



When It's Only Me: The Experience of an Only Child Caring for an Elderly Mother While Working

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Abstract. *This reflective autoethnographic study explores the lived experience of being an only child caring for an elderly mother with Parkinson's disease while working as a full-time lecturer. The research aims to understand how this dual role affects the caregiver's mental health, work productivity, and relationship with the mother. Using a reflective autoethnographic approach based on Ellis, data were collected through three techniques: autobiographical narratives and memos, analysis of personal artifacts (work schedules, medical records, photographs), and an integrated self-interview. Thematic-reflective analysis revealed three main themes. First, structural loneliness describes the profound isolation resulting from having no sibling to share physical, emotional, and decisional responsibilities, which informal support cannot easily remedy. Second, stealth strategies at work refer to hidden tactics such as leaving early without disclosure, using breaks to check on the mother, and concealing caregiving struggles to avoid being perceived as less committed or losing professional opportunities. Third, fought for bonds shows that despite exhaustion and initial frustration, the caregiver's relationship with her mother deepened through daily effort, patience, and reframing caregiving as meaningful devotion, a process aligned with filial maturity. The findings highlight the unique pressures faced by only-child working caregivers, including invisible productivity loss and the inadequacy of general social support. Practical implications for employers, social workers, and policymakers are discussed. This study contributes a rich first-person account to the underexplored area of only-child caregiving and offers recommendations for workplace cultural change, targeted support groups, and subsidized respite services.*

Keywords: *Autoethnography; Filial maturity; Only-child caregiver; Structural loneliness; Work productivity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Family caregiving plays a very important role in supporting older people around the world. As the number of elderly individuals increases, more adults find themselves caring for their ageing parents while also trying to keep their jobs and manage their own lives. In the past, when families had more than one child, caregiving tasks could be shared among brothers and sisters. However, this situation has changed dramatically. Many families now have only one child because of various social and policy reasons. For example, China's one-child policy, which lasted from 1980 to 2015, created a large generation of only children (Hayes et al. 2013; Sutantri et al.2025; Siregar et al. 2025).

Today, over 220 million only children have grown up, and as their parents get older, these only children face the huge challenge of caring for their elderly parents completely by themselves without any sibling support. According to a study by INED (2023), only children do tend to help their parents more often than children who have siblings, but this does not mean the burden is lighter. In fact, having no siblings means that all the physical, emotional, and financial responsibilities fall on one person alone. Even in families with multiple children, caregiving often becomes uneven. A study from Hanamori and Gilligan (2025) found that when

a parent needs a high level of care, it is very unlikely that all children will share the work equally. This means that regardless of family size, one child often ends up doing most of the work (Ezenwanne et al. 2025; Sartimah et al. 2025).

Therefore, being an only child and an only caregiver at the same time creates a uniquely stressful situation. The term “sandwich generation” is often used to describe adults who have to support both their older parents and their younger children at the same time. However, for only children who have no siblings, this burden is much heavier. A large study in the United States by Hanamori and Gilligan (2025) examined 1,773 adult caregivers. Among these participants, 12% were only children. The researchers found that only-child caregivers reported much higher levels of financial pressure and emotional strain compared to those who had at least one sibling. More importantly, informal support from friends or extended family helped improve the mental health of caregivers with siblings, but this same support did not provide the same benefit for only children. This finding is very important because it shows that being an only child is not just about having fewer people to share tasks. It also changes how effective social support can be. Another study by the same authors (Skoblow & Gilligan, 2025) also highlighted that only-child caregivers often face higher levels of distress and lower overall well-being. In other words, the absence of siblings creates a structural form of loneliness that outside help cannot easily fix.

The challenge becomes even more difficult when the only-child caregiver also has to hold a job. Working caregivers often face many problems at their workplace. A report by the Integrated Benefits Institute, discussed by Wellthy (2026), shows that caregiving strain is a very strong predictor of productivity loss at work and caregivers with high levels of strain were over 40 times more likely to report that their caregiving duties were damaging their work performance compared to workers without such strain. This strain is not just about the number of hours spent caregiving. It includes emotional stress, lack of sleep, physical tiredness, money problems, and the mental effort required to manage medical appointments and make difficult decisions.

