

**Adult Children as Caregivers to Elderly Parents: A Mennonite Exploration**

by

**Elizabeth Ann Hildebrand**

A thesis  
presented to the University of Manitoba  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science  
in  
Department of Family Studies

Winnipeg, Manitoba  
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ELIZABETH ANN HILDEBRAND

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## ABSTRACT

### ADULT CHILDREN AS CAREGIVERS TO ELDERLY PARENTS: A MENNONITE EXPLORATION

Research shows that the family is the main source of support for the elderly (Cicerelli, 1982). Due to the multi-cultural nature of the Canadian population, the impact of ethnicity on the familial support system has emerged as an area worthy of investigation. This study examines the parental support system of a Mennonite population in a small Southern Manitoba town in terms of the type of support provided to the parent by an adult child, the quantity of services that are provided, the quality of the intergenerational relationship and the strain associated with the caregiver role. A group of 37 respondents, including 15 adult children, 15 parents and 7 children-in-law, were interviewed separately to determine the different perceptions of the caregiving situation. A separate group of 14 members from a more conservative church, including 8 adult children and 6 parents, were interviewed as an adult children panel and a parent panel.

Results indicated that the majority of adult children provided both affective and instrumental support to their parents. Emotional support was viewed by both parents and adult children as valued and vital. The low level of caregiving strain reported by adult children is partially attributed to strong affective ties which were both in evidence and expressed by both generations.

The relative homogeneity of the findings was attributed to both methodological considerations and cultural and religious factors associated with the Mennonite belief system. These factors include the norms of filial responsibility; strong family ties; mutual aid and service for others. Methodological considerations include the limited size and nonrepresentativeness of the sample population.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the elderly have looked to their families for assistance in times of need (Monk, 1983). Although the family continues to be the fundamental source of support for aging members (Adams, 1970; 1971; Brody, 1970; 1978; Moroney, 1983; Rosow, 1967; Shanas, 1973; Silverstone, 1978 Watson & Kivett, 1976), recent demographic changes suggest that a serious problem is developing. This problem involves the growing proportion of elderly in our society.

Life expectancy in Canada has increased from 61 years in 1931 to about 74 today. In 1921, 5% of the Canadian population was over the age of 65 whereas 10% of the population is currently in this age group. Furthermore, from 1976 to 1981 there was a 17.9% increase in the number of elderly over the age of 65 (Statistics Canada, 1982).

The increase in the proportion of the aged in our society has also been due to a decline in natality during the last century. With the exception of an increase during the "baby boom" the birth rate in Canada has dropped from 28.5 per 1000 in 1959 to 15.3 per 1000 in 1980. Canada's fertility rate which now stands at 1.8, is well below the 2.1 needed to maintain the national population (Statistics Canada, 1982). As life expectancies continue to rise and low birthrates decrease the proportion of the young in our society we face a potentially serious population expansion among the aged.

Furthermore, the fastest rate of increase in population is among the elderly over the age of 75 and particularly those over 85 (Brotman, 1980). In 1976, 750,000 Canadians were 75 years of age or older and by the year 2000 this number is expected to double. For those aged 85 and over, the predicted increase is from 142,000 in 1982 to 351,000 in the year 2000 (Cain, 1982). Especially vulnerable to health and dependency

problems, these individuals are the most likely to need supportive services. An unfortunate consequence of the proportional increase among the aged may be a growing population of potentially dependent elderly (Brody, 1981; Brotman, 1980).

Old age retirement programs were created by the government with the best of intentions. Although most individuals now view these programs as a national right they were originally intended as a safety net for those in need (Baumhover, 1982). The attitude that it is the government's responsibility to provide what is needed to care for the aged is becoming more and more prevalent in this society (Harris & Cole, 1980; Treas, 1977).

