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Perceptions of Fairness of Support Between Older Parents and Adult Children

Anna Willems *, Dimitri Mortelmans and Anina Vercruyssen

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Antwerp, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium
* Correspondence: anna.willems@uantwerpen.be

Abstract: Increased life expectancy and reduced fertility mean more generations are living simultaneously but with fewer members. There is also a growing group of older people (aged 80 and over) who need care and support. This impacts mutual support within families and the care provided by public or private care organisations. Across OECD countries, on average, 60% of people aged 65 years and older in 2020 reported receiving support from family members, friends and people in their social network, living inside or outside their household but not care organisations. European research shows that when older persons do not have a partner (anymore), they rely on their adult children for care and support. Given that adult children frequently serve as primary providers of informal care, our study examines their perspectives and motivations to provide future care alongside the demands and expectations of their old parents. Our study adopts a multi-actor interview approach and simultaneously looks at the perspective of 40 adult children and one of their older aged parents (65 years or older). We apply the distributive justice theory to understand how children and parents assess the expectation and fairness of support. This paper contributes to the existing literature about support behaviour between parents and children, expanding insights about the fairness of support, expectations and willingness from a multi-actor approach. Through the lens of child–parent dyads, it is seen that the principles of the distributive justice theory can be perceived as not so strict, and within family relationships, one or more principles can coexist and have underlying mechanisms. This study shows the complexity and often ambivalence of family solidarity by adopting a multi-actor approach. One of the main findings is that contrasting dyads who reject the reciprocal act of support experience feelings of guilt or misunderstanding, resulting in stress and worry. A child may not follow the expected support pattern from the parent due to competing demands such as work or the prioritisation of young children, which can reduce the support given to the older parent. Besides general contrasts and similarities between child–parent support perspectives, the analysis looked into differences regarding gender and legal relationships. Our findings only found gendered care expectations. Future research should entangle this by looking into feelings of closeness, emotional connection and considering the dynamic character of filial support over time, especially between siblings.

Keywords: multi-actor support patterns; ageing; intergenerational ambivalence; multi-actor interview approach

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1. Introduction

Increased life expectancy and reduced fertility mean more generations are living simultaneously but with fewer members (Bengtson et al. 1990; Harper 2003). There is also a growing group of older people (aged 80 and over) who need care and support (United

Nations 2013; Victor 2024). This impacts mutual support within families and the care provided by public or private care organisations (Blome et al. 2009; Saraceno 2019). Across OECD countries, on average, 60% of people aged 65 years and older in 2020 reported receiving support from family members, friends and people in their social network who were living inside or outside their household, but not from care organisations (Rocard and Llena-Nozal 2022). European research shows that when older people do not have a partner (anymore), they rely on adult children for care and support (Vergauwen and Mortelmans 2021).

Given that adult children frequently serve as primary providers of informal care (de Klerk et al. 2021), our study examines their perspectives and motivations for providing future care alongside the demands and expectations of their elderly parents. Whereas previous research has primarily focused on the perceptions of downward financial support and its effect on care behaviour (e.g., Heath 2018; Tang and Wang 2022), reflecting a single perspective on one type of support in the broad range of family interactions, we look more broadly at care provision and relevant support resources in family relationships. Our study also goes further by adopting a multi-actor interview approach and simultaneously looking at the perspective of 40 adult children and 1 of their older-aged parents (65 years or older). We apply the distributive justice theory to understand how children and parents assess the expectation and fairness of support.

This paper contributes to the existing literature about support behaviour between parents and children, expanding insights about the fairness of support, expectations and willingness from a multi-actor approach. Through the lens of child–parent dyads, it is seen that the principles of the distributive justice theory can be perceived as not so strict, and within family relationships, one or more principles can coexist and have underlying mechanisms. The study shows the complexity and often ambivalence of family solidarity by adopting a multi-actor approach.

2. Theoretical Background

We start by defining different support activities between family members and describe current trends in giving and receiving (informal) support in the context of our study. Then, we look at the determinants of support within a family. Finally, we discuss a theoretical framework and a concept that provide insight into how adult children and parents assess the distribution, expectation and fairness of support: the distributive justice theory and the idea of 'intergenerational ambivalence'.

2.1. Intergenerational Support

Family members offer each other different forms of support. A typical subdivision is by type of activity: personal care support, practical help and social support (Hashiguchi and Llena-Nozal 2020). Personal care comes from a need for assistance and includes care activities such as bathing and dressing (also called activities of daily living). Practical help is usually sporadic and includes activities such as cleaning, shopping, or looking after (grand)children (also called instrumental activities of daily living) (Brandt 2013). A third activity is social support; these activities are important for maintaining social relationships and participating in society. Throughout this paper, we will use the broader umbrella term 'support' to refer to all these exchanges between family members.

The process of ageing goes hand in hand with support needs. A large segment of the population may potentially be in need of support, either now or in the near future. In 2022, 21% of the EU27 population was aged 65 and over. The proportion of those over 65 to those of working age (20–64) was 36%, while in 2012, this was 'only' 29% (Eurostat 2023a). Our context, Flanders, Belgium's Dutch-speaking region, is at the European average (Eurostat 2023b). A

recent study in Flanders shows that the oldest age group (65+) receives the highest proportion of informal care: 21%. In addition, most informal or non-professional support is given by the 26–64 age group, the active working age par excellence, and about half (49%) provide support to a (plus) parent or parent-in-law (Bracke et al. 2022). Support from family members is an important link in meeting support needs. A study by the OECD (2021) shows that the family members to whom support is provided vary by age. This confirms the findings of a Flemish survey of informal care (Bracke et al. 2022) which shows that the oldest age group (65 years and older) mainly provides support to a partner (34%), while the youngest group (18 to 25 years) reports providing support mainly to their grandparent (33.7%) or parent (27%).

