

When She Worries I Worry too: COVID-19 Worries in the Context of Daughters' and Mothers' Relations

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Liat Ayalon¹ and Dikla Segel-Karpas²

Abstract

We examined the extent to which a daughter's worries are related to her mother's perceived worries about COVID-19 (i.e., the daughter's perception of her mother's worries). Regard, defined as reciprocity, closeness or compatibility, and responsibility, defined as guilt, burden and protectiveness, were measured as potential moderators of the relationship between the daughter's worries and her mother's perceived worries. A convenience sample of 438 women between the ages of 30 and 60 completed an online survey. We found a significant correlation between daughters' and mothers' perceived COVID-19 worries. This association was moderated by the daughters' regard. For those daughters that characterized their relations as high on regard, higher levels of COVID-19 worries were associated with higher levels of perceived worries among mothers. The importance of considering the relationships between daughters and mothers, during the pandemic is discussed.

Keywords

transmission, psychopathology, older mothers, adult daughters, relationships, worries, pandemic, Corona

As the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the lives of people all over the world and has resulted in high levels of worry, stress and anxiety among people of all ages (Barber & Kim, 2020; Rosen et al., 2020), it is particularly important to develop a better understanding of some of the factors potentially responsible for high levels of worries. The present study relies on the Intergenerational Systems in Context Model (Fingerman et al., 2020a), which proposes that societal changes co-occur with changes in intergenerational relations, to examine the role of intergenerational relations between daughters and their mothers with regard to the daughters' COVID-19 worries during the pandemic. As the current pandemic is particularly risky for older people (Jordan et al., 2020), and in the light of the strong ties between daughters and mothers throughout the life course (Suitor & Pillemer, 2006), older mothers might be a particular subject of concern for adult daughters. Thus, the present study aimed to examine COVID-19 worries among daughters. The study adds to the current literature on COVID-19 by taking into consideration the nature of their prior relations with their mothers. A second mechanism tested is daughter's COVID-19 perceived worries of their mothers. As such, the present study highlights the potentially important role played by daughters'-mothers' relations during the pandemic and may point to particular aspects of the relationship which make daughters more vulnerable to experience high levels of worries related to the pandemic.

The focus on daughters'-mothers' relationships was selected in the light of the characteristics of the pandemic during lockdown in Israel. As older adults were identified as an at-risk

population, they were specifically instructed to refrain from intergenerational contact during the early stages of the pandemic (Ayalon, 2020). As such, those daughters that were used to intimacy and closeness with their mothers likely were most affected by these instructions, thus reporting higher levels of worry. Similarly, this message of high susceptibility in old age and the need to refrain from intergenerational contact to protect older adults (Ayalon, 2020) could have resonated very strongly with daughters that were already in the caring/parenting position with regard to their mothers, and thus, add to their worries (e.g., high on responsibility).

COVID-19 Worries During the Pandemic

The pandemic, which had stormed into our lives in late 2019 and early 2020, has brought with it many worries, on multiple grounds (Maaravi & Heller, 2020). Obviously, health worries capture a major place, as the pandemic represents a new phenomenon, largely unexperienced before. Constant threats of death and long-term impairment have swamped our lives,

¹ Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

² Department of Gerontology, University of Haifa, Israel

Corresponding Author:

Liat Ayalon, Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan 52900, Israel.

Email: liat.ayalon@biu.ac.il

enhancing imminent fears of the unknown. This, coupled by unprecedented measures taken by most governments to protect their healthcare systems from collapsing, have resulted in substantial life-altering changes, forcing people all over the world to adjust to a new reality through the introduction of major behavioral, and often financial, changes.

Indeed, past research has found high levels of COVID-19 related worries among people of all age groups. In general, older people report more worries than younger adults (Bruine de Bruin, 2020). However, older men report lower levels of worry (Barber & Kim, 2020). In addition, individuals with chronic diseases, defined as a high-risk group, also report higher levels of worry (Joensen et al., 2020). When considering the concept of COVID-19 worries, it is important to note that worries are not always pathological and can be adaptive at times. For instance, moderate levels of worry are correlated with engaging in preventive health behaviors, such as maintaining hygiene, physical distancing and wearing face masks. In contrast, extremely high levels of worry might be pathological, exposing the individual to intense emotional distress, anxiety and even loneliness (Bergman et al., 2020; Grossman et al., 2020).