In 2025, another research article published in *Frontiers in Public Health* focused on China's one-child generation and their struggles in caring for ageing parents. The study revealed that only children struggle intensely to balance their caregiving responsibilities with their own professional growth (Xiang et al., 2025). They experience economic pressure, lack of available helpers, and serious emotional tiredness. In many cases, these only children also have to support both their elderly parents and their young children at the same time, which

creates even more stress. This is sometimes called the “sandwich generation” but in a much more extreme form because there is no sibling to share any part of the load. The effect on mental health is very serious Buranova et al. (2025).

Data from Taiwan reported by the United Daily News Health Section (2025) indicate that long-term caregivers frequently experience sleep disturbances, anxiety, and emotional distress, highlighting the significant psychological burden associated with caregiving. The impact on mental health is not a small problem, it is a major public health crisis that needs urgent attention. Tartaglini et al. (2025) found that elderly caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced significant psychological distress, including symptoms of anxiety and depression. The study also indicated that caregiving conditions, such as living arrangements, may influence caregivers’ mental health.

In families where the mother is the one needing care, the relationship between the adult child and the mother can become very complicated. The child may feel torn between feelings of love and feelings of being burdened. While many studies have looked at how a child’s early experiences of being raised affect their ability to care for their own children later in life, fewer studies have examined how the adult child’s relationship with an ageing mother changes when the child must become the primary caregiver. When the caregiver has no siblings, this change can be especially hard because there is no one else to share the emotional load. McInnes (2021) used a reflective autoethnographic approach to re-examine cultural ideas about ageing based on his own experience caring for his elderly parents. By reflecting on his personal life, he was able to show how policies and common beliefs about older people can have both positive and negative effects on families. His work demonstrates that a single person’s story can help readers understand the intended and unintended consequences of being a caregiver without enough support.

As described above, many studies on caregivers have used survey methods or interviews with many participants. What is missing is a deep, personal look at what it really feels like to be an only child taking care of a sick and ageing mother while trying to hold onto a job. Numbers and statistics can tell us that many caregivers feel sad or tired, but they cannot fully capture the lived experience of waking up in the middle of the night to help a mother who has fallen, or the shame of having to lie to a boss about why one is always late. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by using a reflective autoethnographic method. Autoethnography allows the researcher to become the subject of the study and to use personal experience to understand a larger social issue.

The research based on my own experience as an only child who cares for an elderly mother with health problems while also working a full-time job. By writing personal narratives, studying private documents such as work schedules and medical records, and conducting a guided self-interview, this study examines how this dual role affects the caregiver's mental health, work productivity, and relationship with the mother. To achieve this aim, the study asks the following questions: (1) How does being an only child shape the experience of caring for an elderly mother while working? (2) What are the main ways that caregiving responsibilities affect the caregiver's mental health and daily work productivity? (3) How does the relationship with the mother change when the adult child acts as the sole caregiver? (4) What personal strategies does the caregiver use to handle the pressures of being the only person responsible for both caregiving and earning a living?

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a rich first-person account of the lived experience of being an only-child caregiver, a perspective that remains underexplored. By examining how caregiving responsibilities intersect with work demands, the findings offer insights relevant to social workers, psychologists, and employers in understanding the complex needs of individuals without sibling support. In addition, the study highlights the challenges of balancing emotional and professional responsibilities, pointing to the importance of more supportive workplace policies for caregiving employees.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a reflective autoethnographic approach. Autoethnography is a research method where the researcher studies their own personal experiences to understand a bigger social issue. According to Ellis (2004), autoethnography involves writing about one's own life and then connecting that personal story to wider cultural or social meanings. This method is very suitable for this research because the author is an only child who cares for an elderly mother while also working. By looking closely at my own experience, I can show what this dual role really feels like.

I collected data using three main techniques. First, I wrote memos and autobiographical narratives. This means I wrote my life story as an only child, as a caregiver to my elderly mother, and as a worker. Writing these personal stories helped me remember important events and understand how my three roles affect each other. Second, I analyzed personal documents. The files include work schedules, text messages, my mother's medical records, and photographs that show daily caregiving activities. These artifacts give real evidence of the challenges I face, such as frequent time conflicts and emotional stress. Third, I

did an integrated self-interview. This is a structured set of questions that I asked myself to explore feelings or experiences that my written narratives might have missed. The self-interview helped me think more deeply about topics like guilt, tiredness, and the relationship with my mother.

