders independently coded 200 comments to assess discrepancies. After an additional 300 responses were randomly selected and then coded, interrater reliability exceeded 86% agreement.

Table 1. A Typology of Conflicts and Tensions Between Older Parents and Their Adult Children

Type of Conflict	Operational Definition
Communication and Interaction Style	Conflict over the way family members engage in their relationships across generations. *Examples*: Communication styles ("he is always yelling"; "she has become quite critical"), situational responses ("she jumps to conclusions"), interpersonal relationships ("mother dominates my father—I don't like that"; "the way my father treats my mother").
Habits and Lifestyles	Conflict over lifestyle issues: sexual activity/orientation/experiences, living arrangements, quality of life, the allocation of resources and or education. *Examples*: Style of dress, hair style, types of recreation, educational/occupational choices, use of alcohol or drugs, not attending to physical needs.
Child-Rearing Practices and Values	Conflict over methods or philosophy regarding parenting. *Examples*: Decisions concerning having or spacing of children, dimensions of permissiveness/control, rules/expectations, loving/unloving, forgiving/resenting, support/involvement.
Politics, Religion, and Ideology	Disagreement about religious, moral, ethical, and political attitudes or ideas. *Examples*: Lack of religious belief or overinvolvement in religion, questions concerning the integrity of the United States, feelings about involvement in Vietnam and the Gulf War, values or the lack of them as perceived by the respondent.