2.2. Factors of Intergenerational Support

Several factors influence support behaviour between family members. First, opportunity and cost (or resources) are intertwined: if someone needs support (opportunity), those with more resources (e.g., time and money) will be more likely to provide it (Szydlik 2016). Another factor in family theory explains intergenerational support within families through the lens of social exchange theory (e.g., Nelson 2000; Rank and LeCroy 1983). This implies that reciprocity is expected within families, although not necessarily simultaneously or in the same form (Hämäläinen et al. 2020; Silverstein et al. 2002). Social contact and intimacy are also essential elements contributing to these reciprocal expectations in intergenerational contexts (Parrott and Bengtson 1999). Third, support for an older parent with care needs in Europe is often shared between siblings, depending on their ability and type of support, but such responsibilities fall more often upon the daughters in the family (Aires et al. 2019; Vergauwen 2024). Fourth, intergenerational support patterns between children and parents relate to cultural norms, welfare provisions and services. For instance, in southern (and some central) European countries, there is a higher normative expectation that adult children should support ageing parents combined with limited provision of welfare services compared to northern European countries (Haberkern and Szydlik 2010; Janus and Koslowski 2020; van Oorschot et al. 2008).

2.3. Distributive Justice Theory

An interesting framework for understanding how children and parents assess support distribution, expectation and fairness is the distributive justice theory, as it encompasses financial support, time and attention (Cook and Hegtvedt 1983). In addition to the reciprocity norm discussed in the previous paragraph, which is strongly linked to the equity principle (Kusa 2019), the fair distribution or allocation of support relies on the following principles (Cohen 1987; Cook and Hegtvedt 1983; Deutsch 1975):

- The equity principle: support should be proportional to individual inputs, which is strongly linked to the principle of reciprocity;
- The equality principle: every individual should receive the same support;
- The needs principle: support should be proportional to individual needs.

Fiske (1992) advanced the need principle as the most relevant justice principle within a family context, where everyone gets as much as they need to survive. He distinguished three other types of social relationships besides the family and linked each with the most relevant principle. Strong ties and long-term relationships characterise the family. However, Heath (2018) found that the principles of equity and equality were also present when discussing fair financial gifts from parents to children. Children perceive it as fair when parents treat them equally to their siblings. When parents do not distribute money equally, children use different approaches to manage ambivalence towards siblings or parents. For example, they justified inequality by arguing that they were more responsible than their siblings or because they believed they deserved more support. Another approach was

the belief that parents would financially support them when needed. On the other hand, parents expected their children to act responsibly and be willing to save. In addition, the author refers to intimacy and close contact between children and parents as an important factor in parents' willingness to provide support in times of need. In turn, the study by Tisch and Gutfleisch (2022) found evidence for both the equality and need principles. They conducted an experiment in which parents, in a hypothetical scenario, were asked to divide a fixed amount of money fairly between children. Some participants divided it equally, while others justified inequality regarding the need for real support from children. Both authors point to a possible gender-specific application of justice principles in the case of parental gifts. This could imply that unequal gifts are legitimised differently for daughters and sons regarding their needs and support behaviour.

2.4. Intergenerational Ambivalence

Solidarity within families depends on shared values and normative obligations between family members. Still, it can also be broken because of conflict, as addressed in Bengtson and Roberts's (1991) solidarity–conflict model. However, this approach ignores the reality that conflicting feelings may arise when giving or receiving support (Bengtson et al. 2002; Katz et al. 2005). Therefore, Luescher and Pillemer (1998) introduced the concept of 'intergenerational ambivalence' as an alternative to the solidarity versus conflict dichotomy. For example, older adults may be reluctant to ask for support because they do not want to burden their children, fear that the relationship will change, feel ashamed to ask for support for certain activities, or feel that they are quietly losing their autonomy (Bredewold et al. 2020).

Adult children mention the difficulty of managing all the different roles or feeling inadequate in the support they give (Moen and DePasquale 2017). Another ambivalent aspect of providing support to an older parent is feeling satisfied but, at the same time, overwhelmed by their responsibilities (Shim et al. 2012). George (1986) observed during the support process that children felt guilty because they were caught between solidarity demands and the desire for reciprocity. This intergenerational ambivalence is an important framework for studying child–parent support.

3. Data and Method

Participants were recruited through the interviewer's networks (condition: no family or close relationship). The interviewers were trained undergraduate students from the qualitative research methods course at the University of Antwerp. All children and parents were interviewed separately at different moments in their homes or places of choice. To protect the privacy of our interviewees, pseudonyms are used when interview data are reported. All of the respondents gave their informed consent. To be included in the sample, child–parent dyads had to have (1) a legal or social relationship and (2) children older than 18 and parents aged 65 or older. This latter limit was set because the statutory retirement age in Belgium is 65. However, we have made one exception because of a dyad of a 63-year-old stepparent and their stepchild, as the inclusion of a stepfamily was unique in our database and was deemed necessary for studying changing family dynamics.

This study used a multi-actor approach in which we collected the perceptions of adult children and their parent. We selected eighty interviews (40 adult children +40 of one of their older-aged parents) from the large group based on quality criteria. Interviews were selected if the interviewer achieved a high distinction in axial coding, graphic representation of concepts, theorisation, and reflection on the quality of the assignment. Furthermore, background data were gathered via a drop-off survey, which was processed using an extensive classification sheet (collecting 17 background characteristics per interviewee).

The descriptive statistics of the study population in Table 1 show an overrepresentation of highly educated children and few people with a minority background. The sample was taken from the interviewer's network, and often, the child referred the parent for participation in the study, which may provide an explanation for this overrepresentation. However, 12% of the parents regarded themselves as belonging to a minority group, which indicates a few representatives of other ethnical backgrounds. Next, 60 out of the 80 respondents are females, and the mean age is 59 (range 22 to 84). Sixty-three child–parent dyads are biologically or legally related; two are a foster parent and child, one is a stepparent and -child, and one is a grandparent and -child. Our study population does not represent the Belgian population, as respondents participated without a random sample.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of respondents.