Changes in the social structure have also contributed to the shift in the role of the family in the support of elderly members. The evolution of the family from a multigenerational unit to a nuclear unit came as a result of the social and geographic mobility which accompanies industrialization. In the traditional extended family, individuals were raised to believe that familism overruled individualism. This ideology instilled a powerful sense of obligation to the family which helped to ensure the care of elderly members (Somerville, 1972). However, a characteristic feature of the past few decades has been the desire to achieve independence and privacy within the nuclear family circle (Worach-Kardas, 1983). Now, married couples obligations are to each other and their children first and then to their kin (Brody, 1978).

Despite these odds there is substantial evidence that the elderly have not been abandoned by their kin (Adams, 1970; 1971; Brody, 1970; 1978; Cantor, 1979a; Kempler, 1976; Rosow, 1967; Shanas, 1979a; 1980; Shanas, Townsend, Wedderburn, Friis, Milhog & Stenhower, 1968; Sussman, 1965; Troll, Miller & Atchley, 1979; Watson & Kivett, 1976). A complex pattern of intergenerational exchange exists among

family members which is characterized by an early flow of services from parents to children. The flow is reversed when the younger generation reaches middle-age and the parents become elderly (Adams, 1970; Shanas et. al., 1968; Watson & Kivett, 1976).

Independence is highly valued by the young and old alike. The majority of elderly would like to remain in close contact with their children but they also want to maintain independent households for as long as possible (Kivett, 1976; Shanas, 1980; Sussman, 1976; Treas, 1977, Troll, 1971). When they are no longer able to remain independent the elderly turn to their families for assistance (Cicirelli, 1981; Robinson & Thurnher, 1979; Shanas, 1980; Weeks & Cueller, 1981). Brody and her associates (1978) proposed the idea of a serial availability of caregivers. In the event that supportive care becomes necessary, the spouse becomes the first assume caregiving responsibilities. Adult children are second in this hierarchy and other relatives third. When the spouse is not available or able to provide care, a middle-aged child generally assumes the role of primary caregiver (Neugarten, 1976; Shanas, 1979b).

Usually occupying the second lineal position in a three or four generation family, parental caregivers often find themselves caught between the competing and often conflicting demands and needs of young and old family members (Brody, 1981; Neugarten, 1979b; Schwartz, 1979; Shanas, 1980). Kirschner (1985) points out that stress is often the result of conflict between family loyalty and individualism. For instance, the family life cycle may not coincide with individual transitions. The emotional energies of adult children may be heavily invested elsewhere at the time when their parents are most in need of support. This demand may come at a time when the caregivers are themselves learning to cope with the potential stresses of their own aging, declining health status, and retirement. At this time they may, therefore, be forced to contend with the potential

demands of a job, spouse, children, grandchildren, elderly parents, and perhaps, parents-in-law (Johnson & Spence, 1982; Ward, 1978).

Research indicates that certain demographic variables influence the type and quantity of support provided by adults to aging parents. These variables, which can apply to both the caregiver and the care recipient, include: age (Bengtson, 1979; Cantor, 1975), gender (Adams, 1970; Horowitz, 1981; Robinson & Thurnher, 1979), marital status (Atchley, Pignatiello, & Shaw, 1975; Shanas et. al., 1968), and employment status (Brody, 1981). Generally, being older, female and unmarried is associated with a greater provision of support, whereas employment status of the female caregivers may not affect the provision of care to a great extent. Other factors known to affect the characteristics of the familial support system include: geographic proximity (Cicirelli, 1981); income level (Archbold, 1981); dependency level of the parent (Cicirelli, 1981); and motivation (Horowitz, 1981). Finally, several studies on parental caregiving have pointed out the importance of assessing the qualitative as well as the quantitative nature of the intergenerational relationship (Conner, Powers, & Bultena, 1979; Liang, Dvorkin, Kahana & Mazian, 1980; Strain & Chappell, 1982; Troll et. al., 1979).