Work Orientation	Differences concerning priority and investment given work (or school) performance, advancement, or status. *Examples*: Child working too much or too little, degree of dedication to work.
Household Maintenance	Conflict over participation in maintenance or improvement of family living environment. *Examples*: Yardwork, housework, painting, and general maintenance.

Results

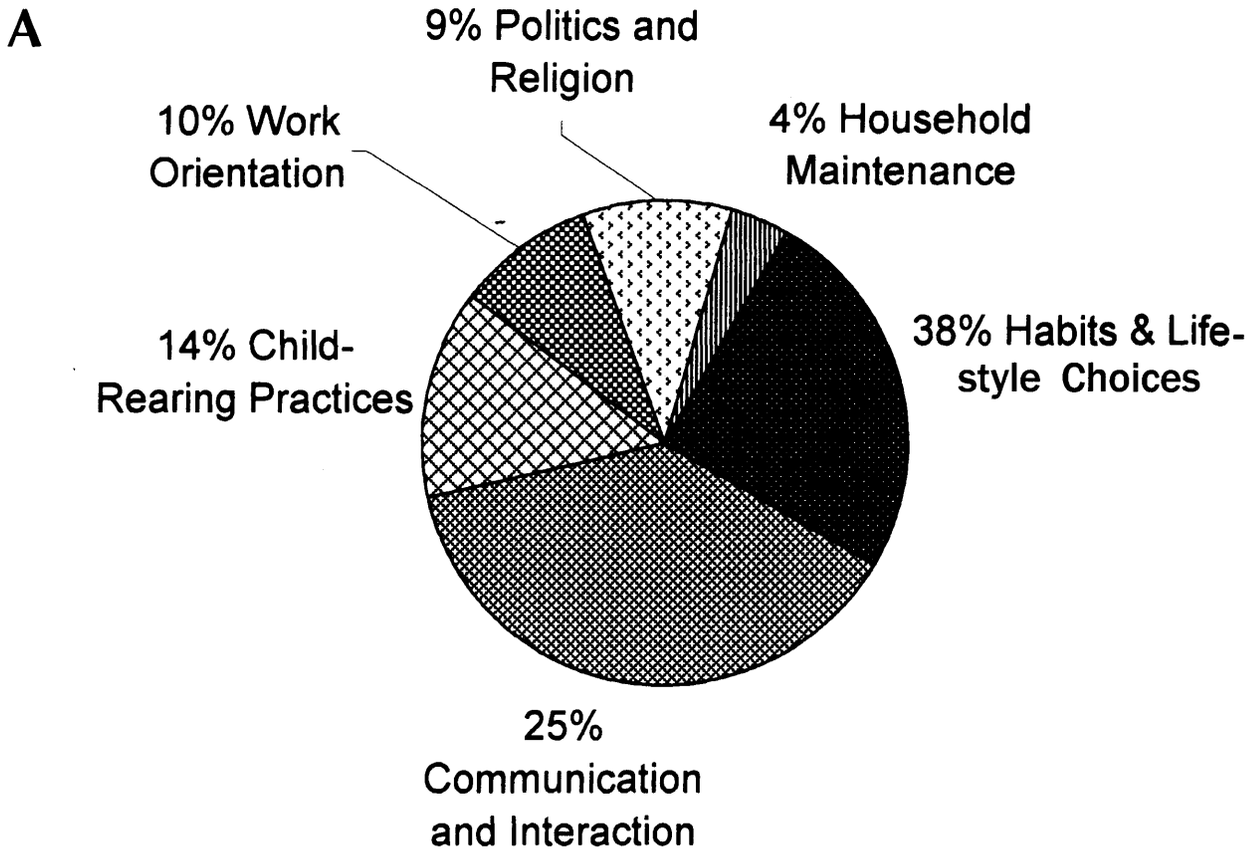
First, it is clear that many respondents viewed this open-ended portion of the LSOG survey as an opportunity to air their differences with the other generation. Slightly more than two thirds of older parents wrote comments expressing disagreement and conflict in their relationship with their children, listing an average of 1.03 issues per respondent. A similar percentage of adult children (66%) expressed conflict, but the rate of complaints was slightly higher, averaging 1.88 issues per respondent. Of the aging parents, 67% (334) expressed conflict in at least one of the six issue domains summarized in Table 1; 3% (17) had no written responses; and 29% (145) responded to the question but expressed no conflict with their child (instead, they wrote in comments such as "we have a great relationship" and "we have never had any conflict"). The distribution of adult children's responses is about the same: 66% (426) reported conflict with one or more of their parents; 11% (69) did not respond; and 23% (146) did not express conflict in their reports, instead writing in some comment about the harmonious nature of their relationship.

