



Conversations with the Experts

The Elder Care Gender Gap



Natalia Sarkisian

Bio: Natalia Sarkisian received her Ph.D. in 2005 from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her research interests include race, gender, and class, family sociology, and quantitative methods. Much of her work examines the differences and similarities in familial involvement by race/ethnicity and gender, and explores the structural circumstances and cultural values that may account for these differences and similarities. More specifically, her recent publications examine the racial differences in extended kin support (*American Sociological Review*, 2004), and the gender gap in help given to parents (*Journal of Marriage and Family*, 2004). The latter article, "Explaining the Gender Gap in Help to Parents," has been selected as the winner of the 2005 Rosabeth Moss Kanter International Award for Research Excellence in Families and Work, given by the Center for Families at Purdue University and the Boston College Center for Work and Family. Her current research examines the racial/ethnic differences in extended family integration and in father-child involvement. She also examines the

gender gap in extended family caregiving, and the relationship between extended kin support and older workers' employment. Finally, she also studies the effects of marriage and parenthood on extended kin involvement.

An Interview with Natalia Sarkisian

By Karen Corday and Judi Casey

Corday: How did you become interested in work-family issues outside of Western countries?

Sarkisian: I've always been fascinated by gender differences; I grew up in Russia, where they are considered natural and essential. This concept of gender differences never seemed right to me, and I was always questioning it. It seemed especially odd to hold these opinions during Soviet times. Both women and men were expected to work outside the home and were technically considered "equal," but women were still expected to put in this "second shift" and take care of the housework and the children alone.

As an undergraduate in Russia, I studied sociology, but none of my courses questioned these gender differences. Sociology of gender was in its infancy in Russia back then, and it was not a part of our curriculum—we haven't even heard of it! So when I came to the United States to go to graduate school, I was fascinated to discover course work in sociology of gender.

This area of sociology offers multiple explanations for gender differences that contradict that these are natural, essential differences. In my own work, I am especially interested in assessing the structural explanation, which focuses on material differences such as differences in employment, job characteristics, hours of work, and level of pay. In "Explaining the Gender Gap in Help to Parents," we tested whether this structural explanation can account for the gender difference in the amount of help given to aging parents by their adult children.

Corday: Please summarize the previous research done on this topic. How does your research differ?

Sarkisian: No prior research has explained the gender gap in the amount of help given to aging parents. Many studies looked at such help, but they tended to examine either women or men separately; most focused on women. These studies examined what predicts caregiving to parents among women, but did not address the gender difference in such care.

Another problem is that many studies used employment as a dichotomy or examined only one employment

characteristic at a time. What we did is examine how a number of employment characteristics simultaneously shape the care that adult children give their parents, and whether these characteristics help explain the gender gap in this care.

Corday: Could you give a short description of your study?

Sarkisian: The research is a quantitative analysis of secondary data from the second wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), which surveyed 10,000 adults in 1992-94. We used a subset of 7,350 adults that included those with living parents and/or parents-in-law. Our dependent variable was the number of hours given to care for parents or parents-in-law in an average week over the past month. In terms of the employment characteristics, we looked at respondents' wages, work hours, work schedules such as rotating shifts, irregular work hours and fixed shifts, job satisfaction and self-employment.

As I mentioned, we wanted to test the structural explanation for the gender gap in caregiving to parents. This explanation suggests that when women and men work in similar jobs, they look the same in terms of the help they give their aging parents. Alternate theories of gender differences include essentialism, which roots the gender dichotomy in biology, psychological theories that emphasize differences due to early childhood socialization, and cultural explanations that focus on cultural beliefs and pressures operating in adult life. All of these alternative theories suggest that a gender gap in caregiving would still exist even when men and women held similar jobs. They also suggest that women and men might respond in different ways to the same employment conditions.

Corday: What are the main findings of your study?

Sarkisian: First of all, we did, of course, find a substantial gender gap in the average amount of help to parents and parents-in-law—as expected, women provided more help than men. We also found that men are much more likely to be employed than women. So we asked, does this account for the difference in help hours? What we found is that employment status does account for a portion of the gender gap in care; employed women and men give fewer hours of help than those who do not work for pay. However, even if we focus only on the employed, we still see a gender gap among them. It's a smaller gap, but it is there.

