Living with Parents: Evolving Family Dynamics within Singapore Households

Dr Leong Chan-Hoong
Head (Social Lab) & Senior Research Fellow

&

Ms Paveena Seah
Senior Research Analyst

Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore

Asian Family Conference:
Building Resilient Family Ties in Ageing Societies

29 November 2017, Singapore
Contents

• Introduction
• Research Questions
• Singapore Panel Study on Social Dynamic
• Quantitative findings based on Wave 1 Survey
• Qualitative findings based on Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)
• Paradox - Realistic expectations about living with children
• Policy recommendations
Introduction

Seismic changes in household structure and family values over the last few decades (MSF Report on Families And Households 2000 – 2014):

• Nuclear family is the dominant household structure

• Most nuclear families are couple-based households with children, followed by Heads Of Household (who are married or never-married) living with their older parents

• Among all 3G households, 72.1% have at least one member aged 65 years and above; 23.9% have a young child (aged below 7 years) and an elderly (aged 65 years and above)
Introduction

Reasons for living with older parents (and parents-in-law):

• Taking care of parent(s) who is widowed, old or in poor health
• Require assistance with childcare

• Parent(s)’ expectation
• Filial piety, or responsibility as a son

• Preference for multi-generation households
• Maintain close family ties
Research Questions

How does living with parents (or in-laws) correlate with the various aspects of well-being? Is that affected by marital status?

To answer these research questions, we conducted statistical analyses on the Singapore Panel Study on Social Dynamics Wave 1 data.

Picture source: http://lgmontessori.com/links-to-parents/
First household panel study to track family resilience in Singapore.


Will interview all household members aged 18 and above in Wave 4 (2018), thus offering 360 degrees overview on family dynamics.
• Wave 1 (2015): 5,002 resident Heads of Household (HoH)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3,665</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>659</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced/ Separated</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>5,002</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Living arrangement</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living with parent(s)</td>
<td>889</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not living with parent(s)</td>
<td>3,321</td>
<td>66.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hence, it is crucial to examine how the intersection between the Heads of Household’s living arrangement and marital status influence family resilience, controlling for age and income.
We examined family resilience within each group and compared HoH living with parents and HoH not living with parents, using **three indicators of family resilience**:

1. **General household satisfaction**
   - Satisfaction within the family, quality of life, and achievements

2. **Financial resilience**
   - Ratings on past, current, and future financial situations

3. **Family ties**
   - Having meals together, compromise where necessary, not keep feelings from each other

Picture source:
http://chestersc.org/finance/
• Heads of Households who are married and living with parents consistently demonstrated lower household satisfaction, controlling for age (left) and household income (right).

Respondents who are married generally reported greater satisfaction; living arrangement with parents affects young and mature couples, and across income groups.
Financial resilience

• Singles/divorcees and demonstrated greater financial resilience regardless of living arrangement with parents, controlling for household income (right).

• Heads of households who are married and living with parents demonstrated lower financial resilience, controlling for age (left) and household income (right).

Estimated Marginal Means of Financial Resilience

Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Age of HOH = 51.77,17

Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Monthly Household Income = 2.44
Family ties

- Consistent with household satisfaction, respondents who are married reported stronger family ties, controlling for age (left) and household income (right).

- Quality of family ties decreased living with at least one parent, controlling for age (left) and household income (right).
Key Findings: Singapore Panel Study on Social Dynamics Wave 1

- Being married linked to improved general household satisfaction and family ties

- Living arrangement with parents has profound effects on various components of well-being

- Living arrangement interacts with marital status, impact cuts across age and household income groups

- Relationship within household is seemingly an important determinant of tension
Findings from FGDs

To further explain our observations, we conducted a series of Focus Group Discussions with 16 Heads of Households in our panel study between May and June 2017. These respondents live with their older parents and are of various age groups and socio-economic status.

Three themes emerged:
1. Tension and conflict between family members, especially between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law and the resulting sandwiched position of the son/husband
2. Caregiving for parents affects financial adequacy
3. Parents’ individual idiosyncrasies affects quality of family ties
Findings from FGDs –
Tensions between family members

“I don’t know if it’s the same for all parents in that generation, because they have this mentality that, “My daughter-in-law comes back, must come out and do things and, you know, build rapport.” And it doesn’t happen that way.”

– Mr Wee, married, aged 50 and above

“About having problems between your spouse and your mother, yes, there will be problems for sure. The reason why I got divorced is not because my ex couldn’t get along with my mum, but it was... It contributed to the final decision, you know.”

– Mr Loh, divorced, aged 50 and above
Findings from FGDs – Tensions between family members

“But if you have two women in the same household, like both of them are right, so as a guy, do you obey as the obedient son or as the husband? Sometimes you can’t decide.

If you can’t decide and you keep quiet, you’ll get into trouble. If you say something, you only please one person, right? So, either way, that’s the problem for me because I don’t want that to be a barrier to say, “I don’t want to get married because of this.”

I still have to but I may have to hurt someone’s feelings. I think in that case, my mum will be very disappointed because I’m the only one left, you know, so that’s the problem that’s coming, so, yah.”

- Mr Kang, never-married, aged 50 and above
Findings from FGDs – Caregiving for parents

“Because our parents are aging and they are not the very well-educated type; financially, most of them are not very well-off, so they have a lot of dependence on us.”

- Mr Wee, married, aged 50 and above

“You see, we all very low income, we pay for one time $90 plus for catheterization set, how much (is it) already? Then, in between (for a period of) ten days, (the catheter) drop(s) off one time, (so in just) one month, I spend $400 already.”

- Ms Tan, never-married, aged 50 and above
Findings from FGDs – Parents’ individual idiosyncrasies

“My mother is also quite particular. She like cleanliness. She doesn’t like it if you touch her things. She is particular.”

- Mr Fang, married, aged 40-60 years

“Older folks tend to nag. They can repeat the same sentence several times a day. She likes to repeat the same thing over and over.”

- Mdm Lin, married, aged 40-60 years
SPSSD HoH respondents expressed willingness to take care of their older parents and an obligation to live with their older parents.

At the same time, HoH respondents expressed hope to live with their adult children in the future. However, they are unwilling to demand that of their children. Why?

Four reasons emerged:
1. Cognisant of conflicts that may arise
   (e.g., communication breakdown, differences in lifestyles)
2. Do not want to be a burden to children
   (i.e., prefer to be self-sufficient, live independently)
3. Respect children’s need for personal space, time and privacy
4. Respect children’s spouse preferred living arrangement
“But in future, when they grow up… it is difficult to say. It mostly depends on the [my child’s] wife. If the woman he marries cannot get along with his parents… then… it’s a common issue.”

-Mr Fang, married, aged 40-60 years

“I HOPE to live with my children, but it is better to live apart. There are bound to be conflicts over time. If we have the means, it’s best to live apart. Because I think they [younger people] feel that it is better to live apart independently. They can have their own personal space. If you really cannot, then you live with them. If not, just go to the old folks home.”

- Mr Choo, married, aged 40-60 years
Policy Recommendations

• HDB Proximity Grant is in line with the value preference of Singaporeans and it has contributed to a more cohesive and resilient family system

• More financial assistance for middle-income Singaporeans who are taking care of older parents with disabilities and serious chronic diseases

• **Expand the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Programme (PREP)** to include managing in-law relationships.

• **Marriage Preparation Programmes** for parents of the soon-to-wed/newly-wed couples; impart information on how to be a good parent-in-law (especially mother-in-law).
Thank You

Correspondence:
Social Lab
Institute of Policy Studies
National University of Singapore
20 Evans Road, Singapore 259365
ips.soclab@nus.edu.sg