Second, two types of issues emerged as the most frequent focus of intergenerational conflicts in this sample. Problems in communication and interaction style were mentioned by 32% of all respondents, combining responses of parent and adult child generations. Disagreements over personal habits and choices were cited by an additional 32%. The remaining one third of responses were distributed as follows: child-rearing practices and values (16%); politics, religion, ideology (12%); work habits and orientation (6%); and household standards or maintenance (2%).

Third, although there were some contrasts between generations in the frequency distribution of conflict types, they were not as striking as we had expected. Figure 1 summarizes these.

When we looked at parents' reports about conflicts with adult children (Figure 1A), the type most frequently mentioned was differences over personal habits and lifestyle choices (38%). This was followed by concerns about communication and interaction (25%) and child-rearing practices and values (14%). The pattern of children's reports about conflicts with parents is slightly different (Figure 1B). Most frequently mentioned were issues of communication and interaction (34%), followed by personal habits and lifestyle choices (30%) and child-rearing issues (16%). Conflicts about work habits and orientations were listed by slightly more parents (10%) than children (4%), whereas more adult children cited differences over politics, religion, and ideology (15%) than did parents (9%). Household standards and maintenance were mentioned more by parents (4%) than children (1%).

We want to note, however, that these percentage distributions should be viewed with caution, given the exploratory nature of this study and the configurations of our longitudinal sample. Future research with a nationally representative sample may result in different distributions among the six conflict types. What is more important is to summarize what our respondents told us about intergenerational conflicts in their



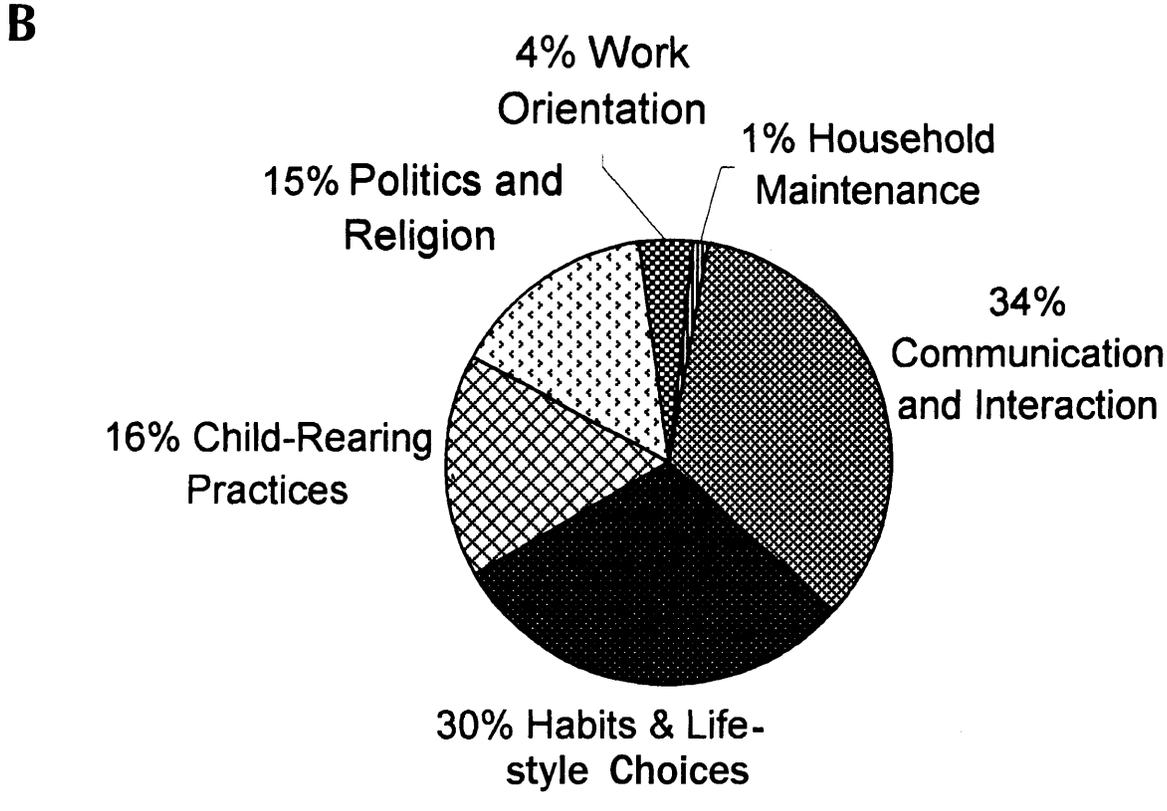


Figure 1. (**A**) Parents' reports about conflicts with their adult children. (**B**) Adult children's reports about conflicts with their aging parents.

own words, so future researchers can examine the extent to which the types we have identified are appropriate for their own samples.

Conflict Type 1: Communication and Interaction Style

This category reflects conflicts about an individual's way of engaging with others, primarily within the family network. Unrealized expectations seem to be the basis of many of these responses, which reflect concerns about communication, contact, and interaction.

A frequent complaint in this sample is that communication is strained or nonexistent. Communication problems are described in three ways. First, some reports located the conflict in *how* communication takes place—the style of communication. One son (age 36) complains of his mother's (age 62) "inability to communicate . . . to air her feelings rationally" A daughter (41) complains of the lack of symmetry in communication with her father (65) by stating that he would "talk [at] you, not discuss things with you." Second, being overly critical may also be a disturbing part of relationships. A daughter (34) says, "My father never has given me a compliment. Only points out the negative." Third, another difficulty is around the actual content of the communication. These reports range from lack of truthfulness to "being verbally abusive." One daughter (36) reports the lack of honesty that has produced conflict in her relationship with her father:

> My dad [63] divorced his second wife and *pretended* to still be married to her for six months until he told us. Weird! He told us 15 years after the fact that he'd had a drinking problem and gone to AA. I don't understand why he keeps personal things private so long that actually affect us, and then tells us later when the incident has lost its impact for us, except to make it clear he's lying to us half the time.