After collecting all the data, I analyzed them using thematic-reflective analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that thematic analysis involves finding repeated patterns or themes in the data. I followed their six steps: becoming familiar with the data, creating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, naming the themes, and writing the final report. I read my narratives, artifact notes, and self-interview answers many times. Then I identified three main themes. The first theme is structural loneliness. This means the feeling of being completely alone in caregiving because there is no sibling to share the work. The second theme is stealth strategies at work. This refers to the hidden ways I manage care tasks during working hours without telling my boss or colleagues. The third theme is bonds fought for. This describes how my relationship with my mother has become deeper and stronger because of the effort we both put into caring for each other.

By using these three data sources and a clear thematic method, this study provides a truthful and detailed picture of what it means to be an only child caring for an ageing mother while holding a job.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I present the findings from my reflective autoethnographic study. Through careful analysis of my autobiographical narratives, personal artifacts, and answers from the integrated self-interview, three main themes emerged. These themes are Structural Loneliness, Stealth Strategies at Work, and Fought for Bonds.

Structural Loneliness

The first and most powerful theme that came out of my reflection is what I call structural loneliness. This is not just a feeling of being sad or alone. It is a type of loneliness that comes from the very structure of being an only child. As an only child, I have no brother or sister to share caregiving tasks or emotional burdens. This loneliness is built into my situation. Sung et al. (2024) found that caregiving stress among family caregivers of older persons with cognitive impairment was associated with increased loneliness, with social isolation partially mediating this relationship. For only children, this loneliness is even stronger because there is no sibling to help with decision-making or to provide emotional support.

In my self-interview for Question 8, when asked how much mental stress I feel on a scale from 1 to 10, I answered: *“If the highest scale is 100, then maybe it is 100, because as an only child, I have no one to share the physical and mental burden with.”* This answer shows that for me, the pressure is not just about the tasks of caregiving. It is about having no one to share both the physical work and the emotional weight that comes with it. I feel this loneliness most strongly when I have to be away from home for a long time. In Question 5, I explained: *“For example, when I have activities on campus that take a long time, and the distance between home and campus is also far, I sometimes worry about leaving my mother alone at home all day.”* The constant worry about leaving my mother alone is a direct result of having no sibling to take turns.

Skoblow and Gilligan (2025) examined 1,773 adult child caregivers and found that only-child caregivers reported higher levels of distress compared to those with siblings. More importantly, informal support from friends helped caregivers with siblings, but it did not provide the same benefit for only children. This matches my own experience. Although I have a nephew living in the same house and cousins who sometimes help, they are not full-time caregivers. They have their own families and responsibilities. As I said in Question 3 *“Yes, I have a nephew who lives at home, but he is not fully able to be a full-time caregiver. The same goes for my cousins, who can help take care of my mother only when they have free time, since they also have their own families to take care of.”* The help is available, but it is not reliable. I cannot depend on them the way I could depend on a sibling who lives with me permanently. This situation makes my structural loneliness even worse because I know that no one is truly responsible for my mother except me.

Stealth Strategies at Work

The second theme that appeared from my data is the use of stealth strategies at work. This means the hidden, unspoken ways I manage my caregiving duties during working hours without fully revealing my situation to my employer or colleagues. Mumford et al. (2022) introduced the concept of “veiled care” to describe how employees often hide or soften caregiving-related emotions and burdens in organizational life to avoid negative reactions from others. Many working caregivers choose to hide their caregiving role at their workplace because they worry about being seen as less committed or less productive.

In Question 9, I described how I felt during my job training period two years ago. I was far from home, caring for my mother while also completing training to become a civil servant. I said *“I felt very alone and lonely at that time because I had no one to share the physical and mental exhaustion of completing my latsar work responsibilities while also being*

a caregiver.” Sometimes, I try to finish my work as fast as possible so I can go home early. I do not tell my colleagues every time I leave early because I am worried they will think I am not serious about my job.