We also found that men and women have different kinds of jobs. Women earn lower wages, are more likely to work part time, less likely to work on weekends, and less likely to be self-employed than men. When we control for these employment characteristics, the gender gap is no longer significant. The most important employment characteristic was income; higher wages are associated with fewer hours of help, and that was true for both women and men. Because women work in lower-wage jobs, this generates a gender gap.

Women and men have similar responses to the same employment characteristics—their help to parents is equally sensitive to variation in their employment. Therefore, our study supported the structural model on all counts. A sophisticated structural analysis that looks beyond the dichotomy of having a job or not serves to explain the gender gap in help to aging parents. Employment conditions operate similarly for men and women.

Our findings do suggest that all things being equal, employed men and women provide equal amounts of care to their parents and parents-in-law. However, it's important to remember that all things are not equal; women tend to work fewer hours than men and are paid less per hour. Because of this dynamic, the gender gap still very much exists, and women provide more care than men.

Corday: What should be the focus of future research on this topic?

Sarkisian: One area for future research is evaluating cultural explanations for gender differences in caregiving. Our study focused on testing the structural explanation, but cultural theories have been increasingly prominent in sociology, and we want to assess them explicitly. Unfortunately, existing data sets have good measures of structural conditions but they lack direct measures of culture. Future research should assess the values and beliefs about gender and caregiving that adult sons and daughters as well as their family members hold. We hope to be able to do that in a future project—Naomi Gerstel and I have recently submitted a grant proposal to the National Institute on Aging, requesting funding to collect data on the structural and cultural factors that may explain gender and racial/ethnic differences in caregiving.

Another important direction for future research would be longitudinal studies that allow for stronger statements about causal relationships. The biggest limitation of our study is its inability to establish the causal order. We assume that employment and its characteristics shape help to parents, but it is also possible that providing help might shape the type of job one holds, or even if one is employed at all. For instance, we assume that higher wages increase the opportunity costs of helping parents, but it is possible that the act of helping one's

parents creates a wage penalty.

It is also possible that those in certain types of jobs are more likely to quit than others, so there can be selection effects. For instance, when we looked at the employed, we saw little effect of employment schedules or job satisfaction on help to parents. Why? It's possible that help to parents is simply resistant to these conditions of employment, but it is also possible that those who were not satisfied with their jobs or had inconvenient schedules quit their jobs when faced with the need to give care. Various self-selection processes shape the employed subpopulation, and we need longitudinal data to explore this further.

I am now starting a project funded by the Center on Aging and Work/Workplace Flexibility that will use longitudinal data to examine the relationship between employment characteristics and help to extended kin. This project will focus on older workers and examine how help given to and received from extended families is shaped by employment characteristics, and to what extent job characteristics are affected by the help one gets and gives. This study will use data from the Health and Retirement Study, which surveys more than 22,000 Americans over the age of fifty every two years.

Corday: How can workplace practitioners help employees with their caretaking duties?

Sarkisian: Offering paid family and medical leaves would be a huge help; unpaid leaves are unrealistic in terms of what many people can afford. Unpaid leaves also increase gender gaps—because women tend to earn less than men, women often end up taking unpaid leaves to give care. Family leaves should also allow for a more inclusive definition of who is family beyond one's spouse, children, and parents. Employers should also help their employees get high quality child care or elder care while they are at work.

Another frequently discussed issue is flexible schedules in terms of hours or days of work or, if possible, work location. Even more important are flexible career tracks—opportunities to shift between full-time and part-time work without losing benefits or promotion opportunities, as well as easy exits and re-entries for those who need time off to give care. A recent book that makes a strong case for such a model is *The Career Mystique* by Phyllis Moen and Patricia Roehling. It emphasizes that the current structures of employment need to change in order to make it possible for people to care for others.

Corday: What is the takeaway for state public policy makers?

Sarkisian: The state should definitely create more incentives for employers to introduce flexible schedules and career tracks. It is also crucial that we see beyond the typical flexibility and family leaves discussions when considering the role of the state in assisting caregivers. There is a great need for the state to intervene and enact policies that guarantee more job security, better pay, and better benefits for all working families.

So often in discussions of work and family, we focus on experiences of middle-class families headed by two working adults. Indeed, many of these families have a difficult time juggling jobs, parenthood, and elder care. But if those with more money and with a spouse have a difficult time balancing work and family, what about a single mother in a minimum wage job who has to take care of both her children and her aging mother? She is forced to make extremely tough choices that no one should have to make. No training programs or marriage promotion programs will eliminate this problem.