Lack of contact with the other generation was a subtheme of conflict in this category. Some respondents, both parents and adult children, report feelings of abandonment and alienation. A 37-year-old daughter complains that during the past two years her father (63) "has never made an attempt to visit," while a mother (62) complains of "not being included" by her child. She continues: "They are so into their own family . . . that I feel very left out at times." Children are also disturbed to see unsatisfying but persistent interaction patterns crossing generational boundaries. One son (41) says this in reference to his mother:

> Has spent little or no time with [her] grandchildren. Has shown little concern about my family and wife. Did not spend time with me while I was growing up.

In some cases the reported disagreements come as a result of divorce and remarriage. One father (74) recognizes that conflict with his son (43) is a direct result of his divorce by saying, "I divorced his mother. My son is not happy about this."

The structural disruption of families caused by divorce and remarriage is perceived as a serious constraint to both communication and contact. The comments of two adult daughters illustrate this point:

> I am disappointed in my father because he long ago chose to cease communication with *all* his children from marriage to my mom. It is something that truly distresses me at this time in my life. I wish I could talk to him but he doesn't want us to know where he lives. (Daughter, 41)

> My sister has two kids from an interracial marriage. My Dad's wife refuses to allow them to her home. My Dad has not overridden her wishes. I find that extremely disappointing, as he loves them very much. He should learn to assert himself on important issues. (Daughter, 40)

Finally, children's comments report conflict over the way one parent behaves toward the other, or the lack of a parent using self-preserving tactics to defend against the other spouse's perceived abuses. A daughter (40) complains about her parents mutually picking on each other and her father's "deprecating comments" about her mother. Another daughter (34) says:

> I wish my mother would have stood up for herself during her almost 40-year marriage. She is totally dependent on my dad and lets him belittle her and run her life.

Conflict Type 2: Habits and Lifestyle Choices

Differences in personal habits and lifestyle is the second largest category of responses we recorded. This is an issue mentioned most often by the older generation. This category reflects conflict over choices members of the other generation have made regarding the way they live their lives, how they invest their time and money, and with whom. An example is a 63-year-old father's objections to his son's "choice of girl for his wife . . . [she is] uneducated, selfish, unsociable, unstable, etc. etc." There are also conflicts that seem to express a world view common to many in the older generation. This same father writes:

> He [39] wants *all things* like his generation of baby boomers, right now—new cars, new houses, vacations —all of it on one income and that a blue collar job income.

This is echoed elsewhere in another father's (60) comment over his daughter's (37) lack of "concern for saving something 'for a rainy day.'" Another father (71) reports that his son's (37) "using credit cards to the limit" is an area of disagreement.

Prominent among complaints about habits and lifestyle are reports concerning economic choices, sexuality, and health-related concerns. First, disagreements over spending priorities arise when older parents and adult children become concerned about the other generation's ability to provide for themselves. Sometimes conflict arises from a fear of continued dependency. A daughter (37) says, "They both have been

helping [me] financially and I know they hate it." Yet in another family, it is the adult daughter (37) who complains about the parents:

> I am disappointed that my father [59] allows my mother to spend all their money and doesn't seem concerned with how they'll survive when they retire.

There is also friction over spending priorities. A mother (63) notes conflict with her son about "how they spent their money." Her son's (40) words indicate another perspective:

> They [parents] are very conservative. They have the money to do whatever they want, but yet they deprive themselves of things they can well afford.

Second, lifestyle choices may involve sexual mores of adult children that differ sharply from those of their parents. For many older parents, cohabitation is a troublesome issue. A daughter (41) writes:

> We differ on women's roles and I'm disappointed in her [mother's, 67] inability to be happy with my choices (living with someone I'm not married to and choosing not to have children).