	Children	**Parents**
Sample size (n)	40	40
Women	77.5%	72.5%
Age range	Min. 22–Max. 59	Min.63–Max.84
Living with a partner	72.5%	71.1%
Belonging to a minority group[1]	5%	12.5%
Highest educational level[2]		
Primary education	5%	42.5%
Secondary education	22.5%	25%
Tertiary education	72.5%	32.5%

The respondents were interviewed with semi-structured interview leads. These leads let the interviewers precode in NVivo in a straightforward manner (Mortelmans 2017). All interviews were conducted in person. The central theme of both the interviews was support between parents and children. The general topics of the interviews were perspectives on ageing; support needs now and in the future, reciprocity, frequency and quality of contacts and digital contacts with family members, financial gifts and heritage, willingness to maintain family, perspective on nursing homes, qualitative care, the responsibility of the state to provide support, and perspectives on the increase in the cost of nursing homes. These topics were on a topic list for the pilot study and were reworked, based on the researcher's experiences in the primary interviews, into interview leads for the interviewers. We used NVivo to restructure the interviews and analyse the transcripts. All interviews were thematically coded and classified into NVivo so we could easily select relevant interview data for our study. This coding procedure allowed this study to process the interview data using coding Queries in NVivo. Only interview questions on reasonable support, fair exchanges and reciprocity were coded and analysed.

The analysis used grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss [1967] 2017), a classic structure of grounded theory analysis with open and axial coding, to ensure reliability. This theory was tested and expanded via constant comparison in the elaborative research population, which consisted of all pre-coded student interviews merged in NVivo (Glaser 1998). Constant comparison in the elaborative research population was enabled, thanks to structured precoding by students (enlisting respondent answers via the semi-structured interview leads) and extensive classification sheets (categorising respondents based on 17 characteristics). By combining both structuring instruments (precoding and classification sheets), we used coding queries to perform a focused comparison in the elaborative research population (Mortelmans 2017). This comparison enabled the triangulation of the results in the

search for negative examples or more nuance in the analysis. This approach resulted in the full-grown model we present in this article.

In constructing our framework, we followed three steps of grounded theory analysis. First, open coding structures were utilised and relevant research material was selected. Each relevant fragment was assigned a label. Next came axial coding, where the total number of fragments was reduced and combined into concepts employed as building blocks for theoretical construction. The third and final step, selective coding, connected the aforementioned concepts into a theory (Mortelmans 2023).

4. Results

4.1. Perspective on Support for Children and Parents

We started with the three principles of distributive justice theory in our analysis to understand the fairness of equitable support expectations between child and parent. All relevant excerpts were coded according to the equity, equality and need principles. The excerpts that matched multiple principles were included multiple times in the open codes. During coding, it became clear that these principles had different motivations and mechanisms. These were then linked to the relevant principle. First, we will discuss each relevant principle and its mechanisms within the child and parent group. The Results section ends with a dyadic analysis of why dyads agree or disagree. The results mainly discuss the expectations and prospects related to parents getting older rather than actual support behaviour, since most of the parents in the study cohort are not yet in need of support.

Since the support relationship is a complex construct and is difficult to encompass, this figure (Figure 1) helped us understand how principles work. We hope that our results will act as a useful tool for the reader.

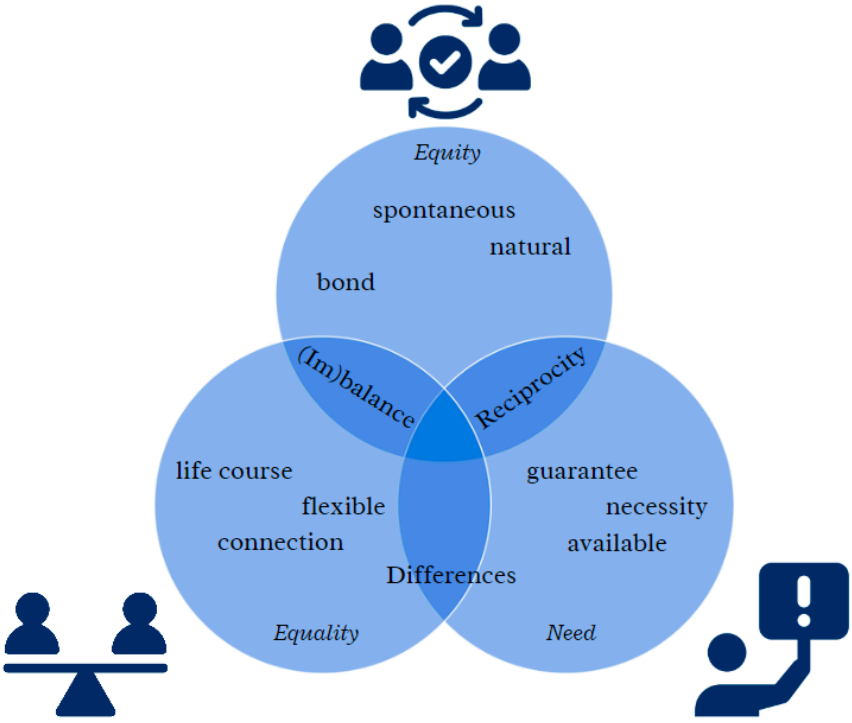

Figure 1. Perspective on support—meaning and mechanisms.

4.2. Equity Principle

The support relationship between a parent and child sometimes changes depending on who gives support and who receives it. We asked respondents how they experienced

this, what and if they want something in return and why they (do not) (want to) give that support.

