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Article — Published Version

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Journal of Comparative Family Studies

Suggested Citation: Stark, Oded (2010) : Do Religious Children Care More and Provide More Care for Older Parents? A Study of Filial Norms and Behaviors across Five Nations, Journal of Comparative Family Studies, ISSN 1929-9850, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Vol. 41, Iss. 4, pp. 629-631, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.41.4.629> , <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41604571>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/233891>

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Do Religious Children Care More and Provide More Care for Older Parents? A Study of Filial Norms and Behaviors across Five Nations

Oded Stark*

COMMENT**

In a recent study, Gans et al. (2009) seek to show that the care provided to aged parents emanates from an obligation, and that this filial behavior is “developed and enacted” by religiosity. Gans et al. (2009) repeatedly refer to support for aging parents as an obligation, and repeatedly argue that religiosity is the reinforcing variable converting obligation to “actual support” (pp. 187, 189, 194, 196, 198, 199). In addition, Gans et al. (2009) provide a summary of a review of the factors that motivate or inhibit adult children to provide care. One of the three factors listed is the presence of “minor children in the household,” which Gans et al. (2009) consider “a barrier to the provision of support by imposing barriers on adult children’s availability” (p. 189). Gans et al. (2009) supplement their own list of factors with the following reference: “Myers (2004) found that the relationship between religiosity and parental assistance was conditioned on [the] gender of the child...with more religious adult daughters providing higher levels of support to...parents compared to provider sons...” (p.189).

Thus, Gans et al. (2009) seek to add to our knowledge as to who provides (more) care to aging parents, and why. Part of the strength of the Gans et al. (2009) study is the frankness in which they conclude it, stating that “the means by which religiosity exerts its influence is not identified by [their] analysis” (p.198); that “other factors ... [explain] caring commitment and behavior” (p.198); and that their study “opens the door for future investigations” (p.199).

Given the purpose of the Gans et al. (2009) study and its stated limitations and vision, the purpose of this Comment is threefold: to briefly propose an alternative explanation to the one presented by Gans et al. (2009) for the provision of attention and care to aged parents; to suggest a reason why the presence of young children could support rather than inhibit the provision of this care; and to provide an explanation as to why daughters are more often observed to provide attention and care to parents than sons.

In Stark (1999), the idea of a “demonstration effect” in intergenerational transfers was developed and tested empirically. The idea was further tested in Cox and Stark (2005, 2007), and in Mitrut and Wolff (2009). In a nutshell, the “demonstration effect” idea is that a child’s propensity to furnish parents with attention, care, and support in old age can be conditioned

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** I am indebted to James M. White for helpful remarks on an earlier version of this Comment.

by parental example. Parents who desire such transfers in the future have an incentive to make transfers to their *own* parents in order to instill the appropriate preferences in their children.

Consider a family consisting of members of three generations: a child, K, a parent, P, and a grandparent, G. Each person lives for three periods, first as a K, then as a P, and finally as a G. P wants K to help in the next period when P becomes a G and K becomes a P. To demonstrate to K the appropriate way to behave in the next period, P provides (visible) help to G when K is around (to watch) and be conditioned. It follows that aid from P to G depends positively (is encouraged by) on the presence of K: attention and care by P are encouraged (not inhibited) by the presence of children of an impressionable age (young children). (Conventional theories of the allocation of time and money within the family could well predict the opposite effect, since young children place demands on their parents' time and income, so that the competing presence of young children would reduce the assistance that P gives to G.) This perspective also suggests that daughters will be more likely to pursue "demonstration effect" behavior than sons because daughters stand to gain more than sons from instilling the desired inclination in their children. For example, in the U.S. in 2006, women's life expectancy was higher than that of men by five years (CIA, 2006), and women typically marry men who are two years older than they are, again in the U.S. in 2006 (United Nations, 2007). Therefore, on average, a man (a son) will have his wife next to him as he ages, but a woman (a daughter) will spend the last years of her life—in the U.S. the last seven years of her life—without a husband, having to rely on her children for support; since she stands to gain more than her brother from "demonstration effect" activities, she will be more motivated to undertake them more than he will.

For evidence in support of the "demonstration effect" idea the reader is referred to Stark (1999), Cox and Stark (2005, 2007), and Mitrut and Wolff (2009).

How does religiosity fit into this? There are two interesting channels to consider. First, religious people are more likely to have children, and are more likely to have more children, than non-religious people. And as we have just seen, the presence of young children can act as an incentive for P to provide attention and care. Seen this way, the direct explanatory variable is not religiosity but having children—young and many. (Stark (1999) provides a rigorous proof that the "productivity" (benefit) accruing from "demonstration effect" activities rises with the number of children.) Second, when G are absent, as for example in the case of adults in Israel whose parents were lost in the holocaust, P cannot demonstrate to K by attending to G. Instead, they will need to rely on, or resort to, institutions such as the church (synagogue). A testable hypothesis is that holding everything else the same, the incidence of church-going (and, for that matter, also the importance that P attach to school as an institution), will be higher for parentless P with K than for P with G and K.

In combination, the preceding considerations also point to a link between gender and the inclination to engage in religious activities. Holding everything else the same, testable predictions are that the inclination of women to resort to institutions such as the church will be stronger than that of men, and that the inclination of women with young children to resort to institutions such as the church will be stronger than that of women without young children. Stark (1999) provides a short discussion suggesting that an alternative to the

“demonstration effect” mechanism for inculcating child loyalty is for parents to engage in moral training of their children through the use of institutions such as schools and churches. For the preceding reasons, women would be expected to engage disproportionately in religious activities. As noted, women stand to gain more from having children who have been duly trained. Empirical studies of religious participation (for example, Azzi and Ehrenberg, 1975, and Ehrenberg, 1977) indicate that (controlling for wages of men and women) religious participation by women exceeds that of men. Further, participation increases with the number of school-age children. Empirical patterns for religious participation thus appear to reflect the empirical patterns of the “demonstration effect,” as presented in Stark (1999), and in Cox and Stark (2005, 2007).

The links between people’s attributes, demographic characteristics, belief structures, institutional environment, and intergenerational relationships constitute a fascinating research program. The causal is not necessarily visible, and the interactions are often subtle and indirect. Gans et al. (2009) so note; this Comment has sought to so illustrate.

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