Generational views on "premarital sex" often diverge. One mother (68) writes that "good girls don't" (presumably in conflict with her daughter's behavior, though this is not amplified). Another older mother (58) regards a "second out-of-wedlock pregnancy" with displeasure. Not surprisingly, same-sex relationships often produce tension. A mother (61) says regarding her daughter (39):

> Her decision to form a gay [lesbian] relationship has been very difficult for me. This despite the fact that her woman friend is wonderful and we do get along well. I have a very "split" attitude about this.

Third, disagreement also occurs over what are perceived to be responsible health choices. Differences regarding smoking recreational drug use, alcohol, and obesity are frequently mentioned. A daughter (37) notes that her father "drinks too much [and] tries to manipulate [me] through guilt" and complains that her mother "continues to wallow in self-pity and indulge in her cycle of weight gain, depression and eating/alcoholism." Occasionally conflict is expressed over choices that have impacts on the third generation. A father (60) states that his daughter (37) and her husband "continue to smoke, even around the baby."

Conflict Type 3: Child-rearing Practices and Values

Child-rearing attitudes and practices are frequently reported as a cause of tension between parents who are in their early 60s and their baby boomer–cohort children who were influenced by the more egalitarian and permissive attitudes of their generation. Reports fell into two general categories: (1) children's complaints about their parents' child-rearing practices in the past; and (2) complaints by children or aging parents about interaction with the grandchild generation.

Child-rearing methods employed by the older parent years earlier can cause resentments in the adult child that are harbored throughout the life course. Many adult children speak of unequal treatment and favoritism practiced by their parents as an area of conflict. A 35-year-old son reports that "she continues to treat me as a young child. *Openly* favors my older brother." A daughter (38) complained that her mother (61) failed to practice "fair and equal treatment of all nine of my siblings, both in monetary and emotional terms." Adult children also feel these inequalities filter down to their offspring. A son (42) says of his mother (62), "My kids are not as important as my sister's kids . . . even though Adam is the best athlete and Justin carries a 3.82 GPA."

Both older parents and adult children report disagreement over contemporary child-rearing practices. Some older parents complain that "children grow up too soon and know too much about sex, violent movies, etc., at too young an age." They worry that their grandchildren are not properly dressed, don't have balanced diets, and have bad sleep and TV habits. They suggest that their children are "too easy" on the grandchildren. From the adult child perspective, a 42-year-old daughter says this:

> My mom (69) does not like the way we have raised our children in some areas. We give our children a lot more freedom and choices than my mom.

In some cases such as the two that follow, adult children complained of their parents' interference in raising their children:

> When my parents came for a visit, my mother [67] kept disciplining my children while I was present. (Daughter, 38)

> As she is still young [51] for a grandmother she has difficulty in not "mothering" my children. She still takes control, corrects, disciplines and is much too tough for my idea of a grandmother. (Daughter, 36)

Divorce produces a different set of problems. Both parents and their adult children complain that divorce in the other generation has produced unnecessary strain on the grandchildren. For example, a daughter (36) says she has disagreements with her mother (58) because of:

> My divorce. How she tries to control my children because they do not have a father around . . . for some reason she wants to be a parent, not a grandparent.

Conflict Type 4: Religion, Politics, and Ideology

This category represents conflict over values and morality in general, and religious, ideological and political orientations in particular. Both older parents and adult children in our sample complained about serious differences between themselves and the other generation. Respondents often provided a laundry list

of issues, such as a father's comment regarding an adult child ("Religion, marriage, politics, view of life in general") or sweeping generalities such as another father commenting about his daughter "not being in tune with the values with which she was raised." Many respondents were more specific. One set of parents (G2s) spoke about moral and value differences between them and their son.