4.2.1. Child to Parent

From the principle of 'I give back in proportion to what the other has done' (fair), we see four mechanisms related to upward support. Children 'give' to parents when they take such actions for granted, when they want to balance giving and taking more, when it contributes to a good relationship with the parent and when they can do it of their own free will.

Natural

In the first mechanism, we find children who describe supporting their ageing parents as a natural process during the life course. These children find it natural to take care of a parent when the roles reverse or feel it is their duty as children:

> "... reciprocal is not a matter of" yeah, they helped me well, then I should also do it in return". No, it's just a matter of course that you do that. Because, at a particular moment, those roles were reversed. So, they always took good care, but then it turned around. Then you have to take care of [them], I think. That's only logical. They have supported me and done very well, but it's not like I have to do that in return. I don't think that's logical; I guess that's normal." (Sandra, 54)

Giving support to a parent may feel natural, but at the same time, the child could be insufficient to meet their parents' needs (this mismatch of expectations will be described in Section 4.5:

> "... before, yes, she intensely took care of us, and now we're taking care of her more than she still has to take care of us. But I think that this all goes very naturally and normally. I think it is normal for the roles to reverse a bit. It's just sometimes difficult for her to understand that we can't always do everything on top [of our things]. Because she never had a paid job and always cared for her own parents. I have this feeling she expects the same from us, but if you and your partner both have paid jobs, which is the case for me and my brother, you can't take everything on top [of things]." (Sophie, 52)

Imbalance

Children can also talk about matching or repaying parents' efforts during their upbringing. Equating that imbalance feels impossible, but children do this by expressing gratitude and respect:

> "My mum has dedicated her whole life to her children and grandchildren. She sacrificed herself for that. That's how you can call that. (Yes) Yes, then, I now find it no more than normal that I am, yes, one hundred to two hundred per cent committed to my mum. I love her to death. When I see what she has done for us. Yes, I don't know if you can ever match that, if I can ever bring that, so (yes) on par for her. If I have to give back what she has given me, yes, I don't know how to match that. (Yes) I don't even know that, but that's my duty. It's your duty. (yes) Like having children, you also must take care of them. (yes) Likewise, it is your duty that you take care of your parents." (Hilde, 60)

> "That can be realised in many different facets. But yes, you should be grateful and respectful to your parents. That they raised you that you grew up, in our case, in a good situation, we didn't live on the streets or anything like that, so then you should show that in the opposite direction as well." (Thomas, 34)

Bond

In addition, some children see giving support as evident or as a shared value in their family. Support is perceived as building or maintaining the quality of their relationship with their parent. They emphasise feeling good and note that the parent benefits or returns their friendship:

> "Reciprocity, uhm, for me is a, gosh, how should I put that in words, normality. Do we help each other that there is open communication and talk to each other? Yes, that is normal both from my mother to me and me to my mother. All I mean is that I like to give support, and I don't ask anything in return for that, either. I get friendship in return." (Martin, 58)

Spontaneous

For others, another aspect of fairness is not feeling obliged to return effort proportionately. They stress the importance of keeping support spontaneous. If support becomes compulsory, it can change the dynamics of the relationship between child and parent:

> "But without it, it has to become an obligation. As long as it's a feeling of: I want to do this for him without feeling obliged if you have to do this now or you have to come now, then it's already become something different, of course. As long as it remains spontaneous and that question can be asked, there shouldn't be anything in return." (Marjolijn, 37)

4.2.2. Parent to Child

Regarding downward support, we find four mechanisms: parents give support to children support because their unconditional support is natural, if it contributes to a good relationship with the child, because they find the balance of giving and taking an imbalance and because they see giving and taking as a reciprocal process.

Natural

Some parents see downward support as something normal, something unconditional. This means they expect nothing in return from their child. These parents feel that supporting children is never over and is even easier for parents than the other way around:

> "I always say: we choose for children; the children didn't choose us. You always remain a mother, I think. That won't go away. Maybe I'm wrong about that, but as a parent, giving more support to a child than vice versa, I think it is normal." (Joke, 69)

Bond

Another mechanism in the support relationship from parent to child is the experience that giving support strengthens the relationship or offers something meaningful to the other person. We also often see this mechanism reflected by parents when talking about grandchildren and how co-caring for them strengthens(ed) the bond with their children:

> "I was at home. That was my big advantage, and I'm very grateful for that because it enriched my life very much. And I also had much contact with my children." (Adriana, 72)

> "I think if you have grandchildren or children, you shouldn't expect reciprocity from them. That might be neat, that that's coming, and I know that's coming too. But, as a parent, you shouldn't do anything to get something in return. You do get that, but the fact is that they come. That's reciprocal, I think; that comes naturally. You shouldn't expect that." (Rosa, age unknown)

Imbalance

Parents can also motivate their expectations towards support as an imbalance in life. This is not about reciprocation, but they expect respect:

> "I think that's the least you can give because a child can never give back what a parent has done for the child. You can never give that back to that extent, and I don't want anything in return, but I want respect and honour, the honour you deserve." (Geertruida, 78)

Others do not feel the need for children to restore balance. The child's priority lies with their own family:

> "I still try to help them where I can. And they have their jobs and own lives. I should not be their main priority. Their lives, their children, their wives, come first, and their mother gets second or third place, and I think that is normal." (Sonja, 83)

Reciprocity

Other parents see the support relationship as reciprocal. The relationship between parent and child is reciprocal in se and has always been so. They expect support in this reciprocal relationship, just as they did towards their parent(s):

> "You hope, of course, when you give an upbringing to your children that they, that they also, that they will remember you, that they, that they, that they won't forget and should you ever need them that you get that back. But that's not always, and... you can't force that either, so you don't do that for that, but I wouldn't, but as normal as I did it for my (...) father, I hope they will do their father." (James, 71)

Other parents do not want to accept support to keep their autonomy: "I do find it hard to ask [for help] because then I'm forced to give up on something again that I used to be able to do myself." (Rita, 79)

4.3. Equality Principle

The equality principle defines fair support as everyone receiving the same reward. In the child–parent relationship, each party gives or gets an equal share (or sometimes an unequal share) of support.

