

An Investigation into the Social Network between Three Generations in a Household: Bridging the Interrogational Gaps between the Senior and the Youth

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Abstract. The traditional pattern of living arrangements makes the family a strong source of financial and emotional support for its members, and it connects grandparents and grandchildren in a unique bond. Unfortunately, it is reported that the number of older people living alone is rising in most countries. Although a lot of effort has been put into slowing down the social and emotional isolation experienced by the elderly, little has been done to investigate the social interaction between generations. In order to bridge intergenerational gaps between three generations of a family, this research work begins with an interview-based study to give insight into individual perspectives among those aged parents living alone and to identify their specific needs in generational connections and interactions.

1 Introduction

Everywhere in developed countries, the population is aging rapidly. Co-longevity has greatly increased the duration of family ties. The parent-child relationship may last 6-7 decades; the grandparent-grandchild bond 3-4 decades[1]. In Chinese tradition, filial piety has always been the ethical core of the family. It also maintains the stability of China's social structure. Chinese people regard filial piety as a virtue and obligation, and the most basic obligation of filial piety for traditional Chinese people is living with parents. The traditional pattern of living arrangements makes the family a strong source of financial and emotional support for family members and connects grandparents and grandchildren in a unique bond. Hagestad (2006) signified that grandparents significantly influence their grandchildren in many different ways. For instance, grandparents can play a role as a family historian, mentor, nurturer and surrogate parent. In addition, researchers have suggested that grandparents act as the reserve army of the family. When the family suffers from crisis, such as illness, financial problems or divorce, grandparents emerge from behind and support problem resolutions, maintaining close relationships between family members [1]. Furthermore, the relationship between the elderly and adolescents does not only compensate for age-related deficits (e.g., cognitive performance, cognitive-affective complexity)[2], but also facilitates physical assistance inherent in co-residence [3]. Due to financial issues and caring reasons, three-generation households make family relationships more intimate. By mutual assistance, these ties bridge the relationship and interaction of the

three generations. As a result, cultural values make three-generation households a representative symbol of the Chinese culture in most Asian countries.

Unfortunately it is reported that the number of older people living alone is rising in most countries. In some European countries, more than 40 percent of women aged 65 and older live alone (NIA, 2007). Even in societies with strong traditions of older parents living with children, such as in Japan, Taiwan and China, traditional living arrangements are becoming less common due to social changes and economic growth [4-6]. In Taiwan, social changes have been accompanied by rapid changes in family structure and relationships, including the spread of schooling, the employment of young people outside the family, increasing separation of the residences of parents and children before and after marriage, and the growing independence of young people [4]. Likewise, the migration of working-age adults from rural to urban China has altered traditional patterns of living arrangements and intergenerational support among elderly persons who remain in rural regions [6]. For the above reasons, the generational gaps between younger generations and their seniors have become clearer and more noticeable, and the correction of the intergenerational gap is therefore a crucial issue.

Social networks go through periods of change relating to life 'transitions', both in terms of the people in the network and the importance of those people. For older adults in particular, social network size and membership may be reduced by 'transitions' such as divorce, spousal illness/death, and geographic displacement – either to be closer to family or to move to sheltered housing or a nursing home. Retirement also has strong effects[7]. Work is likely to have taken up a large part of older adults' time and to have played the largest part in the development of their social networks, beyond the inclusion of family members. Once retired, older adults may find it difficult to maintain or to increase membership of their networks. Age-related functional declines, such as reduced mobility, may make pose challenges to meeting people [8].

Recently social gerontologists have been concerned with the emotional well-being of older persons, and the extent to which these effects are mediated by subjective feelings of social integration [9]. Many studies have even focused on health-promotion interventions that reduce social isolation and loneliness among older people, which include encouraging the elderly to participate in group activities, such as educational input [10-13], providing social support [14-16] and one-to-one home visits, assessments, or provision of information and services [17]. Participation in these social activities can help the elderly to establish social networks and to improve their physical and mental health. In addition to joining general social activities, the main impact on the individual social network involves the existence or quantity of social ties or relationships, which may in turn be distinguished as type (e.g., marital, kin/nonkin) and frequency of contact. Furthermore, the quality of social relationships is another factor that affects social network.[18].

