

Filial Responsibility and the Aging, or Beyond Pluck and Luck

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ATTITUDES about the responsibility of adult children for their aging parents are rooted in personal ideas about family relationships and social goals. This broad frame of reference is seldom clarified, however, in discussions of filial responsibility. It is possible, even likely, that differences of opinion about the administrative difficulties in enforcing children's responsibility, for example, arise from deeper differences. Let us, therefore, examine this frame of reference with some care.

IMAGE OF THE FAMILY

There are two kinds of things to say about the frame of reference into which we fit filial responsibility. The first has to do with our image of the American family. The term "image" is used with premeditation to suggest a perception that may or may not be accurate, that is manipulable, and that is used by a profession or a business to advance its own interests. We have possibly become too charmed with images. The great danger is in dealing with them if their tie to facts is not consequential; what matters is whether an image serves our purposes or someone else's. The image of the American family that is commonly held is an example of this separation of image from fact. Though fantasy can be pleasant, in this case it may be a major single factor in perpetuating relatives' responsibility laws.

What shape does this image take? The American family is deteriorating! In what was once a family-centered society, industrialization and urbanization have separated our old people from their children and everyone from his home. Margaret Mead announces the end of the war of the sexes—women have attained emancipation and need not struggle further. Suffragists may

applaud, but equality leaves men and women uncertain about sex roles. The age of permissiveness was ushered in by Freud. We pay for its glories with character disorders in adults and—who knows—delinquency in children. Our civilization has become so complex that each of us feels adrift, uncertain of our purposes, unable even to achieve genuine intimacy. The man who survives the driving thirties, the dangerous forties, and the frantic fifties may live to be 65—and aged! What awaits him? His children—*anxious, ambitious, and hedonistic*—have neither time nor material support to offer.

This description is a bit of a caricature but with small changes, it would make a sober, persuasive, and typical description of the American family. Though each of the parts of this description contains an insight that is valid, much as the whale contained Jonah, in sum it is chiefly interesting for clinical purposes—as a symptom of the anxiety with which we view ourselves and of the ease and inaccuracy with which we generalize. The flat statement that the American family is deteriorating cannot be supported. The family *is changing*. Some of the changes may be bad, and others are all to the good. As far as the relations of older men and women and their children are concerned, to say that the net effect is on the debit side is a distortion.

The Changing Family

A review of some of the changes in the American family should be helpful. The greatest change of all, of course, is that so many persons live to be old. It would be a rash man who would suggest that this is a change for the worse. At the same time, it must be apparent that the doubling or tripling of the aged population creates a problem of income maintenance, even if nothing else in family relationships changes.

This growth in the number of the aged has been going on for the past century or longer. So, too, there has been a steady, long-run shift from

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a property-centered to a wage-centered economy. When a parent owned his handicraft tools or farm he had an income, whoever did the work, but gradually his income has become dependent on selling a marketable skill that can evaporate. Here is a change that has produced a new problem of support and that one may evaluate as unfortunate. (A rural, handicraft society would be a lot further from reaching the moon, to be sure.) On the other hand, it may not be said that the adult child once supported his father because he cared for him and that today he does not. It is more exact to say that it was, many years ago, in the nature of the situation of many aged people that they commanded support. Today this is less often the case. If feelings or morality have much to do with the change, the evidence has yet to be presented.

A third change, considerably related to the shift to wages, is the ascendancy of the nuclear family. The nuclear family—a man, his wife, and their young children—is becoming as well-known as nuclear fallout and, to judge from the tone in which it is discussed, as unpopular. It is sometimes said that the larger families, including several generations and several degrees of relationship, became obsolete in response to the requirements of industrialization. One must be wary of reading this kind of direct purpose into our preference for nuclear families, but it is clear that small, mobile families work well in an industrial society.

