

# Middle-aged children and their support of aging parents

Amber J. Seidel, Karl Majeske, Mary Marshall,  
Courtney Polenick, Kira Birditt, & Karen Fingerman



**PennState**  
College of Health and  
Human Development

Center for Healthy Aging

# Caring for Aging Parents

- About 34.2 million Americans provide unpaid care to adults aged 50 or older, and almost half of these caregivers report caring for a parent (NAC & AARP, 2015).
- As life expectancy increases, middle-aged adults will likely spend more years providing care and support to their aging parents than in previous generations (Wiemers & Bianchi, 2014).
- Children of aging adults often help make decisions regarding their parents' healthcare and living situations (e.g., hiring a home care aide, approving medical procedures or moving to an assisted living facility).

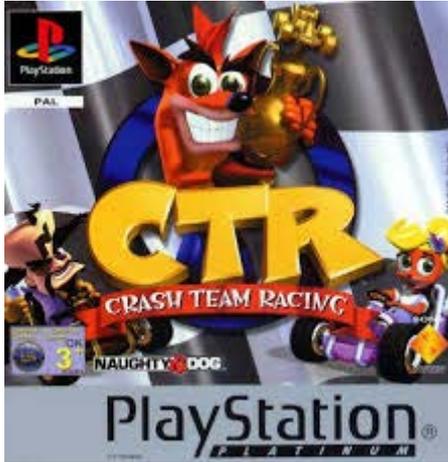
# Symbolic Interaction

What Does C T R  
Stand For?



- Emphasizes the importance of having shared meanings through shared interactions with others and our environment (Blumer, 1969).

# Symbolic Interaction



In the absence of shared meanings, discrepancies in perceptions/communication may arise within the relationship.

# Symbolic Interaction

- In order to be effective in their supportive role, middle-aged children could benefit from having shared perspectives (i.e., child-parent dyadic perceptions) before making medical decisions on behalf of their parents.
- Dyadic perception is the measure of how two or more people hold shared perceptions of an object or of an idea (Turban & Jones, 1988).

<http://www.drfostermd.com/>

# Upstream Support to Parents

- Children tend to feel an obligation to care for their parents as their parents' cared for them (Gans & Silverstein, 2006)
- Middle-age children participate in many types of support to parents including financial, emotional, practical, technological, etc. (Fingerman et al., 2012).

# Factors associated with Upstream Support to Aging Parents

- Health of parent and child
- Relationship quality
- Downstream support
- Gender of parent and child
- Contact



Parent report of Parent's Health, Relationship Quality, & Downstream Support

Parent report of Upstream Support

Adult child report of Parent's Health, Relationship Quality, & Downstream Support

Child report of Upstream Support

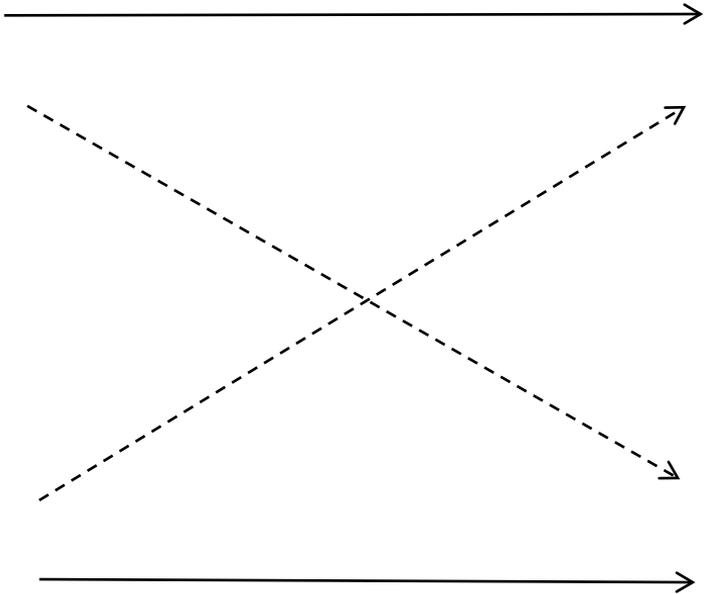


Figure 1. APIM predictive model of factors associated with upstream support from children to parents. Solid lines indicate predicted actor effects and dashed lines indicated predicted partner effects.

# Measures

- **Support.** Both upstream and downstream support were measured using five items from the Intergenerational Support Index (ISI; Fingerman et al., 2011): emotional support; practical support; advice; financial assistance; and talking about daily events on an 8-point scale from 1 (less than once a year or not at all) to 8 (daily); ( $\alpha \approx .80$ ).
- **Relationship quality.** Relationship quality was measured using two items (e.g., Overall, how much does your father/mother/child love and care for you?; Birditt, Tighe, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2012; Umberson, 1992 on a 5-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal).
- **Parents' health.** Parent health was measured for both middle-aged children and aging parents with one item, "How would you rate your [your own/your parent's] current physical health" on a 5-point scale, 1 (excellent) to 5 (poor) (Fingerman, Chen, Hay, Cichy, & Lefkowitz, 2006; Idler & Kasl, 1991).

# The Sample

Participants were drawn from Wave 2 of the Family Exchanges Study (FES).

273 dyads – a person aged 40-60 years old, with a living child over 18, and a living parent



# Sample Characteristics

	Adult Children	Parents
Variable	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Upstream Support to Parent	22.05 (7.34)	20.31 (8.11)
Parent's Health	2.96 (1.07)	3.03 (1.14)
Positive Relationship Quality	4.18 (0.69)	4.35 (0.73)
Downstream Support to Child	19.59 (7.16)	19.11 (7.00)
Age	49.73 (4.75)	75.94 (6.35)
Gender (% male)	42.1%	37.0%



# Results

## *Final Models for the Associations Between Social Support, Depressive Symptoms and Sleep (N = 309)*

Control Variables		
	B	p-value
Gender-Relationship		
Mother-Daughter	0.00	N/A
Father-Son	-4.02	<.001
Mother-Son	-1.24	0.02
Father-Daughter	-4.06	<.001
Child sees parent	0.78	<.001
Child socializes with parent	0.80	<.001
Functioning problems (ADL = 1)	1.22	0.03
Child's age	-0.13	0.10
Parent's age	-0.10	0.20



Parent report of Parent's Health

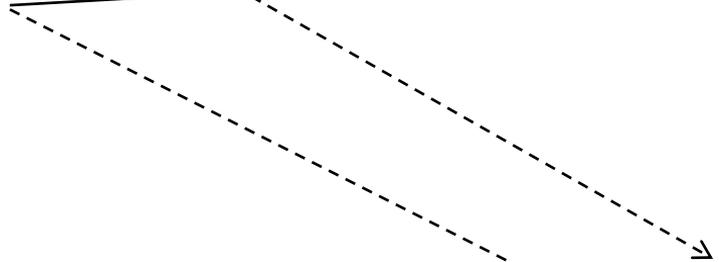
Parent report of Relationship Quality

Parent report of Downstream Support

Child report of Parent's Health

Child report of Relationship Quality

Child report of Downstream Support



Parent report of Upstream Support

Child report of Upstream Support

# Discrepancies (N = 273 dyads)

Factor	Share	Child Overestimates	Child Underestimates
Parents' Health	36.8%	28.5%	34.6%
Relationship Quality	26.0%	29.7%	44.3%
Downward Support to Child	5.9%	42.9%	51.3%

# Implications

- Discrepancies in perceptions may suggest discrepancies in care needs and goals leading to stressors on the family.
- Clinicians and educators may find ways to help aging parents understand each other's perspectives to increase shared meanings of health and relationships related reports.



# Questions