Although a lot of effort has been put into slowing down social and emotional isolation for the elderly, little has been done to explore the social relationship between generations. Traditionally, Asian countries were dominated by the Confucian ethic of filial piety, and they paid attention to social interactions within their families. The traditional living arrangement and formation of families are mutually beneficial for the elderly and adolescents. However, the prevalence of nuclear families makes the interaction between intergenerational family members more difficult. In order to

explore the intergenerational relationship and lessen intergenerational gaps in three-generation families, this study begins with an interview-based study to give insight into the individual's own perspectives among those aged parents living alone and to identify their specific needs in generational connections and interactions. This is followed by the second interview-based study aimed to explore the perspectives of younger people of three generations of a family.

2 Ageing and Generational Relations from Perspectives of Older Adults Living in a Senior Community

This study took a qualitative approach. It was conducted among older parents aged 60 years and over, living alone in a senior community. There were 52 volunteers, about one-eighth of the senior community, with 17 men and 35 women. Written informed consent to participate in the interviews was collected through basic information forms, and the interviewer obtained the participants' verbal agreement and arranged a time and place for the interview. All interviews were carried out in a senior community where the participants live. The participants were interviewed about stage of life, social lives and activities, and intergenerational relationship in order to explore their social networks and the intergenerational connections among those older parents living alone. The duration of the interviews was between one hour and two hours. The interviews were audio- and video- recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Content analysis was employed in this study. It describes a family of analytic approaches ranging from impressionistic, intuitive, interpretive analyses to systematic, strict textual analyses. The interviews were guided by the following themes: stage of life, social lives and activities, and intergenerational relationship. In terms of life stage, changes in living arrangement and life transitions were discussed among those older people living in a retired senior community in this study. In addition, the study found that the senior citizens referred to psychological feelings. Therefore, the psychological feeling was another category of this theme. In describing and analyzing social lives and activities, activities that older adults engage in and experience are considered as part of their social lives in this study. In addition, the study analyzed the quality of social structure between the elderly and their friends in the senior community. As past studies have rarely mentioned generational issues, the theme of intergenerational relationship is the most important to this study. The objective of this theme is to give insight into the lives of aged parents of three-generation families, who live alone, to explore the depth of social connections between the young and the old generations and also to investigate the perspectives and social needs of intergenerational relationships that older people desire.

Two steps of analysis, from open to focused coding, are conducted in this study. The transcribed interviews were read several times. An empirically-oriented approach, with the themes mentioned in the above section and set as a general point of reference, was employed as the first step of analysis. The researchers individually marked transcribed verbatim/text relevant to the aim of this study, brought condensed "meaning units" for each themes together, and compared and discussed the meaning units. In the second step of the analysis, the meaning units were kept on a more

abstract level, guided by the themes. Discussions with a co-reviewer took place in each step of the analysis. The analysis was interwoven with other steps of the research process, as is characteristic of most qualitative research.

Stage of Life. The 52 elders all live alone in a senior community. Most participants used to dedicate themselves primarily to their families and children. As they grew older, the adult children encouraged their elderly parent/parents to move to a senior home for safety issues, medical consulting, social support and relations, and quality of life in retirement. Since moving to the senior community, most of the residents were engaged in many and varied social events, leisure activities, and learning programs; in addition, they have opportunities to meet new friends and to create social groups. In addition, the residents kept in touch with their friends whom they had met before moving to the senior community. Some of the participants indicated their retired lives were more pleasurable than before, and some of them expressed that living in a senior home is very monotonous and lonely.

Social Lives and Activities. About 60% of the participants engage in activities such as chatting (e.g., sharing experiences or expressing feelings) and playing chess or mahjong, and they participate in games or group activities that volunteers organize. Many participants regularly attend community programs that the village holds (e.g., classes for calligraphy, computer use, painting, ball dancing, tennis or language) or festival-related activities and lectures (e.g., Dragon Boat Festival, birthdays, Mother's Day). The participants think that these diverse activities not only offer a great "making friends" opportunity, but also fill their spare time that creates a feeling of companionship and enriches elderly lives. For some elderly people, although the senior community is a place where they can meet people, share experiences, and learn different things in societies or classes, having such social interactions make them feel lonely or even strange.

Intergenerational Relationship. It is noted that a quarter of the participants whose children live abroad visit only on holidays or special occasions. Even though these elderly participants are accustomed to the lifestyle at a senior home and enjoy meeting many friends, they desire and expect their weekly family visits. The children and/or grandchildren's visits bring a sense of pride to the aged parents. Those older people not only show a high level of participation in family activities, but also value quality of life and generational relationships, measured by the quantity of family visits. Following Eastern tradition and cultures, family relationship plays an important role. However, for those aged parents living alone in a senior community, they express their worries regarding life course transitions, the generational difference, and grandparent-grandchild relationship; family company and generational interactions are presented as a valuable source of emotional support to the 52 participants who live alone in the senior home.