Ultimately, I think the only way the poorest people can get the needed supports is through centralized government policies. The government needs to raise the bar and enforce a livable minimum wage. People at the lower end of the employment ladder, as well as the unemployed, should have access to quality health care. The government should also recognize caregiving as a socially valuable occupation and provide financial compensation and safety nets for those who are doing it.

Corday: What else are you working on now?

Sarkisian: I've already mentioned my project with the Center on Aging and Work/Workplace Flexibility and the NIH grant proposal that we recently submitted. I'm also finishing a couple of papers looking at the ethnic differences in help given and received from extended families, which was the topic of my dissertation. In this work, I am comparing extended family support of Whites with that of African Americans and Latinos, and using structural and cultural factors to explain the differences. My findings indicate that African American women and Latinas tend to provide more practical help and White women tend to provide more financial and emotional help. As for men, they are surprisingly similar across ethnicities. The only difference is that White men are more likely to provide financial help. As for the explanations for ethnic differences, here again, structural factors predominate—differences in income and education as well as average age and number of siblings explain much of the ethnic gaps.

Corday: We were interested in your project on marriage as a "greedy institution."

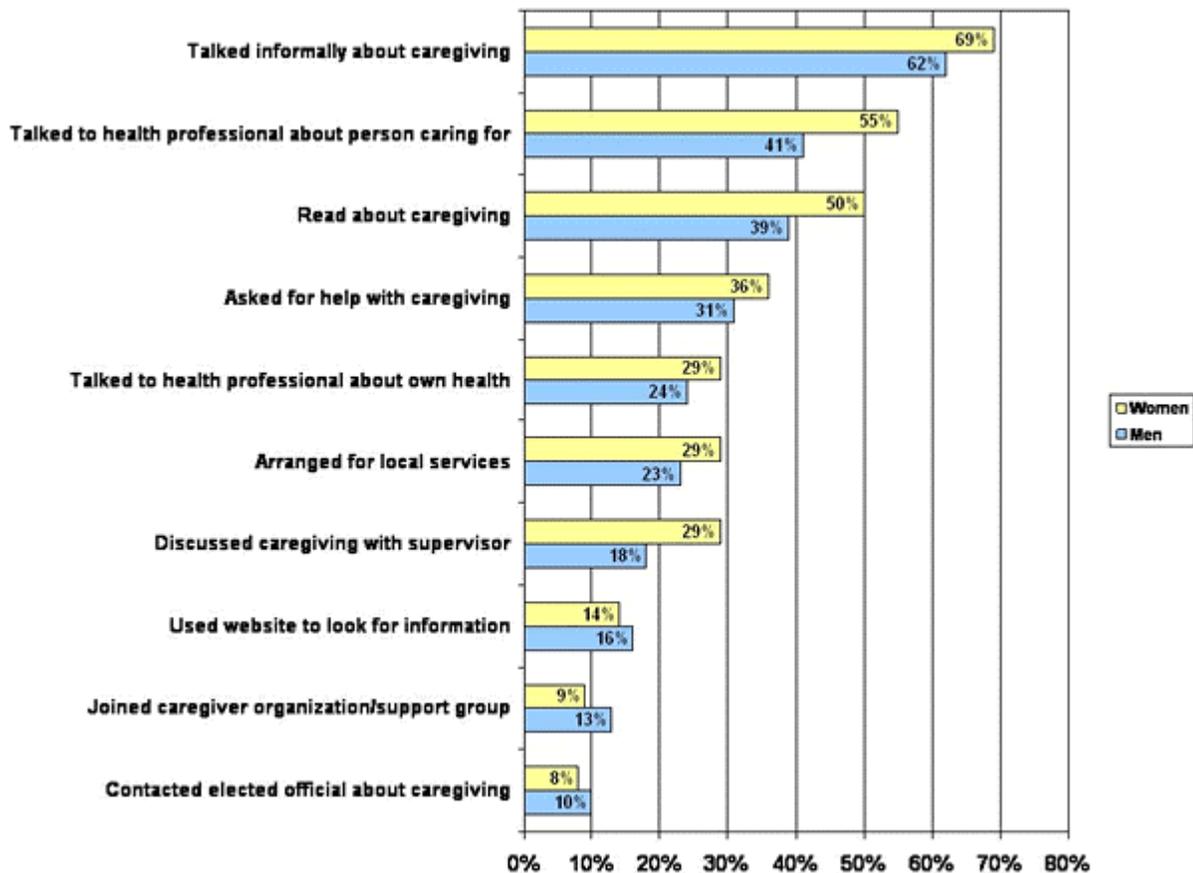
Sarkisian: This is another joint project with Naomi Gerstel. We are looking at the relationship between marriage and extended family ties. What we are finding is that the institution of marriage takes away from caregiving to others and weakens ties to extended family. Part of the story here is about the time and energy that marriage demands—time for spouses to spend with each other, to build family home, and so on. The focus on one's partner may take away from the focus on other family members, particularly if both partners are in the labor force and don't have much free time.