> Standard of value determined by a. price, b. status of manufacturer. Gifts given to son returned to store because it wasn't exactly what he wanted. I feel [he] should unbend—relax—be more tolerant—not so square—be more street-wise! (Mother, 66)

The father (68) provides an additional insight:

> Arranging leveraged buy-outs which often cause loss of jobs and huge debt (he is in bank corporate loan dept.). I have told him of my moral disagreement of this process—enriching a few while causing distress to many—it is part of the job to him. Too much emphasis on making money and having the best of everything.

In another family a daughter (39) says this of her father (69):

> A lot of his values disappoint me greatly and I don't respect him as much as I could; e.g., he's still racist (but not always overtly), sexist, and rather classist. He's not always honest about expressing his feelings. He never likes to admit he's wrong—his ego still gets in the way of communication.

Religious beliefs were often mentioned as areas of conflict. For one son (40), the bone of contention between him and his mother (62) was the way "[the son]' should treat/deal with [his] brother's lack of religious observance," because the son claimed, "it affects me and my family." Religious differences between the parent and child were also mentioned. One son (42) placed "abortion [and] women becoming priests" at the center of their differences. A daughter (40) was frustrated that her father "wants [her] to go to two major religious services yearly." A mother cited her daughter "not going to church" as an area of conflict. In some families the difference of religious commitment becomes an area of conflict, as expressed quite differently by two adult children:

> Disappointed that she [58] doesn't understand my relationship to Jesus Christ my Lord and Savior. (Daughter, 36)

> [Conflict is] that we must be born again into Christ Jesus. That we must raise our children for God, not the devil or world. That we should not teach kids about Santa, Easter Bunny, Halloween, Tooth Fairy, and other lies. (Son, 37)

Conflicts over ideological differences are also apparent over political issues. Adult children registered complaints both over their parents' liberalism and conservatism. One son (43) speaks of conflict regarding "politics. I'm conservative, mom's [63] liberal," while a daughter (43) states:

> My father [63] is very conservative in lifestyle and political beliefs. Sometimes he says things about "people who . . . ," not fully conscious that I am one of those people.

One father (67) describes the area of conflict with his son as this:

> As a "hawk" [my] patience with a pacifist is very limited and we definitely disagree in terms of sanctions *vs* offensive action in the Mideast crisis.

Conflict Type 5: Work Habits and Orientation

This category reflects conflict over commitment to work performance or advancement. Our sample reflects the views of Depression-age parents and their children, born into post–World War II prosperity, who may have different work norms and outlooks on the future. A few parents worried their children worked too hard, which limited their contact with family. But more common was the criticism that their children did not work hard enough. For example, three different parents commented that their child is "wanting to live off other people," unable to "make a good living," or displays a "lack of ambition." Another mother (69) says of her adult son (40):

> We are just the opposite. [My son] is not concerned with achieving much in life. He is content to live here and be taken care of. He is not ambitious about anything.

Nonetheless, it was not uncommon for the career attainments of adult children in our sample to outstrip those of their parents. Over the two decades spanned by the study, the sample, on the whole, has become increasingly better educated and better off financially (Biblarz, Bengtson, & Bucur, 1996). Differences in ever-increasing occupational achievement can lead to difficult misunderstandings. One son's (42) complaint about his father illustrates this problem:

> [His] lack of understanding of my work. [His] lack of understanding of what companies expect and his general blue collar type work attitude.

This "lack of understanding" may be a function of a parent's own work experience in a different era of American life, yet often we found these conflicts illustrated a parent's more resolute work ethic. For instance, a father (73) writes that "his [son's, age 44] work habits seem somewhat tentative. He is well-to-do but doesn't work as hard as he might." Here a mother reports conflict with her son, followed by the son's parallel comment about his parents:

> He still seems to have such a childish daydream attitude toward life . . . in job situation becomes bored quick and resents authority—has trouble adapting to change—feels rules were "not made for him"—walked out on previous job in 1989 with an attitude of "if you won't play my way, I'll go home," was then fired and could not understand it. He is NOT in an authority position. (Mother, 61)