The impact of ethnicity on the family support system has recently emerged as an area of interest in social gerontology (Bengtson, 1979; Cantor, 1979b; Fandetti & Gelfand, 1976; Gelfand & Fandetti, 1980; Holzberg, 1981; Rosenthal, 1982). The most common definition describes an ethnic group as a group of individuals with a shared sense of peoplehood based on race, religion, or national origin (Gordon, 1964). Manual (1982) points out that ethnicity may be imposed upon, or attributed to individuals or groups, in the way they are regarded by others. Ethnicity is generally viewed as an immigrant

culture which has been brought from the country of origin and transplanted into North American life with minimal modifications (Gelfand & Kutzik, 1979). Implicit in the concept of ethnicity is the view that ethnicity becomes less important for successive generations and that components of the cultural heritage such as language, style of dress, food preferences, and other such customs become weakened or lost, being replaced by the counterparts in the dominant culture (Rosenthal, 1982).

However, ethnicity may also persist, at least to some extent, across generations. Kallen (1977) uses the term "ethnoculture" to describe a particular way of viewing and doing things shared by members of an ethnic group and transmitted from one generation to the next through the process of enculturation. Although the ethnic culture may undergo changes as it passes through generations, it remains distinctive (Holtzberg, 1981). The cultural components of the ethnic group may change as a necessary adaptation to the wider environment but a boundary between in-group and outsiders remains.

This study is based upon the premise that adult children are a vital and valued source of supportive care to elderly parents. Although many individuals manage to fulfill this role it often entails some degree of personal or familial sacrifice (Robinson & Thurnher, 1979; Cicirelli, 1981; Horowitz, 1982). The magnitude of the sacrifice is likely influenced by an individual's expectations concerning the role of the family in caring for elderly members. The study concerns the familial support system of a socio-religious or "ethnocultural" group in which the tradition of support based on family ties still exists as a cultural norm. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to examine the parental support system of a rural Mennonite population in terms of the type of support provided to the parent by an adult child, the quantity of services that are provided, the quality of the intergenerational relationship and the strain associated with the caregiver role.

## CHAPTER II

### OVERVIEW OF STEINBACH AND THE MENNONITES

#### Profile of Steinbach

Manitoba is a large province spanning more than 250,000 square miles. According to the 1981 Census, over half of the approximately 1,026,000 Manitobans live in Winnipeg, Manitoba's major city. With the exception of Brandon, which has a population of a little over 40,000, the rest of the province is largely rural. Most Manitobans live in the southern part of the province where, outside the major cities, the primary occupation is farming. In 1981, 11.9% of the population of Manitoba was over the age of 65 (Statistics Canada, 1982).

Located about 38 miles south-east of Winnipeg, Steinbach is a prosperous and growing community. It is known throughout Manitoba as "The Automobile City" because of the large number of cars sold there. With a population now exceeding 7,000 Steinbach serves as a regional trade center for six times that many people in southeastern Manitoba.

Approximately 80% of the population of Steinbach is Mennonite. Nine of 14 churches in the community are Mennonite by affiliation. These nine churches belong to eight separate conferences (General Conference; Evangelical Mennonite Conference; Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference; Mennonite Brethren; Evangelical Mennonite Brethren; Church of God in Christ, Mennonite; Chortitzer and Bergthaler). Even the five non-Mennonite churches include many members of Mennonite background.

From 1874 to 1930, Steinbach was hardly more than a small agricultural community largely isolated from the commercial life of the province. Regional trade centers were usually located along railroad lines and were cosmopolitan in population. Steinbach had neither of these characteristics. Steinbach's commercial development is partially due to



residents' ability to adapt to their political and physical environment and to compensate for restrictions encountered—both imposed upon them and self-imposed. When neighbouring towns with railway connections drew business away from town, Mennonites opened stores in these towns and then moved them to Steinbach once they became established.

Although Mennonite businessmen pioneered the economic development of the town they have not inhibited the participation of non-Mennonites. By 1898 two blocks of land near Steinbach were settled by non-Mennonites, the Clearspring Settlement of Scotch Presbyterians to the north and the Friedensfeld Settlement of German Lutherans to the south. The German Lutherans came from eastern Europe and the Ukraine where they lived as neighbours to the Mennonites and still compose a distinct element in the population of Steinbach.

