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Birth order and gender affect cross-generational helping

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How does kin solidarity and parent-offspring conflict manifest itself in contemporary Western societies? The GENTRANS research project surveyed children of “baby boomers” of Finns born in 1945-50 (n=1115) and their adult children (n=1435) in 2007. We predicted that parent-offspring conflict will affect interaction between adult children and their parents so that sibship size and birth order correlate negatively with giving and receiving financial and practical help. We were also interested in the role of gender.

Adult children helping their parents

Practical help was assessed by presenting a list of various practical tasks (e.g. cleaning, home and car repairs, transportation, paperwork, personal care) and financial transactions (monetary gifts and loans), and asking if the participants had helped their parents in these domains during last 12 months. Helping behavior was measured by a dichotomous indicator, so that participants who had assisted their parents in at least one financial or practical way were classified as helpers. Using this criterion, about half of the adult children had provided help to their parents (56% to the mother, 49% to the father).

Table 1 shows the results of children-to-parent helping behavior. Men had helped their parents, especially their fathers, more than women. People who had many siblings had helped their parents less than those with many siblings, suggesting that individuals share helping their parents with their siblings. Birth order was related to helping behavior, so that later-born participants were more likely to help their parents than first-born participants.

Parents helping their adult children

Most studied adults (90%) had received financial or practical help from their parents during the last 12 months. Table 2 shows the results of children-to-parent helping

behavior. Number of siblings decreased the likelihood of receiving parental help. Birth order was not related to the probability of receiving help from the parents.

Conclusions

The present findings suggest that later-born children may be more likely to provide help to their parents than first-born children. The prediction that received amounts of parental aid correlate negatively with sibship size was confirmed. The prediction that older siblings will be more helpful to their parents than younger siblings (as “helpers-in-the family nest”) was not carried out in by the data: the firstborns were less helpful but received more help. We also studied received aid by the gender of the receiver and the giver. Interestingly, Finnish men help their parents more, especially their fathers. On the other hand, men receive least help. These results will be elaborated with regards to socio-economic status and life situation.

Table 1. Predicting the probability of helping behavior towards mother and father. Two separate logistic regression models; odds ratios (standard errors)

	Model 1: Help to mother	Model 2: Help to father
Birth year	1.02 (0.01)	1.02 [†] (0.01)
Sex		
Women	1.00	1.00
Men	1.27* (0.11)	2.25*** (0.12)
Number of siblings	0.89** (0.04)	0.92* (0.04)
Parent's birth year	1.02 (0.02)	1.00 (0.02)
Birth order		

Only child	1.27 (0.25)	1.20 (0.24)
First born	1.00	1.00
Second born	1.35* (0.19)	1.30 [†] (0.18)
Third or later born	1.41 [†] (0.29)	1.56* (0.31)

Note: *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * P<0.05, [†] p<0.10

Table 2. Predicting the probability of receiving help from parents by gender and birth order. A logistic regression model; odds ratios (standard errors)

Birth year	1.12*** (0.03)
Sex	
Women	1.00
Men	0.94 (0.19)
Number of siblings	0.85*** (0.04)
Birth order	
Only child	0.66 (0.22)
First born	1.00
Second born	0.87 (0.21)

Third or later born

0.67 (0.23)