> Both [parents] still treat me as though I don't have a brain to think for myself. My ideas and suggestions are not considered and most of the time, whatever I feel is treated like a breeze in the wind. Not much consideration from either parent. (Son, 40)

Conflict Type 6: Household Standards or Maintenance

Many of those who mention conflict over household labor participation are parents and children living in the same household. Due to divorce or financial setbacks, there were many cases in our sample of the adult child returning to live in the parents' home temporarily. (It should be noted that in many instances the relationship improved when the child moved out.) This mother (59) expressed her frustration with her 38-year-old daughter:

> Daughter spent very little time at home during the 4 years she lived with me. She wanted to party and refused to stay home and care for her 2 children. I was the major caretaker for my 2 grandchildren.

A second set of complaints in this category centered around performance of household tasks; these were most frequently an issue between mothers and daughters, even when they lived separately. One daughter (41) said, "Our kitchen routines are totally different. She does things her way and I have my way." Another said, "My culinary and 'hostess skills' never quite match up to her standards." One mother (65) said of her daughter (37), "She's a pack rat. Her home is a mess and she expects too much of the two girls, 11 and 14."

Third, some adult children were concerned about their aging parents' attention to their households. Possibly these concerns came from witnessing diminishing capacities and new responsibilities for themselves looming in the future. A daughter (46) is upset that her father (71), no longer physically able to do maintenance chores, is "unwilling . . . to spend his money to get [these] things done." A son (38) says:

> Both my parents have reached a point where they do not clean up the house, and when confronted, they say they are too tired; she works, he does not, but he is barely able to walk.

Discussion

The data reported in this article suggest three things: (1) There is considerable evidence of conflict reported by both older parents and adult children when they are allowed to vent their concerns in an open-ended survey format; (2) the issues around which conflict occurs in these aging family dyads can be typologized around six themes, with a majority of responses involving issues of interaction style and personal habits and lifestyle; and (3) there is value to a multiple-domain approach to conflict in families.

Our data suggest that conflict in older parent–adult child relationships may be more widespread than is commonly assumed. In our sample, two thirds of older parents (average age 62) and adult children (average age 39) reported conflict in their relationship with the other generation. This finding challenges previous reports of conflict in later-life families in two ways. First, the prevailing image of later-life intergenerational relationships is one suggesting relatively little conflict (see Mancini & Bleiszner, 1989). That two thirds of parents and children in our sample report strife in their relationships suggests that conflict remains a part of family relationships well into the later years. Second, roughly the same proportion of parents and children reported conflict in their relationships. Researchers exploring parent-child relationships report that parents present their relationships with their children in more favorable terms than do their children, supporting the "intergenerational stake" hypothesis (see, for example, Bengtson & Kuyper, 1971; Giarrusso, Stallings, & Bengtson, 1995; Hagestad, 1986). Our data, however, reveal a willingness on the part of older parents to acknowledge and to report conflict with their children, though (paradoxically) the principal axis of their relationship may be characterized by high levels of solidarity and mutual support (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990).

The prevalence of conflict in older parent–adult child relationships reported here requires comment. The potential for debilitating effects of conflict is clear. Although families demonstrate a range of tolerance, relationship conflict in these later-life families may result in many problems. The continual drain of emotional resources necessary to maintain conflicted relationships may result in their eventual decay to what have been termed "long-term, lousy relationships" (Bengtson, 1996). The comments of one mother (65) and her son (43) point to blocked communications as one of a plethora of potential outcomes of persistent conflict:

> I chose not to communicate with my son. I am tired of verbal abuse and I have faced reality. My son told me he had no feelings for me. (Mother)

> She still has a tendency to be negative (typically Jewish) and blows up with "get out, go away." Considering difficulty I am having with ex-wife, decided to avoid her for time being. (Son)

Conflict may result in diminished physical or psychological well-being for the individual. It may also bring about a decline in overall relationship quality with rippling effects into other aspects of the relationship. For example, conflict and its relational effects may lessen the willingness to participate in caregiving and to limit the frequency or duration of the support provided to failing parent. Acknowledging that conflict exists in later-life parent-child relationships is a necessary step toward understanding and responding responsibly to conflict in later-life families.

