Taking the Negative with the Positive: Status Transitions and Parents' Ambivalence Toward Adult Children

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Ambivalence

- Intimate relationships are inherently full of contradictions; individuals desire mutual support but also want autonomy (Luescher and Pillemer 1998)
  - These contradictory feelings may lead to ambivalence
  - Implications for relationship quality and parental well-being (Fingerman et al. 2012; Kiecolt and Salva 2011)
- Ambivalence is often strongest during status transitions (Spitze and Gallant 2004)
  - Prior research focuses on how children's transitions relate to parents' ambivalence; this study extents prior research by examining both parents' and children's status transitions

Theoretical Framework

- This study is framed by the life course perspective (Luescher and Pillemer 2008; Elder 1994)
  - Parents' and children's lives are linked throughout the life course; transitions in the life of one member of a dyad may be related to changes in feelings or perceptions of the other member
- People experience many status transitions, some considered normative while others are non-normative
  - Non-normative transitions are often related to conflict in intimate relationships (Willson et al. 2006)

Transitions

- Children's transitions may relate to higher parental ambivalence (Fingerman et al. 2004; Luescher and Pillemer 1998)
  - Importance of attaining adult roles, or normative transitions, including union formation, employment, residential independence, and parenthood (Fingerman et al. 2012); non-normative transitions include loss of employment, moving back home, and union dissolution
- Transitions in parents' lives may relate to ambivalence toward children (Fingerman et al. 2004; Luescher and Pillemer 1998)
  - Normative transitions for parents include retirement, widowhood, and health declines; non-normative transitions include union formation, divorce, and returning to the workforce

Variation by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

- Mothers may feel more ambivalence toward children because of their closer ties and tendency to worry more about children's normative pathways than fathers (Kaufman and Uhlenberg 1998; Cichy 2013; Teachman 2010)
- Minorities make more frequent status transitions and may have higher resiliency, which may relate to lower ambivalence (Bulanda et al. 2007; Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012; Elwert and Christakis 2005)

Research Questions

- How are parents' feelings of ambivalence toward their children associated with transitions in children's lives?
- How are parents' feelings of ambivalence toward their children associated with their own transitions?
- Does the association between status transitions and ambivalence vary by parents' gender and race/ethnicity?

Data and Sample

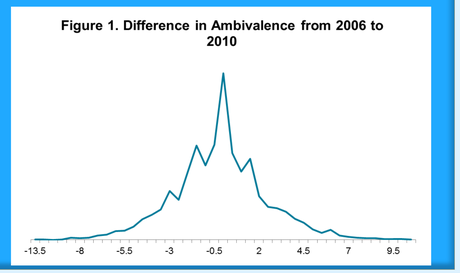
- Health and Retirement Study, 2006 and 2010
  - Examines experiences, relationships, health, and finances of middle-aged and older adults (aged 51 and older)
  - Data collection from 1992 to present
  - Uses the core sample and Psychosocial Survey
- Analytic sample
  - Non-institutionalized adults aged 51 and older with at least one living child; respondents in the Psychosocial Survey in 2006 and 2010 (N = 4,939)
  - Weighted estimates

Dependent Variable

- Positive items: (1 = Not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = some, 4 = a lot)
  - Do children really understand you?
  - Can you rely on children?
  - Can you open up to children?
- Negative items: (1 = Not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = some, 4 = a lot)
  - Do children criticize you?
  - Do children get on your nerves?
  - Do children let you down?
- Ambivalence= (positive+negative)/2 - |positive-negative|
  - Lower scores represent lower ambivalence and higher scores represent higher ambivalence (Ha and Ingersoll-Dayton 2008: S52)

Difference in Ambivalence

Figure 1. Difference in Ambivalence from 2006 to 2010



Independent Variables

- Children's transitions (used as proportion variables)
  - Moving into and out of parents' home
  - Union formation or dissolution
  - Job loss or gain
  - New parent
- Parents' transitions
  - Union formation or dissolution
  - Job loss or gain
  - Health declines or improves

