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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the mother-daughter relationship from the perspective of adult daughters. The first section focuses on information and myths about adult daughter-older mother relationships, including popular images and assumptions, misunderstandings, taboos, and mother-bashing. The second section describes initial research into the nature of the adult daughter-older mother relationship and its effects on the daughters' psychological health. It is based on extensive interviews with roughly 70 women that consisted of open-ended questions about the rewarding and problematic aspects of each of the women's major social roles, and specifically their role as daughters. The third section describes more recent research based on early findings, which studied daughters' relationships with both their mothers and fathers as part of a larger study of 400 women, 25 to 55, who were employed as social workers and licensed practical nurses, and who varied in family pattern, as well as in race and social class. Based on findings from this research, both rewarding aspects and problematic concerns in the adult daughter-older mother relationship are identified and discussed. (TE)

ADULT DAUGHTERS AND THEIR MOTHERS:

HARMONY OR HOSTILITY?

Rosalind C. Barnett

1990

From a talk presented at the Daughters and Mothers Colloquium, March 10, 1990, Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.

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Janet W. Shaw

Publications Assistant at the Center from 1980-89

Adult Daughters and Their Mothers:
Harmony or Hostility?

My perspective on the topic of adult daughters and their relationships with their mothers derives from four vantage points, that of a daughter, a mother of a daughter and a son, a clinical psychologist working with clients as they sort out intergenerational issues in their lives, and a research psychologist studying sources of psychological well-being and stress in the lives of adult women as well as men. In our research, the sources we focus on include the three most widely studied roles, namely, worker, partner and parent, as well as the much less well-studied role of daughter or son (I am referring to both work done with my late colleague Grace K. Baruch on women's lives, and on my current study focusing on couples with a research team including Nancy Marshall and Harriet Davidson).

My focus is on the mother-daughter relationship from the perspective of the adult daughter. Undoubtedly, it would look very differently from the perspective of the older mother. The analogy is the eminent sociologist Jessie Bernard's insight that there is no such thing as a marriage; there is a his marriage, and a her marriage. Accordingly, there is an adult daughter's relationship and a older mother's relationship. My focus is on the relationship as it is experienced by the adult daughter.

The word adult covers a lot of ground, in this case women roughly 25 and older. My paper has three foci: (1) information and myths about adult daughter-older mother relationships; (2) case material from my experiences in my clinical practice with adult daughters dealing with intergenerational issues; and (3) some of our research findings.

Information and Myths

The relationships adult daughters have with their parents are important for several reasons. First, they are long lasting. The length of these relationships is a relatively new phenomenon. Only in recent history have mothers lived long enough to have relationships with their adult children. The relationships adult daughters today have with their mothers are the longest lasting relationships they are likely to have.

As recently as 1963, less than 25 percent of people over 45 had a surviving parent. By 1980, 40 percent of people in their late fifties had a living parent. Not only are people living longer, but they are living longer in good health. It is no longer unusual for a healthy 80-year-old mother to have a 55-year old daughter, who, in turn, has a 30-year old daughter, who, in turn, has a 5 year old daughter.

The newness of adult daughter-older mother relationships is reflected in our vocabulary and our norms. More specifically in our lack of vocabulary and our lack of norms. For example, we do not have words to distinguish between a daughter who is 2 and a daughter who is 52, or between a mother who is 25 and a mother who is 85. And, there is lack of age-graded norms for daughterly and motherly behavior. What, for

example, is appropriate maternal behavior when your daughter is 60? What is expected of daughters when their mothers are 80?

Moreover, these relationships have health consequences. It is widely believed that mother-daughter relationships in the early years have important influences on children's psychological health. Positive parent-child relationships are thought to enhance several aspects of psychological well-being; negative relationships are thought to predispose to psychological distress. Moreover, these influences are thought to persist throughout the child's life. In contrast to the large body of research on parent-child relationships during the child's early years, those of the later years have received limited attention. Yet, it appears that the current relationships also have important influences. Daughters who enjoy positive relationships with their mothers also report better mental health than do daughters who are troubled by their current relationships with their mothers.