Although Mennonites are sometimes described as more of an ethnic than a distinctly religious group, their lack of uniform ethnic identity argues against this conclusion. At the time of their origin in the Anabaptist movement they had two predominant ethnic sources: Swiss/South German and Dutch/North German. Migration eastward in Europe to Prussia and Russia gave them a somewhat pluralistic cultural identity although German remained the dominant language. After two world wars during which time prejudice was directed at German-speaking immigrants, Mennonites found it advantageous to emphasize their earlier Dutch origins. During census-taking most Mennonites in Steinbach identify their ethnic group as Dutch although some report it as German and a small minority report it as Russian. Among themselves they are known as Russian Mennonites as opposed to Mennonites who came to North America directly from Europe. Certain cultural patterns adopted in the Russian environment are still evident among these groups (Harder, 1970).

### History of the Mennonites

Mennonites evolved as part of the Anabaptist movement during the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. A small group of believers challenged the reforms of Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli as falling short of biblical ideals for the church. In an attempt to recover New Testament Christianity, Conrad Grebel led this group in baptising one another upon confession of faith in Jesus Christ at Zurich, Switzerland in 1525. Fired by their new faith, the believers began to evangelize. The movement quickly spread down the Rhine to South Germany and the Netherlands. Anabaptism, which means "to baptise again", denied the validity of infant baptism and rebaptised converts. In the view of the church and state, the Anabaptist position amounted to heresy as in essence it defied the government-run church. Many Anabaptist leaders were martyred and over the next 50 years thousands more were tortured and persecuted. The years of persecution finally forced the believers to seek havens where Anabaptist survivors might live their faith according to their consciences (Shenk, 1982).

Mennonites acquired their name from Menno Simons, a Dutch Catholic priest who renounced Catholicism and became a leader in the movement in 1536. Although not the founder of the movement but rather a consolidator and organizer, Menno Simons was one of the movement's most significant spiritual guides. Closely tied to the Anabaptist concept of a voluntary believers' church was an emphasis on separation from the world and the impingements of government. Menno Simons believed that only God or Christ is Lord of the conscience and, therefore, the state had no right to dabble in matters of conscience. The church must be a free church and not controlled by the state. This belief became the basis of the Mennonite doctrine of complete conformity to God's Word and complete nonconformity to the world (Wenger, 1977).

To accurately follow the teachings of the New Testament Mennonites believed that they must withdraw from the law enforcement and war-waging functions of the state. The Mennonite faith involves a life of nonresistance. Warfare and violence in any form is rejected, not because violence is too dangerous but rather because it is too weak, too short-sighted and inevitably self-defeating (Augsburger, 1983).

All members of the Mennonite faith shared in the responsibility of spreading the gospel. They believed that a follower of Christ could expect to suffer for his beliefs. Persecution forced the Mennonites to migrate to northern Germany, particularly to east and west Prussia as well as the southern parts of Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands. Lured by military and taxation exemptions and permission to found their own school and local governments, many Mennonites immigrated to South Russia between 1789 and 1889. But new government laws in the 1870's, including compulsory military training, caused a wave of emigration to the United States and Canada (Levy, 1979).

Canada promised military exemption and the right to educate their children in addition to large tracts of land for free homesteads. In 1874, Mennonite immigrants established the east and west reserves in southern Manitoba. These reserves included eight townships east of the Red River and 17 townships west of the Red River (Ewert, 1932). The East Reserve, now known as the Rural Municipality of Hanover, has its seat in Steinbach.

Within the larger Mennonite order, smaller Mennonite systems developed ranging from the ultra-conservative old orders to progressive larger denominations. Among the more than twenty denominations of Mennonites there exists a wide diversity of tradition and practice. However, despite their differences in culture and background, Mennonites remain united in their fundamental beliefs (Kauffman, 1977).

### The Mennonite Church System

The Mennonite Church system is congregational in which a number of congregations, similar in character and purpose, group themselves into conferences. These conferences often include congregations located in several provinces and states (Epp, 1968). Although there is uniformity of faith among the different conferences, there are considerable differences in attitudes toward affairs of life and interest in the surrounding world. Whereas some conferences continue to emphasize a life of separation from the world, most conferences have moved toward the acceptance of North American culture. There is a growing tendency to believe that the church should strive to be relevant in today's world. Differences among conferences exist in the interpretation of certain passages in the Bible and in applying certain sacraments. For instance, although all conferences believe in voluntary baptism, some practice baptism by affusion (pouring) and some by immersion (Augsburger, 1983).

