HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY STUDIES

DISSERTATION DEFENSE FOR

LAUREN R. BANGERTER

TITLE: BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF FAMILY SUPPORT AND CAREGIVING

Dissertation Committee:

Steven H. Zarit
Distinguished Professor of Human Development and Family Studies
Dissertation Advisor
Chair of Committee

Michael J. Rovine
Professor of Human Development and Family Studies

Jon Nussbaum
Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences

Kimberly Van Haitsma
Associate Professor of Nursing

Date: May 26, 2016

Time: 10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

Location: 203 HHD Building

Areas of Specialization: Adult Development and Aging and Intervention

Abstract

Giving support to an aging family member is a normative yet potentially stressful experience. The frequency, intensity, and type of support that family members give begins to shift when elderly adults show limitations in activities of daily living (ADL), declines in cognition, and physical functioning. Such decline may necessitate the concentrated support of a family caregiver. The costs of providing everyday support and caregiving to an aging family
member are typically measured by way of retrospective self-reports. The biological implications of everyday support provision and caregiving, however, are not readily understood.

This dissertation consists of two studies that examine how daily measures of salivary cortisol, a biological marker of stress, are linked to everyday support and family caregiving. Study 1 utilizes daily data from middle-aged adults (N=148) who provide everyday support to their aging parents. Study 2 looks at family caregiving, a much more specific and intensive form of family support using daily and longitudinal data from dementia caregivers (N=164).

Study 1 demonstrates that providing support to aging parents has implications for middle-aged children’s diurnal cortisol. Participants showed higher next-day cortisol following days where they provided support to a parent with ADL needs. Study 2 reveals that biological and subjective indicators of caregiver stress are associated with changes in depressive symptoms across time. Caregivers who, on average, exhibited a steeper diurnal cortisol slope showed an increase in depressive symptoms across 12 months. Primary subjective caregiver stressors have differential implications for caregiver depressive symptoms across a one-year period. Caregivers who reported high role overload at reported greater average depressive symptoms at 12 months whereas caregivers with low role captivity at baseline exhibited a steeper decrease in depressive symptoms across time.

This dissertation establishes that assessment of biological markers provides critical insight into the stress processes of providing care and support to aging family members. By taking a biopsychosocial approach, this research reveals under what conditions giving support and care are detrimental to mental health and well-being.