However, my workplace is quite flexible. In Question 12, I explained: *“At the university, I used to teach online during the odd semester. Although the even semester was conducted offline, the university still provided flexibility in teaching. Therefore, I am grateful to have a job that does not require me to come to campus every day.”* This flexibility helps a lot. But even with this support, I still feel the need to hide some parts of my struggle. I also mentioned in Question 15 that *“I use emotional management and time management strategies. I also ask my nephew or cousins to watch my mother when I have to be at campus for a long time.”* These are all stealth strategies. They are not official solutions. They are personal, hidden ways of surviving. As Etheridge (2025) noted, flexible work arrangements can help employed caregivers manage their duties, but employees often still hide their full care burden because they fear being seen as less committed.

Fought for Bonds

The third and final theme is fought for bonds. This theme is about how my relationship with my mother has changed since I became her full-time caregiver. At first, it was very difficult. I felt angry and impatient. But over time, I have come to see this experience as a way to rebuild and strengthen our bond. This bond is not something that happened naturally. It is something I have fought for every day. Morais et al. (2024) introduced the concept of ‘filial maturity’ to describe the ability of adult children to accept their parents' vulnerability while still maintaining a caring and respectful relationship. This concept fits my experience well. Through daily physical care, I have developed a new sense of connection and love that was not there before.

In the beginning, I often felt angry at my mother. In Question 6, I said: *“Yes, when my mother was still very active and able to walk around, I often became emotional with her because she never listened to anything I told her regarding her health.”* But as time passed, I learned to see my mother differently. I started to think of her as a child again. I said in the same answer *“As time went by, I realized that my mother had become like a child again, and I began to place myself in the position I was in as a child, when she patiently took care of me.”* This change in how I see my mother is the beginning of a fought-for bond.

Cochran (2024) wrote an autoethnography about caring for her mother during the last years of her life. She described how the practice of embodied caregiving led to a deep transformation in her relationship with her mother. This is very similar to my story. I have

learned to accept that my mother is now weak and dependent. Instead of feeling angry about it, I now choose to see caregiving as a way to pay back the love she gave me when I was young. In Question 8, I reflected: *“But then again, I always see this situation as an opportunity to earn blessings as a child. Perhaps I had many wrongdoings toward my mother in the past, and I feel that this is the best moment to make up for all my previous mistakes.”*

My bond with my mother is stronger now than it has ever been. In Question 16, I explained: *“In the early stages of becoming a caregiver, it was naturally very emotional because it was the first experience for both of us as a patient and as a caregiver. However, as time went by, I became much closer to my mother. In the past, I was too shy to say ‘I love you,’ but now I hug and kiss her almost every day while expressing my affection.”* This is the result of fighting for our bond. Even though caregiving is physically and mentally exhausting, it has also brought me closer to my mother. In Question 17, I said: *“One thing I am truly grateful for is that my mother is still here with me to witness her dream of seeing me continue her legacy as a civil servant come true”* Seeing my mother proud of me and still alive to share that moment is something I will never forget. This bond is not easy. It requires daily effort, patience, and sacrifice. But in the end, it is worth fighting for. As Morais et al. (2024) argued, filial maturity is not simply a stage of development. It is a continuous process of adapting and redefining the relationship between parent and adult child.

Discussion

The three findings of this reflective study are structural loneliness, stealth strategies at work, and fought for bonds together paint a detailed picture of what it means to be an only child caring for an elderly mother while working. Starting with structural loneliness, this study found that being an only child creates a unique form of loneliness that is not simply emotional but is built into the very structure of family life. Sung and et al. (2024) showed that family caregivers of older persons with cognitive impairment often experience high levels of stress and loneliness, and this is made worse by social isolation. My experience supports this, but it also adds a new understanding. For only-child caregivers, the loneliness is deeper because there is no sibling who shares the same responsibility and emotional history with the parent. As I explained in my self-interview, even though I have a nephew and cousins who help sometimes, their help is inconsistent, and this inconsistency actually made me feel more alone because I could not plan my life around unreliable support. Skoblow and Gilligan (2025) found that informal support from friends helps caregivers who have siblings but does not provide the same benefit for only children. This matches my reflection perfectly. In my case, talking to fellow caregivers helped, but no one could truly replace a sibling who would be equally responsible

for my mother. Therefore, the first major insight from this discussion is that structural loneliness is not a personal failure but a social consequence of demographic changes such as the one-child policy, as McInnes (2021) also argued.