Despite their importance, relatively little is known about adult daughter-older mother relationships. The focus of interest in intergenerational relationships has been on care taking and on mother-child relationships at the two ends of the life span. Thus, we know a great deal about mother-child relationships at the beginning of the child's life. And, we are learning a great deal about mother-daughter relationships when mothers are frail and in need of care. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the nature of these relationships during the many years when both women are healthy and issues of care taking are not central.

Assumptions

In the absence of solid information, we develop our notions about these relationships from popular images. These images are fraught with particular assumptions. A major assumption is that the adult daughter-older mother relationship is a negative one. It is thought to be demanding, difficult, and full of conflict. These ideas are reflected in and propagated by such sensational biographies as My Mother, Myself and Mommy Dearest.

Another assumption is that these relationships are especially conflicted for certain adult daughters, namely those engaged in complicated lives. These daughters are thought to be "caught in the middle," between the demands of their families, their careers, and their mothers.

A third assumption, deduced by the relative amount of the attention paid to daughter-mother compared to daughter-father relationships, is that daughter-mother relationships are far more important. Whether or not that assumption is correct, the genesis of the asymmetry is probably demographic. When both parents are alive, they tend to turn to each other. When one parent dies, the relationship with the children intensifies. Given that mothers tend to outlive fathers the predominate intergenerational relationship in the middle and later years is that between daughter and mothers. As we will see later, although more attention has been paid to daughters' relationships with their mothers, their relationships with their fathers are psychologically significant and warrant understanding.

In large part because of these assumptions, attention has been focused on problems not on positive aspects. As a result, we know almost nothing about the benefits to be had by either party if the relationship is positive. Other areas of particular ignorance are: (1) adult daughter-father relationships; (2) racial differences in daughter-parent relationships; and (3) social-class differences in daughter-parent relationships.

Misunderstandings, taboos, and mother-bashing

In addition to the effect of assumptions in biasing our knowledge about these relationships, ignorance is due to many other factors, especially three: misunderstandings, taboos, and the tendency in our culture toward mommy-bashing.

A major source of misunderstandings is the enormous differences between the lives of women of my generation and those of our mothers. These differences are greater perhaps than those of the today's young women and their mothers.
Among the areas of greatest difference are education, career, birth control, divorce. Compared to our mothers, we are considerably better educated, are engaged in a wider range of career options and activities, are able to shape our reproductive lives both in terms of the number and timing of our children, and are much freer to end destructive marriages. In short, we have far more options than did our mothers.

In this climate of change, it is relatively easy for mothers to feel useless, incompetent, irrelevant, rejected as models. Feeling that they have little to offer makes defining the role of mother difficult at best.

It is also relatively easy for adult daughters of my age to assume that their mothers won't understand or appreciate their life choices, in other words, that their mothers are the way they were. I see many striking examples of resistance to change on both sides when I ask adult daughters to bring their mothers (and fathers) into therapy with them. Old pictures die hard. It is often difficult for daughters to appreciate that mothers, too, change.

One striking example of the negative consequences of assuming that mothers don't change comes from a 1982 study of recently divorced middle-aged daughters, whose mean age was 48.5. Roughly one quarter of the women who had a living parent, had never discussed their marital situation with their parent, typically because they expected disapproval or lack of understanding. Some women admitted delaying their divorces because of the anticipated negative reactions from their mothers. One woman said, "I am ashamed to say it. but at 50 I am still afraid of what my mother thinks...she intimidates me, I was divorced almost a year before I told her."

As adult daughters' move into territories untraveled by their mothers, anxiety is often a traveling companion. As we've just heard many adult daughters are convinced, rightly or wrongly, that their mothers will not be able to understand, let alone allay those anxieties. This was the case with a client of mine, Barbara, a forty-year old woman. After years in a stagnant marriage, she finally admitted to herself how unhappy she was. On the surface, things were going well. Barbara had two pre-teenage sons and a husband who earned a good living. Unlike her own father, her husband didn't drink, there were

no fights. But she had to constantly suppress the vibrant, fun-loving parts of her personality because of his moodiness.