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, † $p < 0.10$

Figure 1. Gave financial support when there is a recipient alive, percent

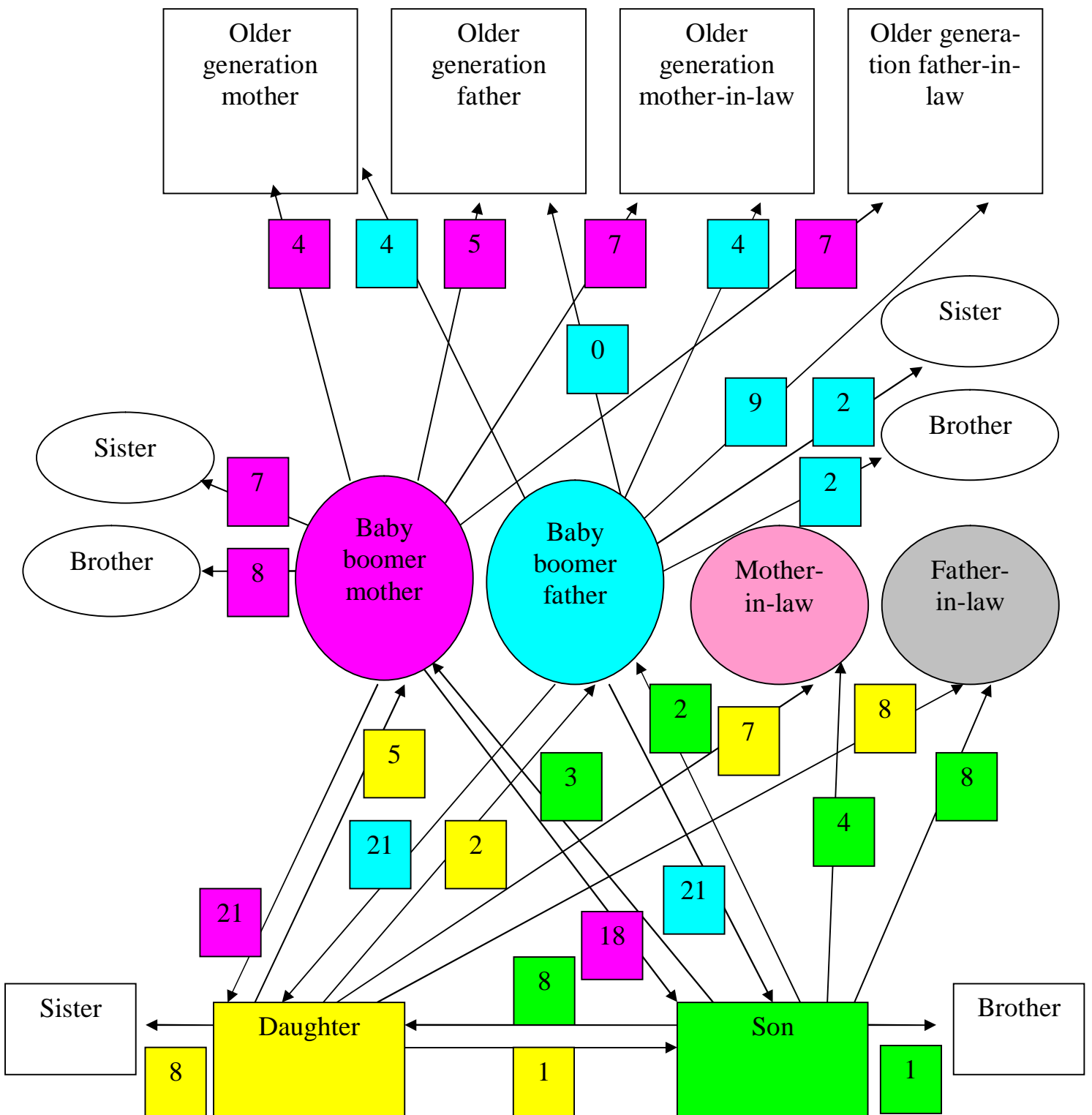


Figure 2. Gave practical help when there is a recipient alive, percent

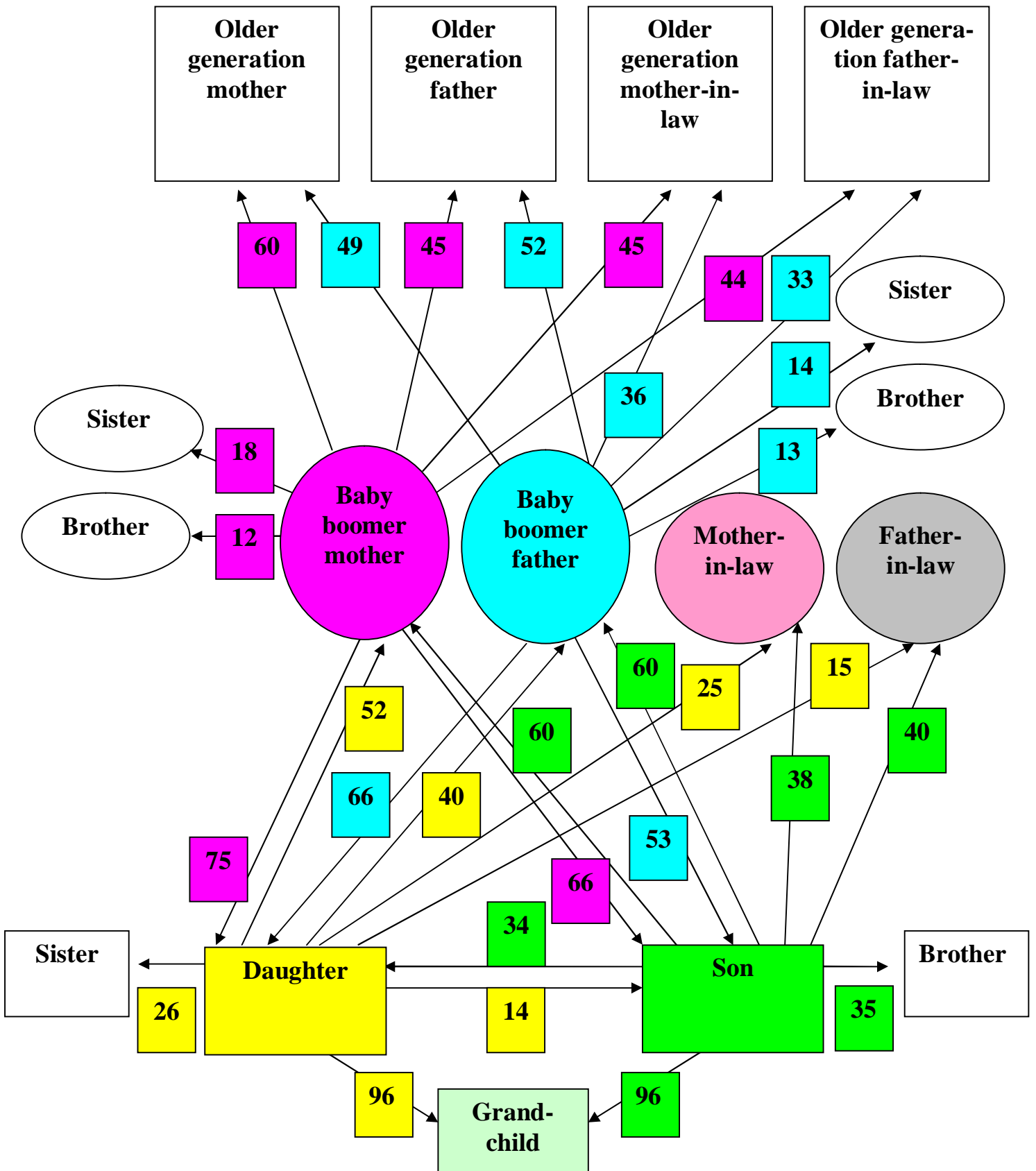


