

*Extended abstract for submission to PAA 2006 Meetings*

## Motivation for In-kind Assistance that Adult Children Provide to Parents: Evidence from “Point-Blank” Survey Questions

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**“Motivation for In-kind Assistance Adult Children Provide to Parents:  
Evidence from “Point-Blank” Survey Questions”**

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When adult children provide care for their aging parents, they often do so at great expense to themselves incurring psychic, monetary (e.g. foregone wages or promotions or delayed pension vesting), emotional, and even physical costs, in conjunction with care that is labor intensive and, at the extreme, unrelenting. While the nature of parent care and the profile of care giving children are well described in the literatures of the social sciences, we still lack insight into why adult children undertake parent care without compensation or compulsion. Are children caring for elderly parents motivated by altruism, guilt, obligation, or gratitude? Alternatively, intergenerational transfers from adult child to parent may be strategic (e.g., in anticipation of a larger bequest), dictated by family norms or traditions, or recognized as an opportunity to enhance self-esteem through family recognition, or a non-discernable mix of motives poorly captured by any one theory or discipline. Both economics and sociology acknowledge the importance of closing the gap, but for very different reasons. Economic theory, for example, focuses on a wide range of conceivable interactions between public and private transfers, i.e. public transfers may supplant or stimulate private transfers, depending on the motivation of the private donor. Despite the importance of motivations for private transfers, economic analyses are limited largely because of the dominance of the behavioral approach in which motivation is inferred from direct observation of choices made. In addition, “costs” are measured with only a monetary metric. In contrast, sociologists focus on intergenerational transfers for the insights they provide into how social bonds and networks are forged and maintained.

Economic research typically seeks to infer someone’s underlying motivation from his or her actions. This indirect, “revealed preference” approach contrasts with a more straight forward method in which questions are asked to elicit from respondents their own insights into why they make certain choices, including the choice of doing nothing. By listening to what respondents *say*, there is the potential for incorporating nuance, subtlety, and a range of motives that are difficult to accommodate in the standard framework of economics. While sociologists, and especially anthropologists, and personality psychologists are far more accepting of a direct approach, their methods are not part of the analytic fabric of economics and are commonly denigrated by economists. Notwithstanding the considerable virtues of mainstream economic methods, we depart radically from the indirect “revealed-preference” approach in favor of a direct, “point-blank” approach, which queries survey respondents with blunt, straightforward questions concerning their reasons for providing familial transfers.

Our data are from an experimental module, “Benevolence and Obligation”<sup>1</sup>, from the 2000 Health and Retirement Study (HRS). Many of the questions in this module

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<sup>1</sup> Modules, usually numbering about 10 in each HRS survey year, are randomly assigned to *non-proxy* respondents who consent to respond to 3-4 minutes of additional questions. Because respondents who completed their core interviews by proxy are systematically excluded from participating in the experimental

reflect a more psychological perspective on understanding motivation, such as the psychic reward of recognition for helping a parent or the self-assessment that one is better suited by temperament to caring for a parent than are other potential caregivers, particularly siblings.

Using data from this module we formulate an approach that is quite different from those that dominate either mainstream economics or sociology. Preliminary findings indicate that transfers are not always provided free of pressure from other family members, for example, and familial norms of obligations and traditions appear to matter for many respondents. These findings suggest that the standard set of economic considerations—utility interdependence, budget constraints, exchange, and the like—are insufficient for a complete understanding of private transfer behavior. These differences are consistent with prior research findings that demonstrate, for example, that women are far more likely to provide care and take seriously family obligations. Past experiences in the care giving also affects respondent's perceptions.

Though one must always be skeptical about reading too much into what people say about why they do the things they do (or think they will do) we nonetheless conclude from preliminary analysis that “point-blank” questions offer, at the very least, a worthwhile complement to the more conventional methods for unraveling motivations for private, intergenerational transfers. Whether the data generated by a direct, “point-blank” approach are credible is an important, but open, question that we address in this paper by: evaluating whether summary measures derived from the HRS module stand the test of predictive validity in model of caregiver selection. We also consider whether those who have had direct care giving experiences in the past are distinct in their views from “naïve” potential care givers.

Interviews were attempted in 2002 and 2004 for all respondents who answered the “Point-Blank: modular questions in 2000. At each biennial interview HRS collects data on: (i) the attributes of the individual siblings of the HRS respondent and the in-kind care each sib provides a parent<sup>2</sup>; (ii) previously unobserved spells of co-residence with a parent and the respondent and his/her siblings after leaving home but prior to the first interview with the HRS respondent were queried in 2002 and 2004; and, (iii) the attributes of individual children and the flow of resources and help to and from each adult child to the HRS respondent<sup>3</sup>, including for deceased respondents the distribution of bequests to individual children. In addition in 2002 and 2004 each respondent reported on whether as a minor child he/she lived with a grand-parent. In combination these data will allow us to:

- Evaluate the modular respondent's assessment of whether he/she is the best able to provide parent care in the context of earlier reports on each sib's

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modules, as are self-respondents who refuse, perhaps because of fatigue after a long interview, Module respondents are implicitly self-selected for good health and high cognitive capacity. Thus, module respondents are usually younger than HRS respondents as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> HRS respondent reports of the characteristics and transfer behavior of each individual sib continue until the death of the last parent or the death or loss of the HRS respondent.

<sup>3</sup> Any assistance given to or received from a grand-child is indexed to the child's parent, i.e., the adult child of the respondent.

education, home ownership, labor supply, household earnings, family size, and marital transitions;

- Consider whether prior transfer history colors self-perceptions of own generosity, helpfulness, or willingness to provide assistance “no matter what the costs” in terms of intensity of help given, number of helping spells; attributes of the recipient, e.g., mother vs. father, and nature of the donor’s relation to the recipient, e.g., parent vs. parent-in-law or biologic vs. step-child.
- Assess the predictive validity of the “point blank” items in models of family transfers observed after 2000, net of conventional socio-demographic and economic predictors; and
- Determine if the “point-blank” questions provide added value compared with accumulating observations of prior exchanges given or received by modular respondents in fully specified models.

In the paper we report on the derivation of a scoring algorithm for the several orthogonal domains motivating parental assistance. From the 20 items included in the “point-blank” module, we isolate three dimensions of (i) self-esteem; (ii) obligation; and, (iii) parental relations. In a full model of transfer behaviors in 2002 and 2004, the third domain, quality of parental relationship, is insignificant while the other two domains are significant as well as traditional predictors of gender, respondent age, education, occupation, and indicators of family structure.