Figure 2. Children's transitions

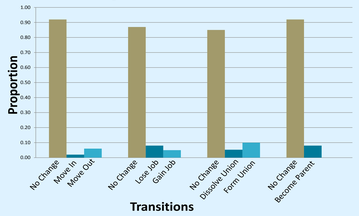


Figure 3. Parents' Transitions

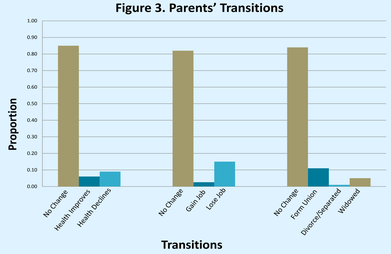


Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean or Percentage
Ambivalence in 2010- Ambivalence in 2006	0.157 (0.04)
Ambivalence in 2010	2.29 (0.05)
Ambivalence in 2006	2.13 (0.05)
Men	44.04
Women	55.96
Age	64.7 (0.15)
Depressive Symptoms in 2010	3.36 (0.02)
Race/Ethnicity	
White	88.37
Black	5.93
Hispanic	4.44
Other Race	1.26
Educational Attainment	
Less than High School	11.46
High School	56.02
College or more	32.52
Assets in 2010	14.27 (0.01)
Owns Home in 2010	76.44
Any children living within 10 miles	53.26
Average Children's Age	41.67 (0.17)

Association of Ambivalence with Transitions

Table 2. Coefficient(Standard Errors) from the Regressions of Children's Transitions, Parents' Transit and Confounding Factors on Change in Parents' Ambivalence Toward Children from 2006 to 2010

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Children's Transitions				
Moving In	- 0.416(.61)		- 0.468(.61)	- 0.399(.61)
Moving Out	- 0.722(.27) **		- 0.683(.27) **	- 0.535(.29)
Losing Job	0.078(.27)		0.062(.27)	0.055(.27)
Gaining Job	- 0.183(.34)		- 0.184(.34)	- 0.142(.34)
Forming a Union	- 0.636(.24) **		- 0.791(.35) *	- 0.789(.35) *
Dissolving a Union	- 0.868(.34) **		0.859(.34) **	0.789(.34) **
New Parent	0.268(.27)		0.277(.27)	0.339(.28)
Parents' Transitions				
Declining Health		0.220(.17)	0.202(.17)	0.188(.16)
Improving Health		- 0.076(.19)	- 0.076(.19)	- 0.115(.19)
Gaining a Job		- 0.375(.24)	- 0.342(.24)	- 0.327(.24)
Quiting a Job		0.048(.14)	0.069(.14)	0.079(.14)
Becoming Widowed		- 0.041(.22)	- 0.073(.22)	- 0.097(.22)
Divorcing or Separarting		- 0.522(.39)	- 0.397(.40)	- 0.378(.40)
Forming a Union		0.299(.15) *	0.155(.22)	0.188(.22)

Note: * p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001
Model 4 also controls for gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, depressive symptoms, assets, home ownership, children's average age, and any child living within ten miles of the respondent

Figure 4. Proportion of Children Moving out and Parents' Ambivalence by Parents' Race/Ethnicity

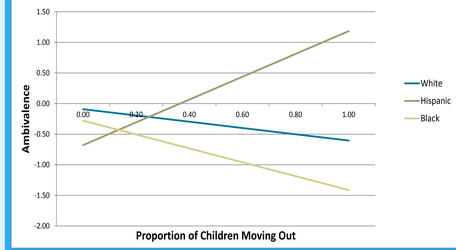


Figure 5. Proportion of Children Moving In and Parents' Ambivalence by Parents' Gender

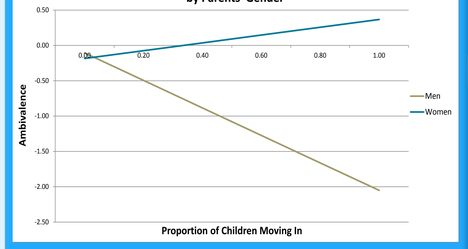
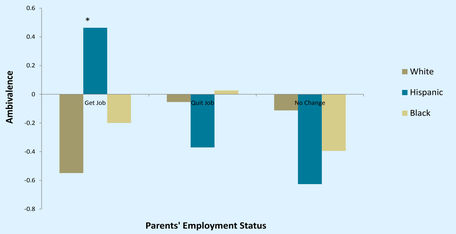


Figure 6. Parents' Employment Transitions and Parents' Ambivalence Toward Children by Parents' Race/Ethnicity



Conclusions

- Children's transitions are more indicative of parents' ambivalence
  - Children's residential independence is negatively associated with parents' ambivalence prior to inclusion of confounding factors
  - Children's union dissolution is positively related to parents' ambivalence toward children, while children's union formation is negatively related to parents' ambivalence
- Parents' transitions yield few significant results
  - Prior to the addition of children's transitions to the model, parents' union formation is negatively associated with ambivalence toward children

Limitations and Future Directions

- Questions used to construct ambivalence are not child-specific
- No measures of children's ambivalence toward parents
- Cannot capture between-wave transitions
- Difficulty in distinguishing between cohabitation and marriage for children in the analyses

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