Barbara felt she couldn't explain to her mother why she was so miserable; she was convinced that the moral and social beliefs that kept her mother in a terrible marriage would also keep her mother from understanding her desire to break out of her situation. So she avoided her mother, in part because she didn't want to hear what was already going through her own head. Namely, such thoughts as "He makes no demands on you, why can't you go along?" What's wrong with you?" "Is what you want important enough to destroy your family?"

She knew that she had to do what she wished her mother had done -- get out of a bad marriage. And she did. During three years of procrastinating, she reached out to her mother, was rebuffed and recovered. Barbara realized that her mother's limitations made it impossible for her to be the mother Barbara wanted and to approve of her decision to divorce. She came to see that she could never get her mother's approval and that what really mattered was her own growing sense of worth and confidence in defining what was appropriate behavior for her. Shortly thereafter, she tackled the divorce process head-on, completing in a few months what could otherwise have taken years.

Approval-seeking leads to constant struggle. Trying to please one's mother and being angry for not pleasing go hand-in-hand. A problem increasing numbers of today's young women face is pressure from their mothers to be the achieving, successful women their mothers never were. Whether it is pressure to be more "traditional and self-denying," or to be more "non-traditional and self-serving", blindly giving in or the opposite -- rebelling -- rarely leads to a satisfying life. Whether pleasing or rebelling, daughters may find it difficult to separate out the choices they are making for themselves from those they are making in reaction to their mothers' lives or wishes. In either case, unresolved issues with one's mother can color and distort a daughter's successes or failures. A wise thirty-five year old woman shared with us a piece of advice given to her by a friend, "When you come to accept yourself, you will stop picking on your mother." Conversely, when mothers come to accept their own lives, they will stop reacting so strongly to their daughters.

Some of these assumptions and misunderstandings are reflected in the case of Alice, a 34-year-old professional woman. She is married and has an infant daughter. Alice worked until the day before the baby was born and returned to work shortly thereafter, sometimes working out of her home office, sometimes leaving the baby with her live-in housekeeper. Her co-workers had made similar arrangements and supported the routine she had worked out.

But Alice had a nagging sense that her choices would not be supported by her mother. After all, her parents had not understood her desire to go to graduate school or her decision to postpone marriage and childbearing until her career was established. They never confronted her on these issues, but made their disappointment known in a variety of subtle ways. Although Alice recognized that her parents were having trouble

comprehending the life choices she was making, her mother's inability to understand served as a constant reminder of her own uncertainty about the new path she was taking. The following incident captures the strain in their relationship.

Alice's parents came to visit when the baby was just a few weeks old, and Alice offered to let her mother hold her. Her mother was delighted and took the baby in her arms. But after a few seconds, she turned to her daughter and said, "No, you take her--after all, you don't get to hold her too often yourself."

Taboos

Taboos are like mine fields, they are areas of discussion that are felt to be dangerous, hence they remain "off limits." Because of their existence, the issue of what each party to this relationship wants from the other is rarely discussed. Why have taboos been built up around the needs of the two parties to this relationship? Probably because of the fear of hearing what you don't want to hear.

One such fear is that the older mother wishes for more contact than the daughter is prepared to give. We are all lead to believe that too much closeness is bad, it connotes dependence; the "D" word. The dependence of an adult daughter on her mother is bad because it connotes immaturity or worse, failure of normal adult development. When asked, "Whom do you turn to when you are feeling blue?" a forty-six-year old woman said in a confessional tone, "I'm ashamed to admit it, but my mother." The dependence of the elderly on their children is bad because it is regressive and it adds to the daughter's strain.

Another fear is that elderly mothers are needy, fragile and demanding; they will want more from you than you are prepared to give. In fact, the best information we have suggests that these fears are misplaced. Actually, the elderly value their autonomy far more than is suspected.

