

## **LIVING IN A THREE-GENERATION HOUSEHOLD: CONTEMPORARY MEANINGS OF THAI OLDER ADULTS.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The meanings of living in three-generation households from the viewpoint of seven Thai older adults have been explored using extended and non-directed interviews to unveil common meanings of living in one roof embedded in the experience of Thai older adults living in a three-generation household for many years. In-depth interviews and focus group discussion were also used in the process of data collection. The method of content analysis was used for data analysis. It was found that meanings of living in a three-generation household yielded happiness and pleasure. Perceptions of happiness and pleasure were included living in peace and harmony, living in comfort, and surrounding with kind and generous atmosphere. In addition, the participants reflected a feeling of pride for contributing something to family, resulted from their living arrangement. The finding of this study revealed an overall picture of the meanings of living in three-generation household of Thai older adults. Implications could be used to inform our understanding of the living arrangement that would lead to quality of life of older adults.

**Key words:** Living in three-generation household, Thai older adults, meanings.

## INTRODUCTION

The proportion of older adults is increasing rapidly in less developed countries, especially in East and South East Asia (Knodel, 1999; Hermalin, 2000). Thailand became an aging society (9%) in 2002, and is expected to be an aged society (15%) in 2020 (UNFPA, 2006). The aged population has increased, but, by contrast, co-residence rate between Thai older parents and adult children have decreased (Knodel and Ofstedal, 2002), the same as other Asian nations (Hermerlin, 2001). These changes have prompted many scholars to ask a question whether enough informal support will be available for older adults in the future (De Jong Gierveld, 1998; Hagestad, 2000).

The typical Thai family is an extended family (Boonchalaksi, 2000). The trend of family structures has changed from extended family to nuclear or single family in the past several decades. An average family size dropped from 5.6 in 1960 to 4.1 in 2000, and is to decrease to only 3.5 in 2010 (Statistic Forecast Bureau, 2008). Recent research found that only 40% of Thai older adults living in an extended family, whereas those living alone or only with a spouse have been increasing in number (Akplakorn, 2007).

In the face of accelerated population aging and the continuation of the family as the main support system for the older adults, a decline in the prevalence of extended families in Thailand has become a matter of concern. It is known that living with or nearby adult children is a predominant pattern that establishes family support (Cowgill, 1968, 1972, Knodel et al., 1995), and Thai older adults prefer to live with their adult children (Knodel et al., 1995, Wongsith and Siriboon, 1999). There is a knowledge gap regarding the perception of the older adults toward support they received from family. Yet, their perceptions of living in an extended family have not been previously described. We know little about quality or type of relationship between the co-resident in an extended family whether those relationships enhance older adults' well-being. It is important that we achieve a wider understanding of their feelings when living in an extended family.

Therefore, exploring meanings of living in an extended family will be of use to anyone seeking to understand the complex and nuanced relationships that exist between the older adults and their offsprings. It also can aid policymakers trying to address the needs of the older population.

## METHODS

### Setting

The study was conducted in suburban area in Southern region of Thailand. Focus group discussion and individual interviews were conducted. Focus group discussion was conducted at a local health center. Individual interviews were conducted at an older adult's house.

### Participants

A total of seven older adults participated in focus-group discussions, and four of them accepted being individually interviewed. Participants were recruited through field contacts. All of them were recruited at a daily gathering in the local healthcare center. The inclusion criteria were older adults living in three-generation households, and willing to participate in the study. The participants consisted of the older adults age 60 and over. Their ages varied from 66 to 85. All of them had been living in three-generation household for more than five years. Their family members varied from 5-10 persons. On average, the participants lived with two to five grandchildren.

### Data collection.

Focus-group discussion is a suitable method for exploratory research (Kitzinger, 1995; Twinn, 1997). The goal is to discover new ideas and insights that can help people to explore and clarify their views (Morgan, 1998). Following up the focus-group discussions, individual interviews allow deeper insight into certain aspects of the chosen topics (Kruger, 1998; Strickland, 1999; Roer-Strier et al., 2005). All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide in the focus-group discussions was developed from a literature review of life satisfaction of the older adults. It focused on the older adult populations' experience of living in three generation households.

their daily life, and their participation in the other family members' life. The interview guideline was tested by an older adult who lived similar to the participant in one try-out interview. The topics were found to be culturally acceptable and relevant. In the individual interviews, the guide was extended to focus on their environment, the content of life satisfaction and the involvement of the older adults in the family. To validate the findings, the participants were asked for their views about an earlier statement made by a previous participant. This made it possible for the participants to verify or decline their statement. This validation method is suitable to validate the finding without seeking consensus (Burnard and Naiyapatana, 2004).