To date, COVID-19 worries have been examined mainly at the individual level, with little attention to the co-dependence between individuals. This neglects the fact that shared emotional experiences between children and their parents is well documented (Leis & Mendelson, 2010) as the influence can go both ways from older parents to their children and/or vice versa (Bijl et al., 2002; Byers et al., 2008). Hence, the present study was set to examine the role of intergenerational ties in the context of the pandemic.

The concept of linked-lives (Carr, 2018; Hagestad, 1984) suggests that the experiences of people who belong to different generations are interconnected. For instance, if one member of the family is highly worried about COVID-19, we would expect other family members to report similar levels of worry. This concept is augmented by the Intergenerational Systems in Context Model (Fingerman et al., 2020a), which views intergenerational ties within the larger societal context. Specifically, the theory stresses the role of macro-level factors (e.g., the current pandemic) in parent-child relationships.

This study has examined the relationships between adult daughters and their mothers and their potential associations with daughters' COVID-19 worries. Daughters' and mothers' relations are known for their strong emotional bond throughout the lifespan (Fischer, 1986; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). In today's world, when the lifespan is extended substantially, daughters and mothers may spend even 6 or 7 decades together. Although, in most Western societies, adult children move away from their parents to establish and raise a family of their own (Schwartz & Ayalon, 2015), the relationships between daughters and mothers continue to be strong and important throughout their lives (Baruch & Barnett, 1983; Fingerman, 1996). Moreover, research has shown that daughters often are the primary caregivers, providing both emotional and personal support to their aging parents (Steiner & Fletcher, 2017).

Mothers, in particular, tend to favor their adult daughters due to perceived similarities in values and perspectives (Suitor & Pillemer, 2006). Despite changing gender roles and patterns, mothers remain the most central figures responsible for maintaining intergenerational relations between family members. These more intense interactions between daughters and their mothers are characterized by both negative and positive emotions (Fingerman et al., 2020b).

Based on the existing body of knowledge, we expected higher levels of COVID-19 worries among adult daughters to be associated with perceived worries among mothers. The association between daughters' worries and mothers' perceived worries (i.e., the daughters' perceptions/assessment of their mothers' worries) could be explained by the high similarity in experiences and feelings between daughters and mothers. However, this may also be due to a sense of fear for the mother's safety being projected on the mother's perceived worries. Alternatively, this may reflect the daughter's concerns regarding the COVID-19 effects on her mother.

To better contextualize mother-daughter relationships, we examined two conceptual constructs as they potentially interact with mothers' perceived worries. Regard represents filial gratitude or reciprocity, perceived closeness, and compatibility. This construct emphasizes closeness and intimacy between adult children and their parents. Responsibility, on the other hand, carries somewhat negative or ambivalent connotations and emotions, such as guilt, burden and protectiveness, when the child sees herself responsible for her parents' mental status and wellbeing (Peisah et al., 1999). The inclusion of both regard and responsibility stems from past research which has stressed the importance of examining ambivalence in intergenerational relations to better understand family lives, suggesting that in addition to positive emotions of care, such as love and compassion, family members may experience more complex emotional responses (Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998). It has been shown that adult children are more likely to report intergenerational ambivalence than their parents, but ambivalence reported by either member of the family (adult children or parents) has a reciprocal effect on members of both generations (London, 2017). We expected both regard and responsibility to interact with the mothers' perceived worries, so that those daughters who feel a strong sense of regard and/or responsibility are particularly tuned to their mothers' perceived worries and therefore, their worries are highly correlated with those perceived to be held by their mothers. Specifically, we expected higher levels of mothers' perceived worries to be associated with daughters' worries especially when the daughters experienced high levels of regard and/or responsibility toward their mothers.

This study is important as it provides a better understanding into daughters-mothers emotional responses at times of extreme uncertainty and turmoil. Much has been written about adult children-parents' relationships within the caregiving context. However, there has been limited attention to everyday lives of the two generations, as they are linked to one another in a completely altered social context. Theoretically, this study

aims to provide further affirmation of the Intergenerational Systems in Context Model and the linked-lives theories. Thus, pointing to the possible role of family relations within a changing societal structure and more specifically to the possible effects of the relationships with one's mother on COVID-19 related worries among adult daughters. Moreover, the reliance on regard and responsibility as two constructs that potentially characterize daughters'-mothers' relations provides a means to identify at-risk populations for whom the COVID-19 pandemic stressors might be particularly influential.

