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# Between elderly parents and adult children: a new look at the intergenerational care provided by the 'sandwich generation'

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EMILY GRUNDY and JOHN C. HENRETTA



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## Abstract

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The 'sandwich generation' has been conceptualised as those mid-life adults who simultaneously raise dependent children and care for frail elderly parents. Such a combination of dependants is in fact very unusual, and the more common situation is when adults in late mid-life or early old age have one or more surviving parents and adult but still partly dependent children. It can be hypothesised that for parents in this pivotal position, the demands from adult children and from elderly parents compete, with the result that those who provide help to one are less likely to provide help to the other. An alternative hypothesis, however, is that family solidarity has an important influence but is not universal, so that some pivotal-generation parents engage in intergenerational exchange in both directions, and there is a positive association between helping parents and helping children. To investigate this question, the paper presents an analysis of data from two broadly comparable national surveys, in Great Britain and the United States, on the care provided by women aged 55–69 years to their descendent and ascendent relatives. The results show that around one-third of the

women reported providing help to members of both generations, and that around one-fifth provided support to neither. They broadly support the solidarity hypothesis, but provide some evidence that having three or more children is associated with a reduced likelihood of providing help to a parent.

## Keywords

intergenerational support      exchanges      three-generation families      UK      USA

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