The Real Family

Now, the argument goes, since grandpa and grandma are no longer part of their children's family, they are forgotten, frequently lonesome, and in any case not supported. The main thing wrong with this argument is that it is not in accord with the facts. Part of it does appear to be true; adult children in the United States do not habitually make cash contributions to their parents. Perhaps 5 percent—certainly not more than 10 percent—of the aged get cash contributions in a given year from children with whom they do not live.¹

Money is more likely to flow in the opposite

¹ Alvin L. Schorr, *Filial Responsibility in the Modern American Family* (Social Security Administration, Division of Program Research), 1961, page 6.

direction.² Marvin Sussman and Lee Burchinal, in reviewing available studies recently, concluded that "financial assistance appears generally to flow from parents to children."³ It seems likely that it is chiefly the middle-aged parents who are giving to their children, but the reason that they give continues into their old age. In other words, an American parent is ambitious for his children and grandchildren, as they are for themselves. He is reluctant to take money from them if he believes that it interferes with their meeting their own needs. (And where is the family that feels it has enough money to meet its own needs?) Even when the parent is less ambitious for his children, he may prefer to do without such contributions and make some sacrifice in his standard of living so that he may keep his feeling of independence.

The older and younger generations are usually in agreement that, if a choice is to be made, the cash must be spent on the children. The aged do not, however, go without help. For obvious reasons, those who are most in need of help usually turn to adult children who have comparatively little to spare. The preferred method of helping that these families use is to share living quarters. For one thing, it leads to the most efficient use of money. For another, living together may provide the older person with natural ways of reciprocating—babysitting, help with housework, and so on. Often, the old people are also in need of nursing care or of benevolent supervision. Indeed, living together is more common with the parent's advancing age and ill health.

If the giving of cash is not a common pattern, living together is. Of the old people who have children, more than a third live with one child or another.⁴ (It should be noted that helping the old person is only one reason for a family to

² There was speculation about this as long ago as 1940. Barkev S. Sanders wrote then that "As a group, the aged may spend as much from their own resources for the support of younger persons as is spent, in the aggregate, by younger persons toward the support of the aged." He proposed a statistical method of testing this speculation but did not, so far as is known, carry it out ("Economic Status of the Aged in Urban Households," *Social Security Bulletin*, October 1940).

³ Marvin B. Sussman and Lee Burchinal, *Parental Aid: Prospects and Implications for Family Theory*, September 1961. Processed.

⁴ Ethel Shanas, "Living Arrangements of Older People in the United States," *The Gerontologist*, March 1961, pages 27-29.

live together; sometimes help goes the other way.) Others live together simply because they always have. There are as many old people living with their children today as the total number of old people who were alive as recently as 1920. This is something of a blow to the theory that nuclear families spin off their aging parents, careless of love and heedless of responsibility.

The intangibles that are exchanged between parents and their children—the feeling, the visiting, the marketing—are as important as the material exchanges. It is a common concept that the old are lonely, uncared for, and in fact, alone. Public welfare workers may have some excuse for thinking this, since the lonely and deserted loom larger in their caseloads than elsewhere.

Nevertheless, there is a growing body of solid evidence that this view is wide of the mark. As Ethel Shanas has observed, only 15 percent of all aged parents live more than a short ride from some child. About half live within walking distance or a short ride, and about a third live with a child. These figures are especially impressive if one considers the rate at which Americans move about and the fact that young families move most rapidly of all. Physical proximity aside, an exchange of services between the parents and their children—an exchange that is typically spontaneous and reciprocal—is noted in a number of studies. More than 2 out of 3 aged parents see their children at least weekly. When there are no visits, they keep in touch—perhaps daily—by telephone.⁵ What of the help that children and parents give each other in emergencies? Enrico Quarantelli writes that disaster studies lend little support to the notion that the extended family is now of little importance. This group, he says, “is the preferred, sought, and major source of short and long term help in time of crises.”⁶

One must conclude that the view that the American family is deteriorating is oversimplified and in error, at least so far as it concerns parents and their adult children. Obviously, this is not to say that there are no needy or lonely old people. The case for filial responsibility laws rests most firmly on a powerful feeling that frequently goes unstated. It is the feeling that

families are falling apart and that somehow limits must be established. It is the feeling that morals and responsibility are dissolving everywhere and that somehow a halt must be called. It is the feeling that the government is being expected to do everything and that it cannot. The image of the American family described earlier, unreal though it is, aggravates these feelings. As long as this inaccurate, popular image of the family and this general, semi-conscious feeling of deterioration support each other, no change is likely to occur.