This effect of marriage is by no means universal—in many societies, marriages serves to integrate extended families and communities. Today we have very specific cultural expectations of marriage. We expect married couples to be self-sufficient, to take care of themselves and their children on their own, and to not rely on their relatives or their communities for jobs, education, child care, or welfare assistance. This expectation of the self-sufficiency of married couples in the contemporary United States supports our observation that marriage threatens ties to extended families.

That's not to say that our argument in this paper is anti-family; it's very pro-family, in fact. It expands the usual definition of family beyond a mom, a dad and their children to include extended family and older relatives. Many politicians today talk a lot about "family values," lamenting their decline. But they usually talk only about so-called traditional nuclear families—married couples with young children. I find this to be a very narrow definition of "family values." It is ironic that many even blame the decline in extended families and communities on the decline of that traditional nuclear family, while in fact marriage dampens extended family ties.

Today, many governmental programs promote marriage and consider marriage to be a solution to various problems, especially problems of the poor. First of all, I don't think that these marriage promotion initiatives will be very successful in increasing marriage rates among the poor, and they will do even less in terms of solving poverty-related problems. Even if these policies do increase marriage rates among the poor, an unintended consequence can be a reduction in extended family ties that are crucial for the survival of poor families.

Caregiving Activities Ever Performed, By Gender



Note: n=1,714; respondents who answered yes to unaided and/or aided caregivers questions (i.e., identified as caregivers and/or engaged in caregiving activities.) **Source:** Kutner, G. (2001). *AARP Caregiver Identification Study*. Retrieved August 31, 2006, from the AARP web site: <http://www.thefamilycaregiver.org/pdfs/AARPSurveyFinal.pdf>.

Additional Resources Related to Elder Care

360 Degrees of Financial Literacy: The Sandwich Generation: The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants has put together an impressive set of articles, tools and FAQs to help people financially plan for caring for children and elderly parents at the same time.

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.360financialliteracy.org/Life+Stages/Sandwich+Generation/>.

ElderWeb: “An award-winning online eldercare sourcebook,” this is the personal project of Karen Brown Stevenson, a consultant and eldercare expert. The site includes many links to long-term care information, a searchable database of organizations, a huge news archive, and many articles and reports.

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.elderweb.com/home>.

Family Caregiver Alliance: “Founded in 1977, Family Caregiver Alliance was the first community-based nonprofit organization in the country to address the needs of families and friends providing long-term care at home. FCA now offers programs at national, state and local levels to support and sustain caregivers.” The site includes a section on public policy and research, several fact sheets and publications and four free newsletters.

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/home.jsp>.

FirstGov: Senior Citizens’ Resources: FirstGov, the official web portal of the U.S. government, has an entire section dedicated to senior citizens, including health care reports, an eldercare locator, benefit and retirement calculators, and much more.

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.firstgov.gov/Topics/Seniors.shtml>.

National Family Caregivers Association: “The National Family Caregivers Association (NFCA) supports, empowers, educates, and speaks up for the more than 50 million Americans who care for a chronically ill, aged, or disabled loved one. NFCA reaches across the boundaries of different diagnoses, different relationships and different life stages to address the common needs and concerns of all family caregivers.” The web site includes research and reports (<http://www.thefamilycaregiver.org/who/surveys.cfm>) and statistics (<http://www.thefamilycaregiver.org/who/stats.cfm>).

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.thefamilycaregiver.org/index.cfm>.

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