Exposing Differences Between Spouse and Non-spouse Caregivers of Individuals with Dementia among Alzheimer’s Caregivers

Melissa Machac-Burleson, M.A., Daniel W. Durkin, M.S.W., and Louis D. Burgio, Ph.D.

Introduction

It has been demonstrated that caregivers (CG) of persons with Alzheimer’s disease or related disorders often have difficulties associated with the caregiving role, including controlling problematic behavior, feeling burdened, utilizing social support, and employing caregiver skills. Many non-spouse caregivers experience additional challenges because they also have caregiving responsibilities for their own children and are employed. Previous literature has suggested that the caregiving experience is qualitatively and quantitatively different depending on the relationship of the CG to the care recipient (CR).

The current study examines the association between caregiver relationship (spouse vs. non-spouse) and the functioning of the CR and CG. Secondary data from 640 caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer’s disease drawn from the NIA/NINR-funded Resources for Enhancing Alzheimer’s Caregiver Health II (REACH II) study was used in this analysis; statistical comparisons were made using an independent samples t tests. Compared to spouse caregivers, non-spouse CGs reported significantly more CG burden, more negative social interactions, and more stress when engaging in caregiving. In addition, non-spouse CGs were caring for CRs who were significantly more cognitively impaired, required more assistance with ADLs/ADLs, and had a higher frequency of memory and behavior problems than spouse CGs. Finally, spouse reports that they were giving better care to their CR than non-spouses. Additional analyses revealed that relationship differences in burden remained after controlling for demographic variables, CR cognitive impairment, frequency of memory and behavior problems, and ADL/ADL.

Research Question

Are there significant differences between spouse and non-spouse caregivers on objective and subjective caregiving stressors?

Measures

- Caregiver Demographics & Context (Race, Sex, Relationship to CR, Years Caring for CR, Number of people in household)
- Mini-mental State Exam (MMSE: Folstein, Folstein, & McHugh, 1975)
- Activities of Daily Living (ADL) and Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADL) (Katz, Ford, Moskowitz, Jackson, & Jaffe, 1963; Lawton & Brody, 1969)
- Revised Memory and Behavior Problem Checklist (RMDBC: Tari, et al., 1992)
- Satisfaction with Support and Negative Interactions (Krause, 1995; Krause & Markides, 1990)
- Daily Care Bother (Gitlin, Roth, et al., 2005)
- Risk Assessment: Caregiving Skills (REACH II investigators)
- Center for Epidemiological Studies - Depression Scale (CES-D: Radloff, 1977)
- Desire to Institutionalize (Morycz, 1985)
- Exemplary Caregiving (Hiirichsen & Niederehe, 1994)

Results

Table 1. Mean Comparisons of Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Spouse Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Non-spouse Mean (SD)</th>
<th>t value</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADL/ADL</td>
<td>4.14 (1.52)</td>
<td>4.81 (1.71)</td>
<td>-2.64</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incontinence</td>
<td>1.76 (0.93)</td>
<td>2.30 (1.20)</td>
<td>-3.85</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Behavior Problems</td>
<td>2.36 (1.80)</td>
<td>3.10 (2.01)</td>
<td>-3.37</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Caregiver Burden</td>
<td>3.10 (2.01)</td>
<td>3.70 (2.10)</td>
<td>-3.37</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Caregiver Burden and ADL/ADL</td>
<td>3.02 (2.01)</td>
<td>3.60 (2.10)</td>
<td>-3.37</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results Continued

Table 2. Results of Multiple Regression (DV=Caregiver Burden)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>t value</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CG Race</td>
<td>-1.57</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>-8.90</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CG Sex</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years caring for CR</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of People in Household</td>
<td>-1.51</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>-1.78</td>
<td>.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMDBC Behavior Frequency</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMSE Total</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IADL/ADL Total</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>.295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using regression analysis, results revealed that the difference between spouse and non-spouse caregivers on caregiver burden remained after controlling for objective stressors, gender, race/ethnicity, years caregiving, and number of people in the home.

Research & Practice Implications

- The relationship of the caregiver to the care recipient appears to contribute to differences in perceived burden regardless of objective stressors.
- These findings do not support findings in the literature which suggest that spouse caregivers experience more burden, though further research is necessary to determine why.
- Qualitative phenomenological studies may provide more information on how both spouse and non-spouse caregivers subjectively appraise aspects of the caregiving situation and shed light on the processes by which this occurs.
- Practitioners working with caregivers should consider the relationship to the CR when tailoring interventions with this population. Because most non-spouse caregivers are children, concepts such as role reversal and role overload need to be considered. The needs of non-spouse caregivers may be different from spouse caregivers.
- Future research should examine additional variables, such as employment status and service use, that may contribute to caregiver burden among non-spouse caregivers.
- In addition, future research should examine possible mediators of the relation between caregiver relationship and perceived burden.

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The University of Alabama

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Note: B = Unstandardized regression coefficient, SE = Standard error, t = Standardized regression coefficient.