

# Relationships more important than genetic ties when deciding who cares for aging family, study finds

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America's elderly population will nearly double by 2050, according to a Pew Research report. As baby boomers enter retirement, concern exists as to who will care for them as they age. Traditionally, children have accepted the caregiving responsibilities, but those caregiving roles are becoming blurred as more families are affected by divorce and remarriage than in previous decades. Now, University of Missouri researchers have found that relationship quality trumps genetic ties when determining caregiving obligations.

Lawrence Ganong, a professor and co-chair in the MU Department of Human Development and Family Studies in the College of Human Environmental Sciences (HES), studied how divorce and remarriage affect beliefs about who should care for aging relatives. He found that [relationship quality](#), a history of mutual help, and resource availability influence decisions about who cares for parents and stepparents.

"The idea that [family obligations](#) are based on genetic ties is not true for most Americans," Ganong said. "How close family members are to each other, how much they have been helped by them in the past, and what hardships caregiving might place on family members are important factors when people consider caring for older kin."

Ganong and Marilyn Coleman, Curators' Professor in HES, presented [study participants](#) with hypothetical caregiving scenarios involving an

aging parent or stepparent and a child or stepchild. Participants then responded to questions about their perceptions of who should provide care. The majority of participants said [biological factors](#) are relevant in caregiving decisions, but they do not automatically require adult children to help older relatives.

"Based on what happens before, during and after marital transitions, family members may change what they think their responsibilities are regarding helping and providing care to kin," Ganong said. "As a society that relies on families to provide much of the care for [older adults](#), we need to better understand the effects of changes in families due to divorce and remarriage."

Ganong recommends that middle-aged adults have honest conversations with parents and stepparents about expectations for caregiving and other types of assistance before needs arise.

Ganong presented the paper, "Who Gets Custody of Grandma After the Divorce? How Marital Transitions Affect Family Caregiving Responsibilities," at the 10th International Family Nursing Conference in Kyoto, Japan, earlier this year. Ganong has a joint appointment as a professor in the MU Sinclair School of Nursing. The research was funded by the National Institute on Aging, part of the U.S. National Institutes of Health.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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