4.3.1. Child to Parent

We can distinguish several mechanisms under this equality principle when supporting a parent. Children support their parents because the balance of give and take normally reaches an equilibrium throughout their lives. After all, willingness to support goes along with the quality of the relationship, and comparisons are made between siblings to judge what a fair degree of support giving and taking is.

Flexible over the Life Cycle

A frequently recurring theme among the children was the balance of give and take. We saw earlier that for some, it will always remain an imbalance, and this will never be able to be compensated for by the child. Others, however, deal with this differently; they experience that the balance of support rectifies itself over the life course. They talk about achieving a more balanced position in this balance of support as their parent gets older and recognise the normality of this balance turning over at the stage of life when their parents need much support:

> "I think we are now in such a phase of our lives that it is rather much a bit balanced, shall I say. He will wait at my house until the plumber comes, and I will take care of his digital and other paperwork. So now we're in balance, and I think in a few years, I'll mainly be a caregiver, and they'll mainly be a receiver. That's how I see this reciprocity." (Juliette, 46)

Emotional Connection

We asked respondents about support vis à vis the other parent(s) regarding this equality principle. For some, we saw that the intensity of support given or willingness in the future towards the parents differed. This discrepancy often results from the perceived bond between child and parent. We describe this mechanism as an 'emotional connection' because the focus is on the quality of contact and connection rather than the quantity:

> "Because I have no emotional connection with him. . . I've already thought about it, and if that person becomes severely needy now, I will take up my role as a daughter. I won't let that one out to die, but it won't be wholeheartedly like with my mum. . . So yes, more out of necessity then. . . I think it will be more purely on the practical and the minimum (laughs). And yes, my mother, I would try to pamper her." (Elisabet, 42)

Contact and visits are described as important in the support relationship between parent and child, but some children mention how a lack of time constrains the frequency of their visits and that they feel guilty about this:

> "Better? Yeah, sometimes you'd want to visit more often, but that doesn't always work, huh? That doesn't always work because you still have your own home. I have my daughter, who's still studying, and yes, she also needs. . . uhm. So yes, I also have my household, and I also have my paid job, and sometimes you'd want to go more often, but it doesn't work, and then you do feel guilty about that." (Karin, 59)

Balanced Relationships

Regarding siblings, some respondents mentioned feelings of unfairness in terms of the support received from their parents compared to that of their siblings. They feel that they receive more support than the others. To avoid this feeling of unfairness, they turn to non-family members or set clear limits on the level of downward support:

> "What I think is important may have nothing to do with that, but I want to say that anyway. I always want to keep it as honest as possible towards my brothers. I think that's very important. My parents take care of me and go to the shops for me, but I'll always pay, for example. So maybe I take care of my brothers or something. . . subconsciously. I don't know if that's caring, too, but. . . It is always at the back of my mind, however. I don't want to take advantage of it or something like that. That you don't want to have the feeling of being pushed ahead compared to. . ." (Veerle, 39)

Yet some also find it logical that parents cannot support their children equally, as one child has less time, struggles with health problems himself, or because the relationship with the other child is disturbed.

4.3.2. Parent to Child

Regarding downward support, we find one mechanism, especially among parents with more than one child: Parents give support to their children according to the child's needs at the time, temporarily creating an uneven distribution of support between children. Parents indicated that they sometimes have different expectations of support for their

different children based on the connection with the child and the nature of the support needed. This also revealed that specific support needs, such as psycho-emotional support or care tasks, are more likely to be given to daughters than sons.

Differences by Needs

When parents talk about the (equal) distribution of support to children, some find that they give varying degrees of support. They find that each child's needs differ at any given time, and consequently, not every child receives the same support at the same time, but they strive for equality over time:

> "No, no. Not at all. Because I think... Also, the help given to other children differs because our one son has four children, our other two, and our daughter also has two. With this one, I will help pick up the children from school and do homework right now. Our other son in the beginning actually, then they had a shop, a sandwich shop, that I started taking care of those children more then. And our daughter, yes, now asks for help for her daughter; that is a bit more." (Els, 70)

Type of Support

Parents, in line with the child's needs, also look to the child's resources to support them. Thus, this finding is not about the support a parent gives to a child but about the different expectations of receiving support. This variety of expectations is based on the connection between the child and the parent or the nature of support needs set by the parent. They are also more likely to expect the daughter to offer specific activities like personal care, medication administration, or psycho-emotional support. When there are several daughters, and they assign more tasks to one of them, they give it to the one they have the best relationship with:

> "No, but it's automatic with (child 1), well, not now . . . but in the past. But, yes, you know what it is, our (child 1) has always been worried about me and uhm, yes, it has grown that way, but our (child 2) has that just as well, but he didn't show it like that, and now I have found out, for several years, that he is certainly as much worried as our (child 1)." (Martine, 74)

> "Our (child 1), our (child 2), and our (child 3). For me, they are three equals. Probably a difference for my wife, though, since our (child 1) is from two of us, and the other two from my previous marriage. But basically, we expect the same from all three, and they are treated the same way. Yes, at the moment, I don't need much support from our (child 1) myself. Yes, I will say it to my son because he is handy. But from our (child 1) himself, I don't expect support at the moment, but I think if I asked, I would get it." (Ludo, 67)

4.4. Need Principle

If one translates the need principle into a fair measure of support, each gets as much as they need to survive. A support relationship between child and parent means that support is proportional to one's need. We saw with previous mechanisms that reciprocity can be expected when support is needed. The need principle also forms a basis for the unequal downward support towards different children (See Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of principles and mechanisms of (mutual) support exchange between children and parents.