The focus-group discussion took two hours, and was conducted by the investigators. The individual interviews took between 30 minutes and one hour, and were conducted by the principle investigator. The focus group discussions were conducted in July 2009, and the individual interviews were carried out during August and September, 2009. Before the interview, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study and requested for voluntarily participated. The participants were fully entitled to withdraw their participation at anytime.

#### Data analysis

Content analysis was conducted in accordance with the method described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). The text was divided into codes, subcategories, and categories. Quotes reflecting the different sub-categories were presented. First, the texts were read through individually several times by investigators to provide a sense of the whole. Thereafter, meaning units referring to the same content were divided into the same codes, and during the analysis, into sub-categories. Finally, the investigators discussed the findings, and agreed the two main categories of the texts.

## RESULTS

Two main categories with their sub-categories were developed, i.e., (1) happiness and pleasure, with sub-categories 'living in peace and harmony', 'living in comfort', and 'surrounding with kind

and generous atmosphere'; (2) feeling of pride for contributing to family, with subcategories "babysitting/ grandchildren care and preparation of foods". The findings are presented as follows: where A represents the focus group discussion result, where a quotation #1 to 4 represents the four different individual interviews. Quotes have been used in reporting some of the findings for the purpose of clarifying the older adults' experiences.

### Happiness and pleasure

All of the participants mentioned happiness and pleasure as a core of their feelings when living in the extended family. The sub-categories noted here included living in peace and harmony, living in comfort, and surrounding with kind and generous atmosphere. The following participants illustrate these factors in their family lives.

**Living in peace and harmony.** A situation that family members show state of being serene and calmness seemed to be important to the older adults. Several older adults stated that "fighting" could lead to anxiety and upset. Peace is the absence of arguing, and it happens naturally in their family. Therefore, living in one roof that all of the family members have control themselves and concern each other feeling brings peace and harmony to the participants.

*"They make me feel well as they do not fight with each other. I am upset when I saw or heard them arguing." (1)*

*"As we live in the same house, if we fight all the time, sure we cannot live together like this. We have learned how to control ourselves or our desire and how to share so that we can live without fighting. The way we eating at home together, no matter how simple a meal...if we have little, we eat less, and we are happy to share food with each other."(2)*

*"When they get mad at my grandchildren, I come to support my grandchildren and then everything is going to be O.K., no fighting anymore."(A)*

**Living in comfort.** The second most frequently mentioned meaning of co-residing with children and grandchildren was having enough free time for relaxation. The older adults can put their mind at rest as they have nothing to worry about because their children will take responsibility for their daily living conditions, such as financial support, housework aids, and care during illness. Their adult children are contributing their money to cover household expenses.

*“What I can expect, if I have to admit to hospital today, is that all of my children will be with me there”. (3)*

*“If she (adult children) has time, she always does it-. My daughter said - now it is my turn-. Someone else will look after you - you will be able to sit back and relax”. (2)*

*“They (adult children) give me money that covers my expenses because I cannot earn money anymore, or at least they did not neglect me”. (1)*

**Surrounding with kind and generous atmosphere.** One of the interesting sub-categories noted here was that many participants loved to be surrounded by their family members. They also mentioned about perception of a sense of love, respect, and a desire to be helped out from their children. There were a wide range of perceptions mentioned by the participants, as follows:

**Consideration mind:**

*“On certain days, when my son came back from work he took me to Lotus (the local shopping mall) to wander around. He said that I had been sitting in the house for a whole day so he wanted to take me out. He never feels bored hanging around with me.” (A)*

**Closeness relationship:**

*“I feel closest to my children. They are very fond of me, helpful and they do not neglect their mother.”(A)*

*“I am glad every time when I see them- living together, let me see my children and my grandchildren everyday- just see their face, I feel better.”(4)*

Another aspect of participants' feeling, when living in the three-generation household, is close contact and strong family ties that are conveyed in form of hugs and shared activities. Feelings of closeness and affection run high, and are more intense when living together. Many participants talked about the feeling as a key indicator of meaning of living in one roof.