Besides, in addition to the conventional interpersonal communication via telephone and in person, many participants attended computer training courses in order to contact their children and grandchildren via the Internet and emails.

Table 1. 'Stage of Life' from the 52 participants living alone in a senior community

Theme	Stage of Life	
Category	Social network heterogeneity	
Sub-category	Work status	Retirement
Meaning unit	<p>Before the age of fifty, I had been working. (<i>Chang8</i>) Ah, a lot of different... ah, the former to be busy, busy to do business ! (<i>Chen13</i>) I used to volunteer (<i>Yao Ho16</i>) Before the age of 50, every day, work, work, make the civil service. (<i>Hsing17</i>) Busy before the age of 50 ... Ah. Care of business. (<i>Hsu21</i>) Yes, this is ... busy doing things ... the company (<i>Chu23</i>) Caring for the grocery store (<i>Chen28</i>) Trained before the age of 50 and go out to serve ... (<i>Li36</i>) Before the age of 50, you have pressure at work and children (<i>Lin34</i>) So you think the biggest difference is busy at work.....(<i>Wang39</i>) There are busy with work before, and now it is very interesting here (<i>Yu Hsia40</i>) Ah for the life of that time is very busy ... tired ... is very hard but also very happy because I'm happy at work (<i>Yuan41</i>) Busy both at work and family (<i>Chang44</i>) Before the age of 55, the pressure of work is very large, then retirement is entirely out of the pressure (<i>Chien43</i>) Before the age of 50, I was busy at work..... (<i>Lin45</i>) Before 50 years old, busy with work to make money (<i>Lu50</i>) I looked after the family at home (<i>Yang Chin5</i>) Not only to do housework, but also with children (<i>Chang8</i>) Yes, look after child (<i>Liu15</i>) Right! Busy, then to my grandchildren. (<i>Wu19</i>) In raising children, later with grandson. (<i>Chu20</i>) Doing housework and look after children..... (<i>Hsu21</i>) When I was young, I was busy with my child and my husband.....(<i>Hu27</i>) There was a lot of house work before but now they are grown up.....(<i>Li36</i>) Before 50 years old, busy with work and children.....(<i>Lin34</i>) ...educate my children.....(<i>Yuan41</i>) I was a little different, I do public servants' work until my husband suffered from an illness ...later I looked after him until he died.... (<i>Li42</i>) Both busy for work and families (<i>Chang44</i>) cultivated children ... (<i>Lin45</i>) life is of course not the same; before retirement, worked every day, doing housework, watching child (<i>Lin47</i>)</p>	<p>Many friends. This is my home, I like this. (<i>Yang 5</i>) There are more friends here than at home(<i>Wu19</i>) To go out with friends..... chess with friends..... (<i>Chu20</i>) There are more friends here and makes me comfortable.....(<i>Chang24</i>) Go out with friends here(<i>Yu Hsia40</i>) I make a lot of friends here... (<i>Lin45</i>) There are more friends here to accompany with me....(<i>Yang Tsai22</i>) The old friends can visit me here... (<i>Chang24</i>) I meet many old friends here (<i>Chu35</i>) I keep in touch with old friends....(<i>Lu50</i>)</p>
Category	Psychosocial impacts	
Sub-category	Positive	Negative
Meaning unit	<p>Life is easier than before(<i>Fang6</i>) in this place is very casual life....(<i>Liang4</i>) The life would be happier here ! (<i>Yang Chin5</i>) We have had a very good life here, and there is good for retirement (<i>Chang8</i>) So now more like the holiday and enjoy life (<i>Chu20</i>) I felt very comfortable staying here ... just like holiday. (<i>Hsu21</i>) Now is more freedom, more happiness(<i>Chang24</i>) I tell people how happy I came here(<i>Hu27</i>) retirement can be simply (<i>Li36</i>) Now I feel interest here...(<i>Yu Hsia40</i>) Life here is so happy...(<i>Lin45</i>)</p>	<p>Life is not a problem ... but here it is so boring(<i>Chu23</i>)</p>

Table 2. ‘Social Lives and activities’ from the 52 participants living alone in a senior community