The second finding concerns stealth strategies at work. Petrovic (2022) described ‘veiled care’ as a way employees hide their caregiving duties to avoid negative reactions from managers. My study shows that stealth strategies are not just about hiding, they are about survival like finishing work early to go home, and I do not tell my colleagues every time I leave because I fear being seen as less committed. Etheridge (2025) studied academic mothers and found similar behaviours, which she called ‘care obfuscation’. My workplace offers flexibility, as I can teach online in some semesters, and my campus does not require me to come every day. However, flexibility alone is not enough. I still hide some of my struggles because I worry that if my boss fully knows my caregiving burden, I might lose opportunities for training or research. In Question 13, I admitted that I have lost many chances for professional development because of caregiving. This is a real and painful loss. Wellthy (2026) reported that caregivers with high strain are over 40 times more likely to have damaged work performance. My experience confirms this, but I add that much of this damage is invisible because caregivers like me use stealth strategies to pretend everything is fine. The practical implication here is that employers need not only flexible policies but also a culture where employees feel safe to disclose their caregiving roles without fear of punishment.

The third finding is the most hopeful one. Despite all the difficulties, my relationship with my mother has become deeper and stronger. I call this ‘fought for bonds’ because it did not happen automatically. It required daily effort, patience, and a conscious choice to change my perspective. In the beginning, I felt angry and impatient, as I described in Question 6. But over time, I learned to see my mother as a child again, and I remembered how she cared for me when I was small. Morais and colleagues (2024) introduced the concept of ‘filial maturity’, the ability of adult children to accept their parents' vulnerability while keeping a caring relationship. My experience shows that filial maturity is not a stage you reach; it is something you develop through struggle. Cochran (2024) wrote an autoethnography about caring for her mother and described how embodied caregiving led to a deep transformation. I felt the same transformation. In Question 16, I said that I now hug and kiss my mother every day and tell her I love her, something I never did before. This change came from fighting against my own frustration and choosing to see caregiving as an act of love rather than a burden. Therefore, this study answers the third research question by showing that the mother-child relationship can become much closer, but only if the caregiver is willing to reframe the experience. Not every

caregiver may have this capacity, which is why social and spiritual support is so important. My spiritual faith and my community of caregiver friends were essential in helping me find this positive meaning.

4. CONCLUSION

This reflective autoethnographic study has explored my personal experience as an only child caring for my elderly mother with Parkinson's disease while working as a full-time lecturer. Through autobiographical narratives, personal artifacts, and a structured self-interview, three main themes emerged: structural loneliness, stealth strategies at work, and fought for bonds. Structural loneliness refers to the deep isolation that comes from having no sibling to share caregiving responsibilities. Stealth strategies describe the hidden ways I manage my dual roles at work to avoid being seen as less committed. Fought for bonds show how, despite the difficulties, my relationship with my mother has grown stronger and more loving through daily effort and a conscious reframing of caregiving as a meaningful act of devotion.

The findings of this study have practical implications for employers, social workers, and policymakers. Employers need to create not only flexible work arrangements but also a safe culture where caregivers can disclose their situations without fear of punishment. Social workers should consider support groups designed specifically for only-child caregivers, as general support may not fully address their unique form of loneliness. Policymakers must recognise the long-term consequences of demographic changes such as the one-child policy and provide subsidised home care, respite services, or financial aid for sole caregivers. Future research should include larger qualitative studies, cross-cultural comparisons, and longitudinal designs to track how only-child caregivers cope and change over time.

Ultimately, this study is a personal story that speaks to a larger social reality. Many only children around the world are silently carrying the weight of caring for ageing parents with no siblings to help. I hope that by sharing my journey, other only-child caregivers will feel seen, understood, and less alone. Caregiving is exhausting, but it can also be a path to deeper love and gratitude. For me, being the only one has not destroyed me, it has shaped me into someone who values every moment with my mother, no matter how hard those moments sometimes are.

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