Methods

Participants

Data were collected from 456 daughters to older mothers, via an online survey distributed by a recruitment company. Participants were financially compensated for their participation. We included daughters who were 30 years of age and older, and whose mother was over the age of 60 and still alive. We excluded participants who did not speak Hebrew or had no access to the online platform.

The recruitment process took place at the peak of the first COVID-19 outbreak in Israel when a strict lockdown was enforced on the entire population. At the time of data collection, all non-essential gatherings were banned, people were instructed to work from home, schools were closed and people who did not live in the same unit were instructed to stay apart and refrain from meeting. Citizens were instructed to stay within a 100-meter radius away from their homes and large police forces were scattered throughout the country to monitor citizens' compliance. During that period, there was a strong emphasis on limited intergenerational contact, with politicians repeatedly arguing that contact between older adults and their grandchildren is particularly detrimental to the health of older people (Ayalon, 2020).

Participants' age ranged from 30 to 60 ($M = 40.82$), with Mothers' ages ranging between 60 and 95 ($M = 69.27$). Nearly 68% of the daughters and 64% of the mothers were married. A little more than half of the daughters were employed but only 16% of the mothers were fully employed. Only 3% of the mothers lived in a residential setting, thus posed an at-risk group for COVID-19 mortality (Ayalon et al., 2020). Eighteen participants failed to correctly answer an attention task and were omitted from analysis. Thus, our analytical sample included 438 women.

Measurements

Dependent variable

COVID-19 worries among daughters. Respondents were asked to: "Please respond to the following questions in relation to the COVID-19 outbreak and its potential impact on your lives: a. How much do you feel worried about the current situation? b. How worried are you about getting sick with COVID-19? c. How worried are you that you or your family members might get sick with COVID-19?" The three items were selected based

on a rapid review of the literature concerning COVID-19 worries. Each statement was rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Exploratory factor analysis suggested a one-factor structure, and reliability was good ($\alpha = .84$).

Predictors. COVID-19 worries among mothers were assessed using the same questions used to assess worries among daughters. Respondents were asked to respond to the three questions described above, this time, in relation to the COVID-19 outbreak's potential impact on their mothers' lives" (e.g., "how worried is your mother about getting sick with COVID-19?"). Exploratory factor analysis suggested a one-factor structure, and reliability was good ($\alpha = .91$).

Moderators. Regard and responsibility were measured using the Parent Adult-Child Relationship Questionnaire (PACQ) (Peisah et al., 1999). Regard represents compatibility, compassion, and care, whereas responsibility represents more negative emotions, such as burden, guilt or protectiveness. The PACQ consists of 13 items, divided into regard toward the mother (five items, i.e.: "I respect my mother's opinion" $\alpha = .921$), and sense of responsibility for her well-being (eight items, i.e.: "I feel like I parent my mother," $\alpha = .850$). Each item was rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

Controls. Demographic and background variables were gathered, including daughters' and mothers' age, marital status (1 = *married*, 0 = *not married*), and education. Respondents were asked whether they or their mothers were diagnosed with a list of chronic conditions, and a score was created by summing the number of conditions. Whether or not the mother lived in a residential setting also was assessed. These variables were incorporated in the analysis as they potential represent risk factors for COVID-19 mortality and severe illness (Jordan et al., 2020) and therefore, could potentially be related with COVID-19 worries.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using hierarchical regression in steps. Our outcome variable was daughters' COVID-19 worries. In the first step, we included the daughter's and mother's background information (e.g., age, marital status, education, residential setting, and number of chronic illnesses). In the second step, we added the mother's perceived worry. In the third, we included regard and responsibility, and in the fourth step, we added the interaction terms between the mother's worry regard and responsibility.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables are presented in Table 1. Daughters' and mothers' worries were highly correlated ($r = .56$, $p < .001$), and so were daughters' worries with regard ($r = .23$, $p < .001$) and responsibility ($r = .20$, $p < .001$). Mothers' perceived worries were also

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between Study Variables (n = 438).