Theme	Social Lives and Activities		
Category	Practically		
Sub-category	Community program	Festival-related or special activities	Group activities
Meaning unit	<p>I like to dance, social dance.... (Chen 13)</p> <p>There are many lessons here, I now have the computer classes, piano lessons, social dances, a healthy lecture.....(Wu14)</p> <p>Oh I sometimes sing the old songs, sing and learn with a teacher.... (Chu20)</p> <p>Oh I now have the computer classes (Chen 37)</p> <p>Ah I have to study painting sketch here ... (Yu Hsia40)</p> <p>Ah, painting, calligraphy, piano art, ... so it's hard to find me (Li42)</p> <p>Ah.. I forgot today is Monday. I have to calligraphy Ah, (Hsiung46)</p> <p>There are two, such as storytelling, acupuncture, meridian massage (Lu50)</p> <p>I only attend computer classes and English class (Lai51)</p>	<p>Do you have to participate in the Dragon Boat Festival Grandpa? Yes(Wang2)</p> <p>I have participate in carnival activities, (Yang1)</p> <p>Mother's Day I seem to attend ah(Wang2)</p> <p>I've been to Father's Day, and Mother's Day (Yang Chin5)</p> <p>Dragon Boat Festival grapefruit peel (Chen13)</p> <p>I participated in a graduation party... (Chen13)</p> <p>I participated in a graduation party and took a photo (Wu14)</p> <p>I'm so happy to volunteer one day a week...(Chien43)</p>	<p>I spend all day with them, playing mahjong. (Yang1)</p> <p>...playing billiards and video game.... (Wu14)</p> <p>Go out shopping with friends Oh.... I will not playing Mahjong, sometimes playing chess with them... (20Chu)</p> <p>Yes, I'm singing....(Hsu21)</p> <p>I did not ... I ... I just... I'd play table tennis with my wife...I play chess, playing cards on Saturday... (23Chu)</p> <p>Mahjong only (Chang24)</p> <p>Not smoking, drinking, playing mahjong, I'm singing...(Feng25)</p> <p>I'm going to sing ,playing table tennis and climbing the mountain ... (Hu27)</p> <p>I climb the mountain ... (Liu30)</p> <p>I ... I just... playing Mahjong only (Li36)</p> <p>Go out shopping with friends (Yu Hsia40)</p> <p>.....I'm going to sing at night...(Li42)</p> <p>chatting, and chess (Li42)</p> <p>I'm going to sing with friends (Hsiung46)</p>
Category	Relational content		
Sub-category	Social regulation or control	Relational demand and conflict	
Meaning unit	<p>Everyone like a family... (Wu19)</p> <p>I have a lot of friends here...(20Chu)</p> <p>.....all the friends here are very nice to me (Hu27)</p> <p>all the friends here are very nice to me, I'm so happy (Chen38)</p> <p>Everyone like a family...they were very good (Li42)</p>	<p>Here is only two people ... with my wife... is so lonely here Ah ... Ah (23Chu)</p> <p>Have rarely neighbour (Liu30)</p> <p>I feel so strange here...(Chen33)</p> <p>I have no way to contact with them...(Chu35)</p> <p>I feel that they regarded me as kindergarten kids I feel very naive (Chu35)</p>	

Table 3. ‘Intergenerational Relationship’ from the 52 participants living alone in a senior community

Theme	Intergenerational Relationship	
Category	Reality	
Sub-category	Meaningful contacts	Participate in family activities
Meaning unit	<p>How many times does your son visit you? sometimes (<i>Wu19</i>)</p> <p>My child always comes here (<i>Chu20</i>)</p> <p>I use the telephone...I can't use cell phone...(Chen28)</p> <p>When my son call me, I will go back home.....(Chen31)</p> <p>Does your child come back to see you?</p> <p>Yesterday my eldest son came to see me, took me out, He would come almost every week (<i>Chen38</i>)</p> <p>It's easy to visit me, and take me out to play.... (<i>Yu Hsia40</i>)</p> <p>By e-mail, because my children will write e-mail, so I learned to use....</p> <p>Ah Ah like looking on Facebook to see a lot of photos (<i>Lin47</i>)</p>	<p>They like to go abroad and take me with them... (<i>Yao Ho16</i>)</p> <p>We always go out to have family dinner...(<i>Chu23</i>)</p> <p>My son and grandchildren take me out and go abroad....(<i>Yang Tsai22</i>)</p> <p>Yesterday my eldest son came to see me, took me out, He would come almost every week (<i>Chen38</i>)</p> <p>It's easy to visit me, and take me out to play.... (<i>Yu Hsia40</i>)</p>
Category	Psychosocial impacts	
Sub-category	Satisfied	Desired
Meaning unit	<p>My children are very good to me (<i>Chen33</i>)</p> <p>My children are filial...(Chen38)</p>	<p>But both advantages and disadvantages, that is quiet good, but also lonely (<i>Yao Ho16</i>)</p> <p>When they need us, take me with them, but now they do not need us and send us back (<i>Chu35</i>)</p> <p>just arrived in the first year things are too hard, life is so bitter, feel homeless (<i>Chen38</i>)</p> <p>few care (<i>chang44</i>)</p>