In addition, future research must consider a multiple-domain approach to conflict in aging families. There has been a tendency toward constrained explorations of conflict that focus on the properties of conflict—conflict frequency, intensity, or duration. This type of inquiry ignores the variable effects of the issues around which conflict occurs. In our sample, conflict was re-

ported around a variety of issues with some noted differences between parents and children. Older parents and adult children are likely to possess varying degrees of tolerance for particular issues of conflict. An issue particularly troublesome in some families may produce little or no turbulence in others.

We offer a typology of conflict issues that can be used to illuminate the consequences of particular conflict issues by allowing more precise and systematic investigations. We found that older parents and adult children reported conflict in six domains. Most frequently mentioned were conflicts over the way family members relate to others, and conflicts over habits and lifestyles. These two categories represent nearly two thirds of all reports. The rest of the reports of conflict were distributed between four additional categories (in descending order of priority): disagreement over child-rearing practices, ideological differences, work habits, and household labor.

That these types of intergenerational conflicts may have important implications for well-being is suggested by other studies. For example, the way family members relate in the family context (communication and interaction style) predicts relationship quality (Whitbeck et al., 1991), perceptions of cumulative parent–child relationship (Johnson, 1979), filial concern, relationship strain, effectual solidarity (Whitbeck et al., 1994) and psychological distress of both parents and children (Umberson, 1992). Conflicts over child-rearing practices may result in a number of troublesome child behaviors (Loeber & Dishion, 1984; Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984), and frustration and conflict over parental favoritism has been shown to predict the quality of adult children's bonds with their parents (Bedford, 1992). Similarly, lifestyle issues (e.g., substance abuse) reduce the child's attraction to his or her parents and result in lasting effects on parent-child interaction patterns (Simons, Conger, & Whitbeck, 1988).

Conflict seems to be both pervasive and a natural part of family interactions. Assessing several domains of conflict is useful, particularly when developmental changes in family relationships or psychological well-being of family members are at issue. Further inquiry into family conflict should focus on: (1) the stability of conflict in relationships over time through longitudinal research designs; (2) refining the proposed typology of conflict domains by focusing on more ethnically and racially diverse samples of aging parents and middle-aged children; and (3) beginning systematic investigations into the trajectories and effects of specific conflict issues. For example, do issues of particular conflict episodes (e.g., divorce, loss of jobs, disability leading to sudden retirement, health crises) predict the intensity, duration, or the interaction processes through the long-term course of solidarity and conflict? This approach will begin to reveal how issues function as a single component of conflict, whether as conduits (forces that channel the flow of conflict in a family-patterned way), conductors (forces that orchestrate the way conflict unfolds), or catalysts (accelerating agents igniting already inflamed relationships).

Finally, we note a persistent theme in many of our respondents' reports: a desire for their relationships with the other generation to be more satisfying. This is important. It is also important to note that although families may acknowledge tension, disagreements, and conflicts, at the same time they can also report high levels of intergenerational solidarity, indicating there is affection, contact, and mutual support (Silverstein, Parrott, & Bengtson, 1995). This is the paradoxical nature of family relationships over the life course in which the balance between solidarity and conflict can teeter back and forth—or remain in perfect balance, one contained within the other. These contradictions witness the dynamics of ebb and flow, the interplay between structure and process, which mask the hidden strengths, weaknesses, and paradox in multigenerational families (Bengtson et al., 1995). Future research should therefore focus on the link between conflict issues, family solidarity, and individual well-being. Such inquiries will provide a clear focus for intervention strategies directed toward specific conflict-issue domains that will allow families to enter the final stages of life with less tension, and perhaps open the channels for increased understanding and support.

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