Perhaps, most jarring is the finding that the morale of the elderly is negatively related to the frequency with which they see their children. The more they see their children, the lower is their morale. How can we understand this counterintuitive finding? Speculatively, if adult children don't ask what their parents want from them and assume that their parents are needy and fragile, their visits may consist mostly of "doing". Chances are the things they do will miss the mark, and will go unappreciated because they are unwanted and unnecessary. One outcome of such a scenario is that the elderly feel demeaned and infantilized, their self-esteem is undermined, hence, their morale suffers. Supporting this conjecture, is the finding that the morale of the elderly is positively associated with their lateral relationships. When the elderly relate to their peers, the exchanges are more likely to be reciprocal than they are when they relate to their adult children, at least when taboos and assumptions dictate the nature of the exchanges.

A recent study of three-generational families also illustrated these points. While all three generations placed a high value on the family, the grandmothers were much less

likely than either their daughters or their granddaughters to endorse the idea that their working daughters should take time to do household chores for them and they were much more likely to favor hiring outside people to help them. Interestingly, the granddaughters were even stronger proponents of direct care giving than were their mothers.

A third fear is that of being seen by one's mother as unloving. "If I don't -- visit/help/buy the groceries -- my mother will think I don't love her." This coupling of behavior and message, which is frequent among adult daughters (and perhaps among adult sons), is problematic. It assumes that the behavior carries an unspoken message, the "I don't love you message" which, in turn, typically leads to feelings of guilt. Breaking the taboo and talking about feelings directly, requires separating statements of feelings from behavior. It means, for example, learning to say "I love you and I can't drive you to the doctor" or "I love you and I can't visit for the weekend."

This separation of message from behavior may also lead to greater flexibility about acceptable forms of care taking. We can perhaps look at our brothers for other forms. The brother who sends a cab when his mother needs to get to an appointment may be no less loving than the daughter who feels she has to leave work to drive her mother.

Mommy-bashing

In our culture, there is a strong tendency to blame Moms for adult daughters' woes. Among other things this tendency results in a perpetual focus on the past and on the problems in the relationship. Given this tendency, it is easy to see why mothers might avoid "serious" discussions about the daughters' lives. Such discussions are likely to degenerate into finger pointing; they often become an opportunity to be dumped on. Since our mothers are also part of this culture, they may be all too ready to accept the responsibility we are all too ready to assign to them. Such mutual blaming is hardly a recipe for constructive, growth-enhancing dialogue.

As a result of the above misunderstandings, taboos, and misogyny, open discussions between adult daughters and their mothers are often avoided, rigid pictures are reinforced, problems are focused upon, and costs not rewards are magnified. Most importantly, these obstacles often result in a loss of real support and closeness that could enrich the lives of adult daughters and their mothers and fathers.

Our Initial Research

The taking off place for our original research was the awareness that little attention had been paid to the current relationship as a factor influencing daughters' current mental state. The researh team had several research questions in mind: What is the nature of these relationships currently? How do they impact on daughters' psychological health? Does the impact vary for daughters who are in different life situations, for example, single vs. partnered daughters, or daughters who themselves have children compared to those who do not?

We interviewed roughly 70 women. Some were employed, others were not; some were partnered, others were single; some had children, others did not. The interviews were conducted in 1979. We did extensive interviews that took between 3 and 6 hours. We asked open-ended questions about the rewarding and problematic aspects of each of the women's major social roles. The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and content analyzed. We then identified the most frequent responses and used them to develop scales of rewards and concerns. These scales, with some modifications, have been used in several subsequent studies.

With respect to the role of daughter, we learned a great deal about the aspects of their relationships that were rewarding as well as those that were problematic. For example, companionship, and identification with the mother as a role model of aging, were more salient that care taking.

To illustrate, a single, professional woman in her late forties told us that her 81-year-old mother "is in a very nice situation, and it wouldn't be something I would have anticipated a little earlier about getting old. Moving out to California certainly was a big transition for her, but I think she has done quite well with it. I think it's the fact that she lives in a very nice place, she's been very active there and seems to like her life better and better. So I do not feel pessimistic about getting older. It gives you a positive outlook."