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Daughter's age	40.82	8.01											
2. Daughter's marital status	0.68	0.47	-.10*										
3. Daughter's education	3.56	1.16	-.17**	.02									
4. Daughter's chronic cognitions	0.30	0.66	.18**	-.08	-.11*								
5. Mother's age	69.27	7.20	.78**	-.09	-.06	.18**							
6. Mother's marital status	0.64	0.48	-.28**	.09	.15**	-.11*	-.31**						
7. mother's chronic conditions	1.37	1.40	.22**	-.06	-.11*	.24**	.31**	-.14**					
8. Residential setting	0.97	0.18	-.18**	.06	-.09	-.01	-.27**	.10*	-.17**				
9. Daughter's worries	4.46	1.45	.00	.13**	-.21**	.15**	-.02	.06	.07	.00			
10. Regard	5.27	1.43	-.08	.10*	-.06	-.02	-.07	.14**	-.11*	.05	.23**		
11. Responsibility	3.22	1.33	.09	-.04	-.08	.11*	.18**	-.17**	.27**	-.13**	.20**	.23**	
12. Mother's worries	4.86	1.52	-.02	.06	-.05	.14**	-.01	.11*	.11*	.08	.56**	.25**	.21**

Note. M and SD are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively.

* indicates $p < .05$. ** indicates $p < .01$.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analysis Examining Demographic Characteristics (Step-1) and Mother's Worries (Step-2) Regard and Responsibility (Step-3) and Their Interaction With Mother's Worries (Step-4) as Potential Predictors of COVID-19 Worries Among Daughters (n = 438).

Predictor	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	
(Intercept)	5.60**	.97	3.77**	.81	3.42**	.83	5.65**	.98	
Age	0.00	.01	0.01	.01	0.01	.01	0.01	.01	
Daughter's marital status-Not marrier-ref	0.42**	.15	0.30*	.12	0.30*	.12	0.30*	.12	
Education	-.26**	.06	-.23**	.05	-.22**	.05	-.21**	.05	
Daughter's chronic conditions	0.33**	.11	0.17	.09	0.17	.09	0.17	.07	
Mother's age	-.01	.02	-.01	.01	-.02	.01	-.02	.01	
Mother's marital status-Not married-ref	0.28	.15	0.06	.13	0.08	.13	0.02	.13	
Mother's chronic conditions	0.04	.05	-.02	.04	-.03	.04	-.03	.04	
Residential living-ref	-.28	.39	-.64*	.32	-.60	.32	-.49	.32	
Mother's worries			0.52**	.04	0.50**	.04	0.00	.13	
Regard					0.05	.05	-.37**	.11	
Responsibility					0.07	.04	0.06	.04	
Mother's worries*Regard							0.10**	.05	
R2			10**%		38**%		.38**%		.41**%

Note. A significant b-weight indicates the beta-weight and semi-partial correlation are also significant. b represents unstandardized regression weights. SD represents the standard deviation of the b-weight. * indicates $p < .05$. ** indicates $p < .01$.

correlated with regard ($r = .25$, $p < .001$) and responsibility ($r = .21$, $p < .001$).

In the first step of the analysis, less educated daughters, daughters with more chronic illnesses and those married were significantly more likely to report higher levels of COVID-19 worries. In the second step, mothers' perceived worries explained almost 24% of the variability in daughters' worries. In the third step, when regard and responsibility were entered into the model, they were non-significant predictors. In the final model, we found a significant interaction between mothers' perceived worries and regard ($b = .10$, $p < .001$), but not with responsibility. For this reason, the interaction with responsibility was omitted from the final reported results (see Table 2). Simple slopes analysis suggested that the relationship between mothers' perceived worries and daughters' worries is stronger when regard is higher ($b = .36$, $p < .001$ when regard

is 1 SD below the mean; $b = .54$ when regard is at the mean; $b = .64$, $p < .001$ when regard is 1 SD above the mean) (Figure 1). The interaction effect explained 3% of the variance.

Discussion

Much has been written about COVID-19 worries (Barber & Kim, 2020; Lin, 2020). However, to date, the potential role of daughters'-mothers' relations has been a blind sight. This neglects the important role that daughters'-mothers' relationships play throughout their entire life course (Fingerman et al., 2020b). As expected, the present study has found that higher worries among adult daughters are correlated with higher perceived worries by their older mothers. This is not surprising as past research has shown that daughters and mothers tend to share similar values and perspectives on life (Suitor & Pillemer,

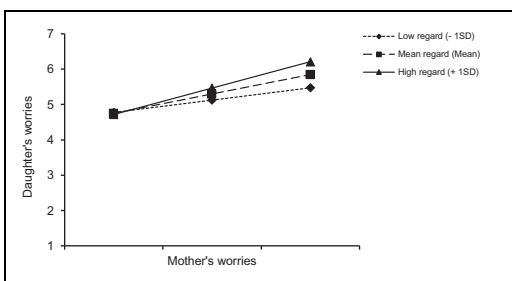


Figure 1. The moderating role of sense of regard in the relationship between daughters' and mothers' worries.