CONCEPT OF POVERTY

Filial responsibility has been discussed so far in the frame of reference of the American family. Let us shift now to consider filial responsibility in the context of poverty. There was a time not so long ago when poverty might have been defined as the absence of money. This definition is influenced perhaps by the Horatio Alger notion that, if money is lacking, with work and determination one provides it. Another definition of poverty may be more useful; a point about Horatio Alger will serve to introduce the definition.

The Alger Heroes

The Alger heroes had a lack of money that impresses one from the first pages of their story. Luke Larkin swept out his school twice a week to earn money to attend it. Ragged Dick shined a gentleman's shoes but couldn't make change for a quarter. There was a lack of money! It would be hard to be worse off than these street boys, but one should pause to count their blessings. They were white, these heroes of Horatio Alger. They came from homes with a proper, legal view of what a family is. Sometimes, if their fathers had died, they were left with anonymous but well-heeled guardians, who came through at crucial points. Because of their early training and associations, our heroes were polite and well-mannered. Only Phil the Fiddler was an Italian immigrant and could not even manage English. (Perhaps by then some social workers had been talking to Horatio Alger and spoiled the purity of his story line, but only for one book.)

⁵ Alvin L. Schorr, *op. cit.*, pages 15-17.

⁶ Enrico L. Quarantelli, “A Note on the Protective Function of the Family in Disasters,” *Marriage and Family Living*, August 1960, page 264.

Horatio Alger's heroes had a solid early education. They had a degree of ambition that suggests they had seen the last pages of the book. As if this cornucopia of blessings were not enough, in the last act fortune favored them with a rich little girl to rescue from runaway horses or a river in flood. Take nothing away from Horatio Alger—he figures in our country's adolescence and gave us what we needed, or wanted—but these street boys did not know poverty. They knew an episode when money was less plentiful, so they could enjoy it when it became more plentiful. That is not poverty in our country today.

Today's Definition

A definition of poverty more appropriate to the present day would go like this. Poverty is a complex set of circumstances, each caused by and in turn reinforcing the others, that combine to keep a person without money despite such energy or hope as he is able to muster. It may be exact to say that in our country today those people are poor who can least afford it.

If a person is poor, there is a fair chance—1 chance in 5—that he is Negro, or Puerto Rican, or Mexican, or Indian.⁷ There is a better chance—1 in 4—that he is in a home where there is no father. (The average income in such cases is one-third the average for intact families.)⁸ If he is poor, he is relatively uneducated (2 chances out of 3), and his cultural equipment is meager. You may think that therefore he needs better schools, but on the whole the schools he attends are poor. (On this point, Dr. Conant's conclusion will serve: "The contrast in the money available to the schools in a wealthy suburb and to the schools in a large city jolts one's notion of the meaning of equality of opportunity.")⁹ The poor person is not necessarily a child; if not, the chances are good that the person is the mother in such a home as has been described or is old.

Where does he live, this non-Alger hero? In

⁷ These odds and those that follow are inferred from Robert J. Lampman, *The Low Income Population and Economic Growth*, Study Paper No. 12, prepared for the Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress, December 16, 1959.

⁸ Lenore A. Epstein, "Some Effects of Low Income on Children and Their Families," *Social Security Bulletin*, February 1961, pages 12-17.

⁹ James Bryant Conant, *Slums and Suburbs*, McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1961.

Chicago today, half the poorer, broken families that include children live in housing that is seriously crowded, dilapidated, or lacks central heat, electricity, or plumbing.¹⁰ The aged do not fare so badly in terms of housing. If they live with relatives, they share their fortunes so far as housing is concerned. Of those living alone or with nonrelatives, from a fourth to a third are in substandard housing.