	Child	Parent
Equity *(No)* Quid pro quo	Natural Turning roles Natural process Sense of duty and responsibility	Natural Unconditional Life course Guaranteed support (need)
	Imbalance Match and repay Respect and gratitude	Imbalance Expects respect and honour Guarantee of reciprocal support (need)
	Bond Feeling good about yourself/others Gratitude Shared value Guarantee of reciprocal support (need)	Bond Valuable Enrichment
	By choice No obligation Spontaneity Tension: when out of necessity (need)	Reciprocity Shared value Emotional connection Demonstration effect Availability guaranteed (need)
Equality *equal support*	Flexible in the life course Balance Caregiver	Differences in needs Flexible over the life course Depending on others (need)
	Emotional connection Quality of contact Interconnectedness	Type of support Gender Expertise Interconnectedness
	(Dis)honesty in relationships Setting boundaries Different means	
Need *needs and demands*	Out of necessity First point of contact Role conflict	Not wanting to be a burden Spontaneous support (In)dependence Conflicting expectations
	Guarantee of reciprocal support Availability Looking out for each other	Guarantee of reciprocal support Reassurance Interconnectedness

4.4.1. Child to Parent

Regarding upward support, we have identified three mechanisms: Children support parents because the parents are in need of such support, and they are the first point of contact or feel responsible for the parent in question. A second mechanism is linked to the reciprocal nature of support; children expect to be supported in return when needed. Finally, children describe that they and their parents can always fall back on each other, mainly because the parent is always there for them.

Out of Necessity

Children may act out of necessity because they are the first point of contact or feel responsible. Children may feel burdened if they cannot (entirely) comply with the parent's request because the different roles are challenging to combine:

> "With my father, I took out thematic time credit, part-time, two years, for being able to be at home more and for taking care of him more... People say, 'Why are you doing that?' I say: 'Yes, yes, I think that's my duty anyway'. I would do that for her, too, but now, in that situation, it is unnecessary. But when my father was sick, she was also there, and she was still able to care for my father, but if something happened to her, she had nobody but us. So then that situation changes." (Karin, 58)

> "The visit to the retirement home, for example. That was agreed upon then, as well as who did what and when. That is not the case with us; we cannot agree with anyone. After all, we are alone as children. In that respect, that does worry us. We go all out and want to do all we can to manage that. That, combined with our work, does worry us, but we are willing to make sacrifices. We are. It's not that we're not going to care. But because we do care, we are also worried about this." (Marc, 55)

And some children hope it never gets to the point that the parent becomes entirely dependent:

> "I give support to my mother because I love her very much. That's my duty, but you do this without thinking about someone you love. It's just that I'm sometimes frustrated because I'm the only one encouraging mom to do things herself. She knows I'll do anything for her, but she also knows I'm the one who wants her to keep her independence, and because of that, there are some things that I won't do because our mom goes fast in a victim role since our dad died two years ago. We're not at the point where I need to do everything for mom. I just hope that she can age gracefully and that she'll remain capable of doing things herself. My biggest fear now is that she'll get dementia and that she'll be dependent on everything and won't realise anything anymore. That's really my biggest fear." (Annemie, 40)

Guarantee of Reciprocal Support

During the interviews, children indicated that they do not immediately expect anything in return from their parents but do have an implicit expectation that the parents will be there for them in times of need:

> "No, I don't find that more than normal, support between parents I don't find more than normal, that you don't always have to get something in return. Except if you need support, they must give it back." (Tanya, 29)

Availability

Many children find it essential to know they can count on their parents when needed. They describe their parent as someone they can turn to or who stands behind them or is concerned about their well-being. This is not about reciprocity but a state of presence:

> "Yes, but just that someone is thinking of you; they are concerned when things don't go well. That's weird, huh, but I think that's so important. If I were sick now, our dad would call and email: 'Is it going better already?'" (Marie, 59)

4.4.2. Parent to Child

Parents often express expectations regarding the future support they hope to receive from their child, which is in line with the need principle. The first point is that parents hope never to receive support from their children because they do not want to be a burden and do not want to put their child in that role. However, the opposite is true for some

parents, who express reciprocity as a desire to receive support in need. In between these two viewpoints, we find parents who do not necessarily expect support in return but find it reassuring to know their child will be there when needed and spend time with them.

I Do Not Want to Be a Burden

Regarding receiving support from children, some parents stress that the support given should be spontaneous and that the child should not feel obliged to provide it. This argument is closely linked to the concept of intergenerational ambivalence. Parents are aware of their (future) support needs but do not want to bother their children or lose their independence. Some, from their frame of reference, do not understand why their child does not have time for them:

> "I don't expect much of that because they don't have time. I think there is no time. I do think that's weird, but that's reality, I guess. That's how I hear that, anyway. That people who often have to visit their parents find it a burden. I find that strange, but I think, yes, I don't want to be a burden for the children either because I hear that if you have to come often, you'd rather be dead if you're going to be a burden." (Christiane, 72)

Guarantee of Reciprocal Support

Some believe that the child should not have to return support immediately but that it should be returned in moments of need. One speaks of a desire to receive support in times of need, and thus reciprocity:

> "But it's not because someone does something for another that the other has to do something in return. Well, I don't think that, at least. Let me say it this way: You have to be there when needed, but it is unnecessary when the other doesn't need anything." (Jan, 66)

Availability

Another aspect of the need principle is not about support but about reassurance that the other person is there for them, and that spending time together is important to the relationship between child and parent:

> "No, they should remain happy to see me. Maybe also because I know a bit that I can count on them. I don't have to worry about it; maybe that's also why it's easier that I don't expect anything either. Because I think if you expect a lot, you don't get a lot. But I expect, well, expect, actually nothing, but I think it will be there if it is needed. I'm sure of that." (Els, 70)

> "Gosh yes, that you do get a present unexpectedly or that there is a dinner party unexpectedly, well, those things, unexpected cosy things, going out for dinner or a present or, uhm, the grandchildren who draw pictures for you, such things so, uhm, unannounced or that they insist on it anyway if we would like to go away together for a weekend and so on and yes, that's enough for me." (Brigit, 70)

To summarise the perspectives on support for children and parents, Table 2 lists an overview of the mechanisms for each principle.