*“I cannot explain the feeling when my grandchildren give me a hug- -. It is kind of happiness- . I felt connecting with them.”(2)*

*“She (the elder's child) always asks me if I want something to eat more or anything else when she is going out.”(3)*

*“I love to see all of them eating together- -, that is my happiness- -, when they come back from work or school, we enjoy sitting around chatting and having supper together.”(A)*

**Feeling of pride for contributing to family**

A second category of what it means to older adults to live in an extended family is the perception of self-esteem. Most of the participants indicated that the overall perception of self-esteem was feeling of pride for contributing to family. They insisted that feeling of pride meant being able to devote time and energy to do some things that important for their family members. There was an example of activities mentioned by the participants as shown in the following quotation:

**Babysitting/ grandchildren care:**

*“I was taking care of grandchildren. I brought them up without doing any harm. It is a very responsible job. Of course, they are my life and soul and that I want to do it by myself. I do not trust anyone to look after him (grandchildren).”(A)*

*"Although I feel tired sometimes, I am happy to help my children- -, raising a child is not kind of easy job especially when you have no one at home in the day time." (2)*

*"I encourage her (daughter in law) to give birth- -, I said to her that it would be better if you gave birth now because I am still healthy and that I can help you to raise the child."(3)*

#### **Preparation of foods:**

*"I fix a meal for everybody in family-, I love to do that- , it is my pride and joy". (1)*

*"I always prepare meal for everybody- -, they just sit and eat- -. My husband still earns money from his work as selling liquid latex from the rubber trees, and spends it for groceries and- -, some kind of- -, social events such as wedding ceremony or ordination ceremony. So, we hardly ask for money from our children-".(2)*

## **DISCUSSION**

These findings help one understand the perception of Thai older adults co-residing in the extended family. The aspect of shared positive meanings of living in an extended family was uncovered. It is the same as the results of previous research on psychological and life satisfaction consequences of living arrangement (Xu, 2001; Silverstein et al., 2006). Living within an extended family represents the most complete fulfillment of the Thai doctrine of "katanyu katavedi", the essence of Thai kinship relations, and may directly protect the well-being of the older adults. In addition, older parents and adult children exchange more instrumental support when they live together than when they live apart (Agree et al., 2002; Yan et al., 2003).

The interpretation that all of the older adults in this study perceived themselves as living with happiness and pleasure has important implications for policymakers because it supports conventional assumptions that elders in Thai society should co-reside with their adult children. Moreover, the perception of self-esteem of the older adults has

an important issue. Since grandparents in Thailand, and other Asian countries, are valuable resources to families, where parents are not able to fulfill their parenting duties (Hermalin et al., 1998; Chen et al., 2000). The involvement of grandparents as caregivers to grandchildren has traditionally been important in families when sons and their wives go to work during the day (Parish and Whyte, 1978). As do grandparents in most nations of the world, grandparents in Thailand play an important role in shoring up the family. However, what is distinctive about Thai grandparents is that their contributions take place within a kinship system. In Thailand, a society that emphasizes collective family goals over individual goals shows the contributions of grandparents to the welfare of their children's families that fulfill a cultural mandate and are highly valued. Such provisions allow grandparents to receive greater respect from younger generations, which in turn enhances their sense of self-esteem and self-worth within the family.

Although this study was one of those that explored the meaning of living in a three-generation household of Thai older adults, some limitations of our study design are needed to be mentioned as well. There was a limitation in the sampling procedure. Approaching the experience of living in the extended family from additional and different perspectives might have increased the richness of findings. For example, recruitment efforts might have targeted informants receiving family support but who had not been living within extended family, or elders who had previously lived in the extended family, may have enriched the interpretation.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors are grateful to all participants who were willing to share their perceptions. This study was funded by the research center, Faculty of Nursing, Prince of Songkla University.

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