3 Generational Relations and Social Activities from the Perspectives of Younger Generations

To make a comparison with the previous interview-based survey, the study included interviews with 19 middle-generation individuals. Each of them is a parent of a three-generation family and answered questions regarding everyday interactions between the three generations, social demands such as social patterns, family types, the relationship with their seniors, and social behaviours. Family categories and social behaviour include their lifestyles and social needs; family support refers to the inter-generational relationships between three generations of a family; specific needs comprise social behaviours and interpersonal communication.

Family Categories and Social Behaviours. Nineteen middle-aged people, aged 30-50 years, participated in this study. The family categories were classified to three generations living in a household (8 participants), nuclear families (10 participants), and only one participant who lives with a spouse. Socialization is the social process in which people are engaged in life experiences and learn cultural patterns, including social norms and behaviours. In this day and age, the use of computing technology and the Internet is an essential part of all types of work and has inevitably impacted socialization within the family, the young generation in particular. Based on the findings, socialization through face-to-face conversations, phone, emails, instant messaging (IM), and social network sites (SNS) has been adopted by the participants and

presented as customary and preferred social patterns. Communication technologies, such as Facebook, Plurk, MSN, or Skype, have made socialization easier for family and friends to stay connected, and they were considered today's popular social tools by the participants.

Family Support and the Intergenerational Relationship. Families of three generations state that family members interact on a daily basis while nuclear families do so on a weekly basis at least. A participant, for example, indicates that three generations, while living apart, would go for walks three days a week due to concern about the mother's loneliness at home. Therefore, traditional families all value family interactions either on a daily or weekly basis to enhance their relationships. The elderly reveal that chatting in person or over the phone is the most common way to communicate, and the content of such conversations is mainly about feelings, or new information and interesting daily events. Many traditional festivals or holidays in Taiwan also bring families together. One of the participants mentioned that family members gather once a week to maintain connections; another participant stated that three generations, living close to each other, dine together every day. Many participants share the same interests with their elderly families, such as walking or exercising. One of the participants, for instance, describes that three generations would gather for a walk every two weeks because they do not live together and yet are very close to each other. The participants are satisfied with and wish to sustain their current interactions with the elderly, while over half of the participants wish to have more interactive opportunities. The middle generation shows a great concern for the connection between family members and values good relationships with the elderly.

Technology and Intergenerational Socialization. Unlike the elderly in the village, every participant has an experience on the Internet, whether browsing the Web, searching for information, playing games, downloading files, listening to music or the radio, using Facebook, MSN or Skype, writing emails, etc. Getting online has become essential to and habitual in everyday life and is one of their daily activities. The Internet is an important interactive way for the middle generation to communicate. The Internet allows for information sharing, messaging and connecting with different people and is another method of interaction between friends. The participants wish to teach the elderly to use the Internet to have a new way to communicate and to enhance family cohesion. One participant who often travels for business misses his family in Taiwan and states that besides a cell phone, emailing is another way to interact and to care for the elderly.

4 Conclusion

In the past, in Taiwan, the majority of aged parents have lived in three-generation households, or with grandchildren in skipped-generation households. However, social changes have been accompanied by rapid changes in the family structure, and the usual living arrangement now includes only the nuclear family. It is interesting that the elderly and middle generation both mention personal wishes. Elders wish that their children spent more time with them and that their grandchildren would visit more often. The middle generation wishes for health, happiness and longevity for the elderly. Based on

the interview findings, the elderly who live alone in a senior home expressed fear of loneliness and the desire for companionship. Thus, the elderly actively participate in activities or societies to develop more interpersonal relationships, have diverse lifestyles and sustain their happiness. For young people, social interactions with friends and colleagues enrich their lives and allow for the exchange of new information. Influenced by the traditional culture of filial piety, the elders expect the companionship of children, as the middle generation wishes to spend more time with them.

As the Internet and similar technology have developed, network interaction has become widespread. SNSs are deeply integrated in young users' everyday lives. According to interview results, the elderly are gradually using the Internet instead of using pen and paper or telephone to contact their children and grandchildren. With the prevalence of the Internet and applications of Web 2.0-related technologies, interaction between three-generation families is no longer limited to in-person communication. Technology breaks such communication limits and brings more opportunities for contacts and sharing. This also enhances the cohesion between the elderly and their families.

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