4.5. Perspective on Support Between Child and Parent Dyads

In the final phase of our analysis, we constructed a table outside of NVivo to determine whether each dyad agreed or disagreed on a principle. This process is detailed in the online appendix (supporting information, Table S1: Insight in analysis of dyads–agreement or disagreement on principles). Next, a new variable was added to our classification sheet,

alongside the 17 background characteristics, to categorise each respondent within their dyad into seven groups.

The groups were categorised as follows: (a) both disagree on the equity principle (the "no quid pro quo" group); (b) both agree on the equity principle (the "quid pro quo" group); (c) the child disagrees on the equity principle, while the parent agrees; (d) the child agrees on the equity principle, while the parent disagrees; (e) there are no matching principles; (f) both agree on the need principle and other coexisting principles; (g) both agree on the equality principle and other coexisting principles. To simplify and better understand the data, we consolidated these seven groups into two broader categories: one representing similarities (A, B, F, G) and the other representing differences (C, D, E).

First, looking into the dyads that differ in their perceptions of fair support, we can distinguish three concepts based on contrasting principles and mechanisms: a mismatch of expectations, non- (or partial) acceptance of reciprocity and a rejection of the demonstration effect. The first one is the result of a mismatch in expectations of giving and receiving support. In these dyads, children may be reluctant to ask for parental support for various reasons, such as because they do not want to burden their parents with their worries or because their parents are in bad health. Conversely, parents could feel helpless or angry because they want to help more. Second, it can be that the parent expresses the wish to spend more time with the child. In turn, the child is not able to visit more frequently because they do not have the time to help (more), which often goes along with feelings of guilt because the child wishes to assist more or to help with smaller tasks but struggles to combine different roles (work, family life), or prioritises spending time with their own household.

The second one is the parent not accepting the reciprocity of the child. Children express that supporting their parents is something natural that occurs over the life course. They want to reciprocate out of gratitude, duty, or just because it is expected. The parent, in return, does not accept this, because they do not want to lose their self-dependency; secondly, some do not want to be a burden for their children or only want to receive social support from their offspring, while they feel that intensive care tasks should be performed by professionals. It is important to mention that some parents express that they do not want to expect anything out of self-protection for fear of rejection from their child.

The final concept is the rejection of the demonstration effect. Parents anticipate that their offspring will provide the same level of support they once offered to their parents. However, this expectation goes unmet when children prioritise their offspring over their parents. Additionally, children may lack the time to provide the same support due to their employment in contrast with parents who never have worked and decided to stay home, creating a different frame of reference (for more discussion and research on the demonstration effect, see Cox and Stark (2005)).

Dyads who match in terms of support relationships highlight the importance of shared attitudes or family social norms, respecting each other's privacy and independence and being guaranteed to receive support when needed. They stress the emotional proximity and availability of support when needed, but also place importance on respecting each other's privacy and autonomy in multiple ways.

Table 3 presents a summary of the dyadic analysis. Besides general contrasts and similarities between dyads, we looked into other differences, such as gender and legal relationships. We found no contrasting principles directly related to these characteristics, except that the type of support is often divided into traditional gender roles (e.g., personal care is more often expected to be provided by daughters than by sons). These findings are already described in Section 4.3.

Table 3. Summary differences and similarities between dyads.

Dyads Who Differ	Dyads Who Resemble
Mismatch of expectations	Family social norm
Non- (or partial) acceptance of reciprocity	Guarantee of support
Rejection of demonstration effect	Respect autonomy
No contrasting principles in those who are biologically versus socially related.	
Connectedness and previous shared experiences matter.	
Resources (e.g., time, distance) affect support behaviour.	
Types of support activity are often gendered.	

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper used three principles of fair support to study support expectations and motivations among eighty adult children and their older-aged parents: equity, equality, and need principles. The study contributes by analysing multi-actor support perspectives and studying changing family dynamics. Examining support from these two perspectives allowed us to identify different interpretations behind the fair support distribution and its complex nature. Regarding fair support and the equity and equality principles, we found that both children and parents perceive family solidarity as natural over the life course. Children describe reciprocity when they are caring for their ageing parent. However, some parents decline this support to maintain a sense of autonomy or because they do not wish to be a burden. Many parents mention they would prefer to stay at home and have a combination of filial care and professional care services. This finding accords with previous research showing the ambivalent attitude of parents towards filial care (Bai et al. 2020). When we look into child–parent support relationships, some do not match their expectations towards each other. A parent is dissatisfied with the frequency of contact, and the child cannot fulfil this need because they have other time-consuming roles to fulfil (such as working or supporting their own family). Another study aligns with this ambivalent view of mismatched expectations (Peters et al. 2006), and our multi-actor approach further contributes to this perception of children. They often feel guilty because they wish to spend more time supporting their parent. Other children do not feel guilty and choose to prioritise time with their close family, such as their partners and children.

Our results demonstrate that a child–parent support relationship can have ambivalent motivations and expectations. The multi-actor analysis pointed again to children perceiving filial support as restoring the balance of support. Their parents, in return, do not accept this reciprocity because the child should prioritise their own family. Other parents acknowledge this imbalance and ask for respect and gratitude in return. Other child–parent dyads give us a good view of how generation and norms can differ; this is called the demonstration effect in the literature (e.g., Cox and Stark 2005). This occurs when a child rejects the expectations of the parent, who anticipates that their offspring will provide the same level of support they once offered to their own parents. However, this expectation goes unmet when children prioritise their offspring over their parents. Additionally, children may lack the time to provide the same support due to their employment, which differs from the experiences of parents who have never worked and decided to stay home, creating a different frame of reference.

