

Impact of inter- generational relationships on older adults



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How do Intergenerational Relationships Affect Older Adults and their Family Relationships?

Intergenerational relationships have become an important topic in the fields of studying sociology and gerontology. In modern society, there are a variety of issues around older adults and their family relationships, and the intergenerational relationships have appeared to become the most significant one, due to the fact that older adults are receiving support and caregiving primarily from their adult children (Xu and Chi, 2010, p. 49).

Harmonious intergenerational relationships with family members are essential for seniors to achieve positive emotional outcomes in later life; on the other hand, broken intergenerational relationships are pernicious to older adults and would negatively affect their quality of life (Jeste, Depp & Vahia, 2010, p. 78). Intergenerational relationships have been defined as the relationships that involving people in typically one or two generations (Birditt et al. 2012, p. 627). In many cases, intergenerational relationships can also refer as parent-child relationships between older parents and adult children. In fact, many seniors believe that parent-child relationships are their most valuable relationship, as well as a key factor for them to maintain the good quality of life (Shapiro, 2004 p. 127). Therefore, this paper will investigate the question, ' how does intergenerational relationship affect older adults and their family relationships?', and the thesis will be: successful intergenerational relationships are important to maintain older adults' quality of life, as well as tightening their relations with their family members; and vice visa.

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First of all, intergenerational relationships have been categorized as a major component of the life course, especially in the later life. Shapiro (2004, p. 127) identify that intergenerational relationships can be measured by intergenerational solidarity. Thijseen (2016, p. 593) has given two definitions of intergenerational solidarity: first, it is the ratio of practical multigenerational support; second, it is the norm and believe that generations think they should behave. Since the solidarity is an awareness that refers to the ideas and behaviors among different generations, it is subjective and related to individual opinions. Therefore, because of the different life experiences and generational status, it is obvious that the assumptions of the solidarity are various between younger generations and older generations. In fact, Shapiro (2004, p. 129) finds that older generations have a greater chance to identify themselves as having a greater closeness to their children, and younger generations would have a higher chance to report themselves as not to close to their parents.

According to Xu and Chi (2010, p. 54), older adults who participate in their research have reported that intergenerational support is significant to them in many ways, such as financial support, instrumental support, and the feelings of being love and care. This implicates that intergenerational relationships could have impacts on seniors' health and it is an essential element for seniors to maintain the good quality of life. However, many older adults report that they perceive and evaluate intergenerational relationships differently with their children. With reference to Chappell et al. (2007, p. 286), these differences can be explained by the concept of the intergenerational stake, which is the assumption that illustrating the

differences of developmental needs between the two generations. Older parents are tended to invest more time, emotion, and resources on their adult children; adult children, on the contrary, are tended to emphasise the differences with their parents and require more independent from them. Therefore, older adults would contribute more and have a relatively positive rate on intergenerational relationships, but their children might have an opposite thought: they would have a weaker sense of closeness than their parents (Birditt et al., 2012, p. 628). Shapiro (2004) conduct a research on the quality of the parent-child relationship by using the data from the National Survey of Families in 1996. The result finds that older adults generally have a higher chance to overreporting intergenerational solidarity than their children. For instance, only 6.4% of seniors report their children have frequently visited them, while 69.7% of adult children report they do well on visiting their parents. At the same time, 59.4% of seniors report they have a good quality of relationships with their children, while only 13.7% of adult children share the same thought (Shapiro, 2004, p. 137). Moreover, older adults would tend to have lower negative quality relationships than their adult children, due to the fact that they believe they are not allowed to express negative feelings to their family members, but this belief does not appear in the younger generations' (Birditt et al., 2012, p. 635).

Besides, intergenerational solidarity can be affected by the living arrangement, as well as how much caregiving provided by their adult children. With reference to Chappell et al. (2007, p. 281), over 70% of seniors in Canada are living alone or with spouse, while only approximately 14% of them are living with their children. This implicates that the majority

of seniors are distanced with their children and grandchildren. According to Stuijbergen, Delden and Dykstra (2008, p. 420), the term 'geographical distance between the parent and children' can be defined as the measurement of the households' distance between older adults and their children. In the Netherlands, the mean geographical distance between the parent and children is 31.28 km. The authors argue the distance is long and the geographical separation has created difficulties for adult children to provide caregiving to their parents, including unable to react when there are emergency accidents, unable to frequently visit their older parents, and communicate only through phone and letters. Sokolec (2016, p. 168) brings another point that there is an increasing demand for caregiving to older adults in recent years. She reports that the increasing older adult clients are because their family members are unable to take care of them. Therefore, many seniors have no choice but to unwillingly move from their own home to nursing home. Data from Statistic Canada also shows that the percentage of older adults who live in health-care institution have rapidly increased from less than 2% to around 10% in 2004 (Chappell et al., 2007, p. 281).