Figure 3. Received financial support when there is a recipient alive, percent

The arrows point to the recipient of support as reported by the giver.

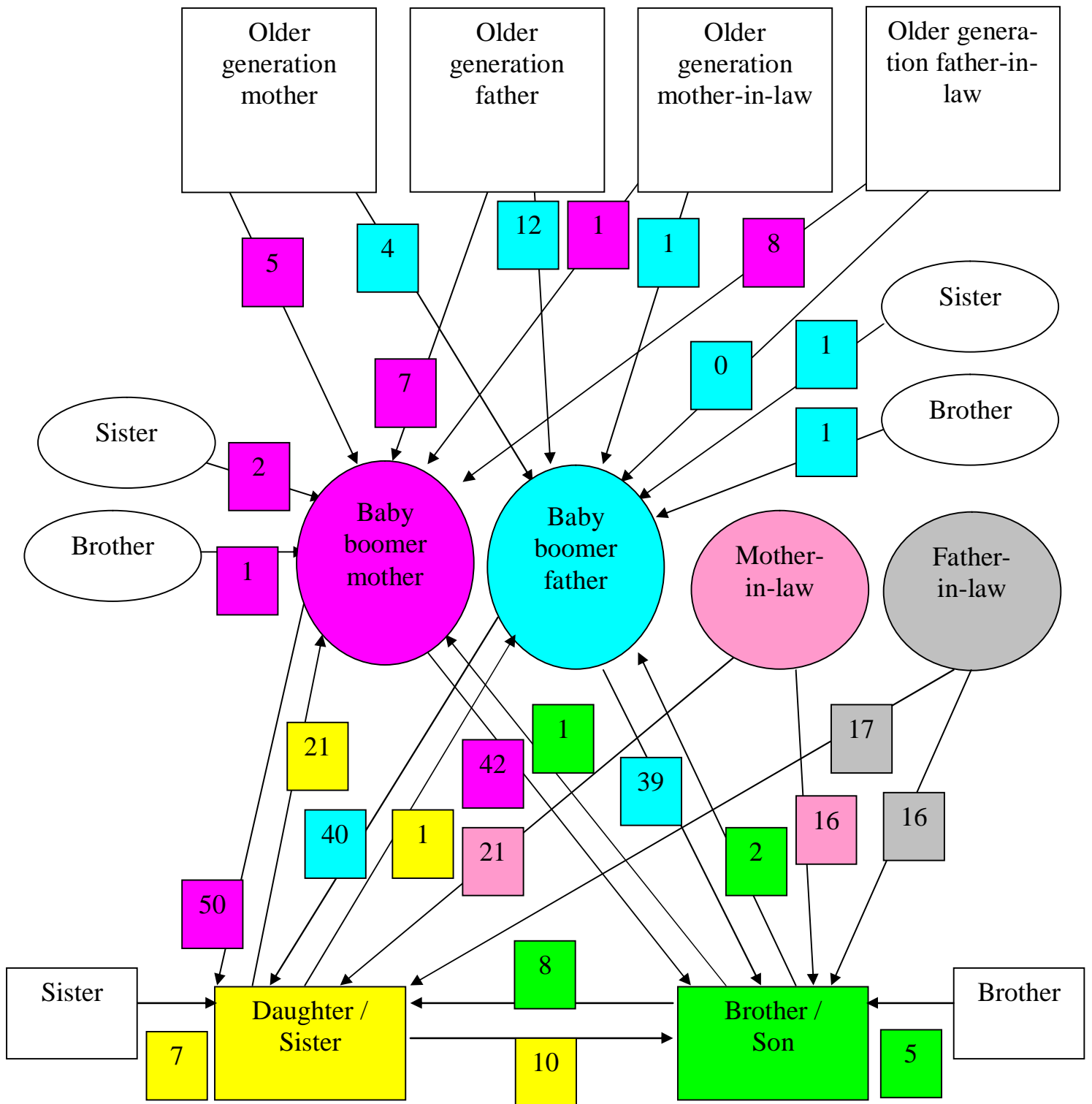


Figure 4. Received practical help when there is a recipient alive, percent

The arrows point to the recipient of help as reported by the giver.