Mothers who are having a difficult time also have a strong impact on their daughters' views about aging. A mother's illness raises a major concern about whether the same fate will befall the daughter. A forty-nine year old woman whose mother died when she was sixty-two, told me "I'm not worried about turning fifty, but I imagine the year I'm sixty-two, I'll be sweating it out."

Another dramatic example comes from a client of mine; a single woman of 35. When she was nine, her mother died very suddenly, from a brain tumor. Her mother was 37; her little brother was 5. Fear that she too will die young and that what happened to her and her brother will happen to her children, has lead her to avoid any serious romantic relationships. She doesn't imagine being able to consider such a prospect until she has passed her 37th year.

We were also surprised that the same aspects daughters mentioned as rewarding in their relationship with one parent were almost identical to those they mentioned as rewarding in their relationship with the other parent. Similarly, the concerns were virtually identical in their relationships with each parent. What are the problematic aspects of adult daughters' relationships with their mothers? Not surprisingly there was a concern about "mothers' decline." There was a second cluster of concern items that centered around "guilt and conflict."

What do we mean by the quality of the relationships? As I described earlier, we view the quality of relationships as consisting of two components: rewarding and problematic aspects. Both positive and negative aspects co-exist. The presence of rewards does not

mean the absence of concerns. Conversely, the presence of concerns does not imply the absence of rewards. To make this point clearer, think about your check book. A positive balance does not require the absence of withdrawals; it just requires that deposits (i.e., rewards) outweigh withdrawals (i.e., concerns). Accordingly, the overall role quality of your relationship with your mother (or father) is the difference between the level of reward and the level of concern you currently experience.

We first used the role-quality concept in a study of 238 White women, 35 to 55 years of age. We found that, in general, daughters have positive relationships with their mothers. By the time these daughters had reached 35, they seemed to have come to terms with their mothers; they seemed able to look at their mothers and sort out the good and the bad without anger or guilt. Here is how a 46-year-old married woman described her mother: "My mother was not physically affectionate. She was a marvelous mother. I see that now, but I never thought she was. I didn't get along with her until I was thirty years old. My mother didn't play with us, my father did...My mother took care of us...It was not until I had grown up myself that it dawned on me that she is a human being too and she had feelings, she isn't the tough lady I thought she was."

The words of another woman, a forty-year-old single woman, echo the same theme of recognizing the pluses and the minuses. "My mother is a wonderful, slightly manipulative, slightly dominant person. She's done what she had to do all these years: she has achievements that are quite a credit to her, she's come through many a storm, and she's done it her way and I respect and admire her. It's difficult to be a forty-year-old woman with her at times because she'd like to see things done the "right" way. This past holiday that I spent there I had quite a conversation with her and she didn't necessarily like what she heard, but I more or less pointed out a few things in a kind way."

Most importantly, we found a strong association between the quality of a daughter's relationship to her mother and the daughter's psychological health.
Most daughters who experienced their relationship with their mothers as positive overall also reported higher self-esteem, overall life satisfaction, happiness and optimism than daughters whose relationships were more troubled.

The effects varied somewhat for daughters in different family situations. For example, the impact on well-being was greater among single than among married daughters. Although single and married daughters may have equally rewarding relationships, the well-being of single daughters is more affected by the quality of their relationships with their mothers than is true of married daughters. The more roles a woman occupies, the less impact each has on her well-being.

Our Recent Research: 1985 -1988

Because the early findings were intriguing, we extended the research by studying daughters' relationships with both their mothers and their fathers as part of a larger study of 400 employed women, 25 to 55, who varied in family pattern, as well as in race and social class. The 400 women were employed as social workers and licensed practical

nurses. The data were collected in 1985. We focused on psychological distress as our indicator of mental health. More specifically, we asked daughters about the frequency with which they experienced 24 symptoms of anxiety and depression. These symptoms included, feeling suddenly scared for no reason, feeling everything is an effort, feeling hopeless about the future, feeling that something bad is going to happen to you, and worrying too much about things.