These figures on housing underline a point that is insufficiently appreciated in this somewhat psychiatric age: Substandard housing affects personal behavior and family patterns. It means, for example, that there is not adequate opportunity for study or even for parental control. Questioning once, at Hull House, a program that kept 13-years-olds out 5 nights a week until 10 o'clock curfew brought the following reply: It is hopeless to attempt keeping children inside the apartments in which these youngsters live. After they have had supper, sitting on beds and stools around a table, they wander outside. One draws them to a settlement house or leaves them in the streets. Hylan Lewis has observed that poor children are not given their freedom at an early age. They seize it.¹¹

How would parents keep control in the kind of housing that drives children outside? Crowded housing means early, and not especially pleasant, acquaintance with sexual facts. It means tension; it means weariness. A study of working-class Negroes in Chicago during World War II revealed that most of them had less than 5 hours' sleep per night. They slept from three to five to a bed, and the beds were filled day and night.¹² Matters have undoubtedly improved since the war. Nevertheless, one reads public assistance case records with a somewhat different attitude if these facts are borne in mind.

Poverty means other things. For many, it means living in a state of despair or bitterness that, if it represents a realistic and even necessary reaction to their experiences, in itself becomes a barrier to improving their circumstances.

¹⁰ Beverly Duncan and Philip M. Hauser, *Housing a Metropolis—Chicago*, The Free Press, 1960, page 137.

¹¹ Hylan Lewis, *Child Rearing Practices Among Low Income Families*, National Conference on Social Welfare, May 16, 1961.

¹² Allison Davis, "The Motivation of the Under-Privileged Worker," in *Industry and Society*, edited by William Foote Whyte, McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1946, page 94.

Poverty means that a man's family is not likely to be able to help him get ahead. Not only are they not able to help, but they may turn to him when they are in such desperate need that he must share with them anything extra that he has managed to scrape together.

What Filial Responsibility Means

The point of this catalogue of the elements of poverty has now been reached. Filial responsibility legislation is not examined realistically when it is examined in isolation. Taken as an abstraction, the requirement to support may be a small, not to say reasonable, requirement to make of a person. Its appearance may be different if it is seen as one element in a network of circumstances that combine to handicap a person at every turn.

It would be another matter if people of average means or better were being considered. The fact is that those with good income tend to have parents with adequate income. The fact is that persons with good income do not need to be required by law to help their parents when they are in need; they tend to do it voluntarily. The fact is, finally and ironically, that those with good income know best how to evade the law if this is what they want. In Pennsylvania, for example, a study of shared households found that half the support contributions to clients came from adult children whose family income was less than \$2,400 a year. In no case was there a contribution from a son or a daughter whose family income was over \$5,400 a year.¹³

One might grant the thesis that many factors in a poor person's situation interact to keep him poor and yet doubt whether support requirements are in themselves a significant handicap. As far as is known, the matter has never been studied in just these terms. Yet, one must take note of the extent to which the self-improvement of adults is subsidized by their parents today. Marvin Sussman and Lee Burchinal observe, for example, that we are well on our way to a new norm, that parents should, if at all possible, provide a college education for their children. College education is not the only subsidy; middle-class parents

make substantial contributions at marriage, in connection with grandchildren, and so on. The adult children being considered here not only fail to get this assistance; they are required to give the assistance.

Visualize a child on the aid to dependent children rolls reaching the landmark of his eighteenth birthday. Obviously, his family is not going to be able to help him towards the goal of self-improvement—financially, at least. Much less than that, the child is now a legally responsible relative. The Pennsylvania study mentioned earlier counted 5,180 children over age 18 who were living in homes receiving aid to dependent children and were regarded as legally responsible relatives. North Carolina assumes a contribution from an employed child over age 18—50 percent of his net income or \$75 a month, whichever is smaller. Utah assumes a contribution from any child earning more than \$75 a month—50 percent of the amount over \$75.

Not all of these children, or even most of them, will achieve earnings that bring these requirements to bear on them. Nor are all of those who do achieve such earnings striving for self-improvement. What of those who are? Shall we debate how to provide specialized services to encourage self-improvement while we require them to give up the means for it?