Furthermore, cultural difference could affect intergenerational solidarity.

Cultural difference has been characterized as an important factor for intergenerational solidarity, especially among immigration families.

Warburton and McLaughlin (2006, p. 48) uses an example of older adults in Australia, in which 32% of older Australian are either born overseas or from non-English speaking countries. Seniors who follow their adult children to move to a new country might experience cultural and language barriers.

Furthermore, when they have grandchildren, they will also face problems of

culturally and linguistically diverse with them. These problems include: unable to communicate through same language, cross-cultural ideological differences, cultural shock, and so on (Warburton and McLaughlin, 2006, p. 55). For seniors, since they are born and raised overseas, they will have a higher chance of keeping their original cultural practices, which make them closely connect to their ethnic group but diverse from the dominant culture; on the other hand, for their children and grandchildren, they are more likely to assimilate and integrate with the dominant society and disconnect with their original ethnicity (Esser, 2004, p. 1130). Therefore, these differences create distance between seniors and their offspring, and their offspring might avoid close relationships with them (Klever, 2015, p. 348). Moreover, older adults play an important role in cultural maintenance, since the majority of them feel responsible for passing down cultural knowledge to their next generations (Warburton and McLaughlin, 2006, p. 52). However, Shapiro (2004, p. 131) argue that children might refuse to practice cultural norms because they do not regard them as the filial obligation. For instance, if a household's language is different from the mainstream language, the young generations might possibly refuse to learn that particular language. As a result, it might be hard to keep that language alive. This would intense the intergenerational differences because older adults tend to highly value their culture. When they cannot pass down cultural knowledge to their offspring, and their next generations do not acknowledge the culture, they might feel distressed and guilty for not fulfilling the responsibility to passing on their culture.

Last but not least, since many seniors are not living with their adult children, and they are experiencing cultural differences with their next generations, these issues might lead them into emotional cutoff among the multigenerational family. With reference to Klever (2015, p. 341), the emotional cutoff has brought up three disadvantages to older adults. First, the emotional cutoff will isolate older adults from the instrumental and emotional of family support. In other words, older adults might have feelings of isolated and uninvolved from their family members. Second, emotional cutoff could cost younger generations having a lack of knowledge about their family backgrounds and cultures. With reference to Warburton and McLaughlin (2006, p. 50), older adults are viewed as repositories of traditions and knowledgeable to culture. However, the emotional cutoff has limited the effectiveness of passing down cultural knowledge, because of the lack of interaction between grandparents and grandchildren. Third, it is harder for harder for seniors to develop emotional contact to next generations. Holton et al. (2008, p. 119) mention that wisdom comes with age because older adults have rich prior experiences and more capable of managing their emotions when compared to younger generations. Their wisdom, as well as their pieces of advice, are undoubtedly valuable to their offspring. However, these kinds of connections are harder to build, because of the emotional cutoff.

In conclusion, successful intergenerational relationships can help older adults maintain the good quality of life and have positive connections with their family members. On the contrary, unsuccessful intergenerational relationships can bring harm to older adults, both psychologically and

physically. Without a doubt, intergenerational relationships are having huge impacts on the later life of older adults. They are complicated, interconnected and are affected by cultural norms, individual experiences, and social structure. Intergenerational differences are subjective and originated from ideological and cultural differences among older parents and their adult children. To achieve intergenerational solidarity, Stolee et al. (2014, p. 712) suggest that continuously sharing opinions with family members is important for later life care planning. Also, seniors can make the important decision, such as living arrangement, together with family members, so that they can enhance their relationships with each other. There are several limitations that path the way for future research. For instance, some issues could have significant impacts on intergenerational relationships but do not cover on this paper, including changing the role of women, changing family structure, remarriage and widowed, psychological problems and so on. Future research is suggested to continuously explore these unknown fields.

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