Some respondents described their support relationship as maintaining or strengthening the bond, where support is a family value. We saw that more similar dyads often share this view on family solidarity. Another mechanism in dyads with similar perceptions is spontaneity, which is support that is provided only when needed. These dyads identify

their support relationship as only being active when the other party requests support, and they feel that this is an essential mechanism for respecting privacy or safeguarding autonomy. Their faith that the other party will be available to assist them when necessary is often enough to maintain their support relationship.

Besides general contrasts and similarities between child–parent support perspectives, the analysis looked into differences regarding gender and legal relationships. Our findings did not show big differences between legally or socially related child–parent dyads. Both parents and children stress the relevance of emotional connection and quality of time spent together as parameters for balanced solidarity. Previous studies emphasise feelings of closeness and frequent contact, making children prone to becoming their parents' expected caregivers (Boerner et al. 2013; Pillemer and Suitor 2014). Due to the limitations of our sampling method, we did not have a view of a wide range of different family forms. However, 4 of the 40 dyads were stepfamilies, foster families and other family structures. Also, the sampling occurred such that a child referred to a parent or vice versa, making it almost exceptional to observe a fractured relationship between the two. Nevertheless, we see in the results here that there are struggles between parent and child, showing that solidarity between child and parent is not always evident or apparent. Future research should include a broader range of family structures and families with fractured relationships to give us a broader perspective on how solidarity works in the current family dynamics.

Furthermore, in this study, the gender of the child–parent dyads does not show differences regarding motivations but hints at gendered care attitudes. This means that daughters are more expected to provide personal care and socio-emotional help, while sons preferred role is practical support (Haberkern et al. 2015). However, recent research has drawn attention to the family context and the dynamic distribution of care between siblings in studying filial care (Vergauwen and Mortelmans 2021). Since most respondents did not need long-term care, these gendered support perspectives may change and influence parents' care expectations. These results show us how other factors, such as a close geographic child–parent distance and fewer work responsibilities, facilitate children to maintain or even start the care of the parent (Vergauwen 2024). An important limitation of our study is the overrepresentation of women in our data. Also, in previous quantitative research on informal support in the same context as this study, women's participation was relatively higher than men's. There are clear (and stable) gendered differences both in response rates and in giving and receiving informal support (Bracke et al. 2022; Willems et al. 2022). To counter this overrepresentation of women, future research could actively recruit more male participants to test if this mechanism of solidarity stands from a male perspective.

To conclude, the results of this study illustrate the power of an approach that accounts for the complexity and multi-actor perspective of support patterns and support behaviour. This analysis is an abstraction of reality and reflects the possible motivations or expectations of the child and parent. Support's ambivalent and complex nature is not (or hardly) reflected here. After all, a person may have multiple expectations or motivations, which sometimes contradict each other. Often, support behaviour is modelled through questions about opportunities (e.g., 'Do you know someone with a long-term illness, health problem or disability?'), costs, frequency, care tasks, etc., from one perspective—often that of the caregiver. Further research is needed to study whether expectations and motivations differ according to the type of activities or support between parent and child. In this study, we chose to look at support in its broad context so that we could include all forms in the analysis. We should also reflect on the context of this study. Previous studies have revealed how the care provision for older adults and cultural contexts influence care responsibilities within families. Northern and central Europe, including Belgium, is known for its division of care responsibilities between family and professional providers, where the care-intensive

tasks are mainly distributed to professional services. The World Health Organisation addresses the concept of ageing in place within the broader context of active and healthy ageing (WHO 2002, 2007). The current policy framework of this study depicts ageing well in the right place, where family solidarity plays a prominent part in the care network of older adults, which ensures this multi-actor research on motivations and expectations between children and parents is still relevant.

Finally, we briefly reflect on the strengths and limitations of this study. By adopting a multi-actor approach, we have uncovered different dimensions of the support principles used by adult children and their parents. In doing so, the text excerpts illustrate the ambivalence and complexity of those support principles. This may inspire follow-up research on support behaviour to establish more complex concepts in the questionnaire. The diversity in child–parent relationships, including gender, is also a strength of this study. Since this scope of the research was a broad view on (future) support willingness and expectations, data on the following background characteristics were not collected. Still, such data could be interesting for subsequent research, as we know the following factors affect caregiving behaviour together with gender and would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the diversity in perceptions of fairness: health status of the child and health and dependency status of the parent; geographic proximity between parent and child, and socioeconomic factors (van Groenou and De Boer 2016; Verbakel et al. 2017). To conclude, this study contributes to family support relationships and behaviour by adopting a multi-actor approach and detecting mechanisms beyond the individual perspective. One of the main findings is that contrasting dyads who reject the reciprocal act of support experience feelings of guilt or misunderstanding, resulting in stress and worry. A child may not follow the expected support pattern from the parent due to competing demands such as work or the prioritisation of young children, which can reduce the support given to the older parent. Besides general contrasts and similarities between child–parent support perspectives, the analysis looked into differences regarding gender and legal relationships. Our findings only found gendered care expectations. Future research should entangle this by looking into feelings of closeness, emotional connection and considering the dynamic character of filial support over time, especially between siblings.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci14010044/s1, Table S1: Insight in analysis of dyads–agreement or disagreement on principles.

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Notes

[1] This characteristic indicates whether the respondent identifies himself as belonging to a minority group. The respondent answered with yes or no; the interviewee gave no further elaboration about what it means to belong to a minority group.

[2] Highest educational level indicates the highest degree of the respondent. Primary education achievement includes less than or equal to lower secondary education; secondary education covers upper secondary education, including postsecondary non-tertiary education; and tertiary education indicates bachelor's-, master's-, and doctoral-level education.

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