The largest group of North American Mennonites, known simply as the Mennonite Church, is often referred to as the "Old Mennonites". Largely of Swiss Mennonite origin, the majority of these Mennonites have settled in eastern Pennsylvania and southern Ontario. Membership in Canada numbers approximately 9,000. The General Conference was founded in 1860 by John H. Oberholtzer, a progressive leader in the Mennonite Church in Pennsylvania. This group is largely comprised of Mennonites from Russia who came to North America in the 1870's, 1920's, late 1940's and early 1950's (Wenger, 1977). Currently, there are approximately 25,000 members in Canada.

### History of the Steinbach Churches

Evangelical Mennonite Church. The Evangelical Mennonite Church or EMC, known until 1952 as the Kleine Gemeinde, is the oldest congregation in Steinbach dating back to 1874. The Kleine Gemeinde began in 1812 as a renewal movement in the Molotschna Mennonite settlement in Russia. The entire group, consisting of ninety-six families, emigrated to North America in 1874. Thirty-six families moved to Nebraska and sixty families settled in Manitoba. In 1906 the Nebraska group relocated in Kansas but was largely dissolved by 1947. The Manitoba group dispersed between two villages in the east reserve, one of which was Steinbach, and five villages in the west reserve.

In 1881, approximately one third of the Kleine Gemeinde converted to the American renewal group called Church of God in Christ, Mennonite. For the remaining members, the doctrine and church practices remained essentially unchanged until after World War I when the church experienced a period of renewal with an increase in baptisms resulting in a membership more open to change (Harder, 1970).

The coordination of the work of the church is the responsibility of the Church Council and a Pastoral Committee. The Pastoral Committee consists of the pastor, youth pastor and three elected members from the congregation who determine the needs of the congregation and give spiritual guidance to the total church program. The Church Council consists of the pastor, the youth pastor, chairmen of the Deacon Committee, the Trustee Committee, the Missions Committee, and the Christian Education Committee, as well as three elected members from the congregation. Among other things, the Council prepares the agenda for membership meetings and coordinates the work of the committees. Present membership of the EMC is 580 (Schellenberg, 1985).

Steinbach Mennonite Church. When the second major wave of Russian Mennonites arrived in Canada in 1923, an elder in Manitoba organized a large church consisting of smaller congregations scattered throughout the East and West Reserves. In 1935, eight of these families moved to Steinbach and formed the nucleus of a new congregation. In 1941 the first new church building was erected and a year later the group formally adopted the name Steinbach Mennonite Church and applied for membership in the General Conference.

The third and final wave of Mennonite immigrations from Russia occurred after World War II. Between 1947 and 1950 thirty families settled in Steinbach and joined the Steinbach Mennonite Church. A few years later more immigrants came via Paraguay. Largely due to this rash of immigrations the SMC has shown the fastest growth in Steinbach (Harder, 1970). Present membership of the SMC is 430.

Church of God in Christ, Mennonite. John Holdeman, the founder of the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (CGCM) conference, was raised in the (Old) Mennonite Church in Ohio. This group has settled into a conventional type of ethnic church with little thought of revival and mission work and little motivation for changing the established patterns of worship and church organization. In 1844, at the age of 12, Holdeman experienced a radical spiritual rebirth and at the age of 20, consecrated his life to renewing the church. He firmly believed in the necessity of spiritual rebirth, a nonresistant stance, plain dress, discipline of unfaithful members and condemnation of "worldly churches". He was convinced that he had been called to the ministry directly by God. When Holdeman's attempts to initiate changes in the Mennonite Church proved unsuccessful he separated himself from the church in 1859 and organized a small group of followers into the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (Harder, 1970). Today there are approximately 2,300 members in the Canadian CGCM conference.