What were these women like? The mean age was 39 and a half years. By design, approximately half were partnered and half were mothers. Fifteen percent were Black, 85% White. As expected more women had a living mother than a living father. The actual numbers were 305 who had a living mother, 230 who had a living father. The mean age of the mothers was 66 years, the mean age of the fathers was 68 years.

Daughters experience their current relationships with their parents to be more rewarding than problematic. We were surprised at the similarity between daughters' experiences with their mothers and with their fathers. We found these relationships to be about equally rewarding and about equally problematic. In addition, the particular aspects daughters found rewarding in their relationships with one parent were identical to the aspects they found rewarding or problematic in their relationship with the other. The four items that were experienced as most rewarding in their relationships with their mothers were: Having a mother who lets you know she cares about you; Your mother getting along well with important people in your life -- children, husband/partner, friends; Having a close relationship with your mother; Getting along smoothly with your mother. The four items that were experienced as causing the most concern in their relationships with their mothers were: Seeing your mother age and worrying about how she will manage as she gets older; Feeling guilty or uncertain about your obligations to your mother; Having to act like a parent to your mother; A difficult or poor relationship with your mother.

When we looked more closely at the rewarding aspects, we found that having a close relationship with one's mother was experienced as the main reward. Having a close relationship included the following four aspects: Being able to talk over problems with your mother, Enjoying your mothers's companionship, Getting along smoothly with your mother, and Having a mother who helps you out when you need her.

The concerns clustered into 4 groups: Parenting your parent, Physical caregiving, financial support, and disaffection. Let us focus briefly on the disaffection cluster, since it lends itself perhaps most readily to efforts at improvement. There are four aspects that are included under Disaffection: Having a difficult or poor relationship with your mother, Your mother's disapproval of or not understanding your way of life, Having a mother who interferes or intrudes in your own life, and Having a mother who doesn't help out when you need her. (Because of the relatively young age and good health of the mothers, the clusters reflecting care giving were not as salient. In a study of older daughters and their mothers, these concerns might be more paramount.)

By improving the quality of this relationship before issues of care taking become central, the strain associated with caring for an elderly mother might be alleviated.

Improvement in role quality can come either by increasing the rewards you experience about some of the positive aspects of your current relationship, or by reducing the concern you currently experience around some of the problematic aspects.

Compared to White daughters, Black daughters report higher levels of rewards in their relationships with their mothers and their fathers. White daughters report higher levels of concern in their relationships with both parents. Despite these differences, for both White and Black daughters the quality of their relationships with their parents has similar effects on their mental health.

Is there a relationship between daughters' feelings of anxiety and depression and the quality of their relationships with their mothers and fathers? The answer is a strong yes. If a daughter has a poor relationship with her mother or father, her level of anxiety and depression is high; if she has a good relationship, her level of anxiety and depression is low. Moreover, we found the same pattern among White and Black daughters. If your relationship with your parent is good, you reap a mental health benefit, and the benefit is the same for daughters of both races. There are differences, however. Some daughters are affected more than others. Younger daughters, single daughters, and daughters who do not have children benefit more than their counterparts when their relationships with their mothers are good. However, their mental health suffers more than their counterparts' when their relationships with their mothers are troubled.

Having a good relationship with your mother and father is good for your mental health. With respect to adult daughter-father relationships, daughters benefit equally from a good relationship regardless of their own life pattern. Not so for daughter-mother relationships. The quality of your relationship with your mother has especially strong effects on mental health among certain groups of daughters, namely those who are relatively young, single, or do not have children. In other words, the fewer roles we as adult daughters occupy, the more central to our mental health is our relationship to our mothers.

In closing, there is no time like the present to look at your relationships with your parents and to do what you can to improve their quality. This is as true for your relationships with your fathers as it is for your relationships with your mothers.