2006). However, the present study adds by showing that this relationship is moderated by daughters' regard toward their mothers. Specifically, those daughters who hold more positive attitudes of love and compassion toward their mothers also report higher levels of worries when they perceive their mothers to worry substantially about the COVID-19 pandemic. This points to one potential path for the transmission of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic between mothers and daughters.

In contrast to past research (Rozworska, 2018), we argue that these positive relations toward one's mother might amplify worries, rather than abate them at times of mutual threat and concern for daughters and mothers, alike. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is particularly dangerous to older adults, love and compassion, as assessed through the construct of regard, result in greater attenuation to the mother's perceived response to the situation. As we relied on the perception of the daughter of her mother's worries, it is possible that when the daughter feels closer to her mother, she perceives her to be more similar to her than she actually is and thus, reports similar levels of perceived worries of the mother. Alternatively, daughters who are high on regard, might be closer to their mothers, speak more often on the phone and discuss their worries. This in return, may result in each party mutually amplifying one's COVID-19 worries.

In contrast to regard, responsibility, characterized by the burden of parenting one's own mother was a non-significant predictor of the daughters' worries, and did not interact with the mothers' perceived worries. Hence, those daughters who felt as if their relationships with their mothers were characterized by a sense of guilt or protectiveness of the mother, were not particularly affected by the way they perceived their mother's emotional reaction to the pandemic. This is somewhat consistent with past research which has found a negative association between ambivalence in intergenerational ties and the perception that mother and adult child share the same value (Pillemer et al., 2007).

The Intergenerational Systems in Context Model represents a framework of the various ways in which macro-level societal processes interact with intergenerational ties (Fingerman et al., 2020a). Our findings clearly demonstrate that daughters' relations with their mothers' play a role in their response to the current pandemic. Intergenerational ties matter in our everyday lives and contribute to our emotional and behavioral responses

to the current pandemic. Consistent with the linked-lives model (Bengtson et al., 2012), the present study stresses the interdependence between mothers and daughters by showing that those daughters who perceived their mothers to worry about the pandemic end up reporting higher levels of worry, when the relationship with the mother is characteristics as high in regard.

Practically, our findings suggest that future interventions should consider, at the minimum, the mutual relations between daughters and mothers. Under relationships that are characterized by love and compassion, simply targeting the daughter's perceptions of her mother's response may result in changes in COVID-19 worries among the daughters. Clinicians can use this information to guide future interventions to better assist daughters to develop an adaptive emotional response to the current pandemic.

Despite its strengths that include a novel approach to COVID-19 worries, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, this is a cross-sectional design that does not allow for assumptions concerning cause and effect. Second, this study was conducted from the point of view of adult daughters. Future research will benefit from incorporating the point of view of the mothers. Finally, other potential predictors, such as attachment, solidary or conflict, not included in this study, may also play a role in daughters' worries. The study also did not look at co-residence or at shared-personality traits, which could potentially explain the findings.

Nevertheless, the study has considerable merits and practical implications. Our findings stress the interdependence between adult daughters and their mothers and suggest that this interdependence is particularly strong under relationships of support and compassion. Having a greater sense of responsibility toward one's mother, on the other hand, had no association with one's sense of worry during the pandemic. The present study is important as it highlights the role of daughters'-mothers' relations during troubling times and points to the nuanced characteristics of these relationships to better understand the daughters' worries.


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ORCID iDs

Liat Ayalon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3339-7879>

Dikla Segel-Karpas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6054-0469>

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Author Biographies

Liat Ayalon, PhD, is a researcher in the School of Social Work, at Bar Ilan University, Israel. She coordinates an international EU funded

PhD program on the topic of ageism (EuroAgeism.eu). She is also the Israeli PI of the EU funded MascAge program to study ageing masculinities in literature and cinema. Between 2014-2018, she has led an international research network on the topic of ageism, funded through COST (Cooperation in Science and Technology; COST IS1402, notoageism.com). She consults both national and international organizations concerning the development and evaluation of programs and services for older adults.

Dikla Segel-Karpas, PhD, is an assistant professor (tenured) with the Department of Gerontology, University of Haifa. Her main research interest concern social relationships in older adulthood, including couple's relations, intergenerational relations, and loneliness.