Filial responsibility and poverty can be viewed in two ways. One can put the emphasis on support and consider questions of justice and reasonableness. Using this approach, it is possible to establish a definition of moderate income and to require that all or part of any sums above that amount be contributed to the needy parent. Some States set this level low indeed. In addition, one's concept of justice must somehow encompass the fact that most Americans, of any income level, do not make cash contributions.

At least implicitly, a second approach is being proposed here. This approach puts the emphasis on poverty and asks at how many points and how substantially it is possible, within the framework of the public assistance programs, to interrupt the cycle that keeps people poor. This view seems to be implicit in Dr. Conant's book. At any rate, it is conceivably an appropriate view to take of public assistance programs and, specifically, of the matter of filial responsibility. Interfering with poverty is, it must be apparent, far from a simple thing to do. It requires change on a

¹³ Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, *Composition of Shelter Groups, Latter Half of January 1958, Special Analysis*, June 9, 1958.

variety of fronts—education, race relations, employment, family relationships, and so on—many of them outside the reach of our everyday work. One small area can lie within our reach: if we deal with an old man, we may include his children in our stated goal of fostering independence.

INDIVISIBILITY OF FAMILY WELFARE

With respect to the points made so far in this article, a few qualifications are necessary. Why, for example, so much talk about children when the subject is filial responsibility and the aged? The reason has already been stated in another connection: The welfare of the aged and their children and their grandchildren is indivisible. It is not possible to have old people comfortable at the expense of their children. No one wants it that way, but in any case it could not be achieved.

Second, it is not intended to give the impression that parents and adult children are necessarily distinct groups of people. A great many people are parent and child at once. It has been noted, for example, that support requirements may be a handicap to the child after he is dropped from the rolls of aid to dependent children because of his age. Similarly, a youth may be handicapped because support for an older relative is required from his 40-year-old father. Further, increasing numbers of aged Americans are finding that they have even older relatives who might be considered to be dependent on them. The proportion of those just over age 60 to the really old—over age 80—is now about 3 to 1; in a generation or so, the proportion should be 3 to 2.¹⁴ Thus, contributions to the aged might have to be enforced from the aged.

There is a third qualification: In speaking about poverty, human spirit and drive have been referred to only negatively—that is, in terms of despair and bitterness. This is not to say that the human spirit will not assert itself despite all obstacles. The human drive towards self-respect may surmount decades of repression and indignity. (The desegregation movement is a con-

temporary illustration.) It does seem clear, however, that poverty will be left behind only bit by bit, here and there, unless we create the conditions for leaving it behind.

Finally, it may seem that it is being suggested here that children should not help their parents but should think only of themselves. Far from it. Evidence that children freely and spontaneously help their parents has been noted. It is the effect of the legal requirement that has been discussed specifically, in particular its effect on adult children who are being denied the right to the smallest surplus income that may be applied to self-advancement. These are not the people one should choose, as in effect the law chooses, to enforce support on.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up: Filial responsibility laws cannot be considered alone, for they should have some rational relationship to the way families live. These laws do not represent the normal pattern of American family life, nor are they likely to be enforced except on public assistance families. In fact, a case for the repeal of these laws can be based solely on their effects on family relationships. (This was probably the primary motivation of the recommendations against support requirements made by the 1961 White House Conference on Aging.) Support laws appear to be intimately related to vague, though powerful, fears about the deterioration of families. The anxiety may be real, but it is not tied to objective trends in family life.

Filial responsibility laws must also be considered in relation to poverty. The requirement to support is one of the network of handicaps that surrounds a poor family; it may, on occasion, be the crucial handicap that persuades a person that improvement is not in the cards for him. Earlier in this article images and their dangers were discussed. Visions merit rather more respect. We have had the vision from time to time of so organizing public welfare, and our society, that we shall wipe out poverty as we know it today. Eliminating support requirements in public assistance is only one element in this program, but it is an element.

¹⁴ Senate Subcommittee on Problems of the Aged and Aging, Report to the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, *The Aged and the Aging in the United States—A National Problem*, January 29, 1960.