



Power and ambivalence in intergenerational communication: Deciding to institutionalize in Shanghai[☆]



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ABSTRACT

China's tradition of taking care of one's aging parents continues to evolve, as evidenced by the growth in nursing home residents in Shanghai. However, how these families make the decision to institutionalize remains unclear. To fill this gap, this study draws on power relations to examine communication dynamics when oldest-old and their adult children decide to institutionalize. This study used a phenomenological approach. Twelve dyads of matched elderly residents and their children participated in face-to-face, in-depth interviews ($N = 24$). The format and content of intergenerational communication indicated that both conflicts and compromises took place. Adult children achieved greater decision-making power than their frail parents, which evoked older adults' ambivalent feelings. A discrepancy in perceived filial piety between generations also emerged. These dynamics of caregiving decision-making offer insight in understanding evolving filial piety in urban China.

Introduction

Between 1953 and 1964, China's population swelled by an additional 112 million (Riskin, 2000). This baby-boomer generation contributes to a current disproportionate increase in the population of older adults and middle-aged adults approaching retirement in China (Du, 2013). As the largest developing country in the world, China must contend with this rapidly growing aging population with foreseeably overwhelming long-term care needs (Feng et al., 2011). By 2050, more than 30% of China's total population will likely be 65 and older, a number roughly equivalent to the current 316 million United States' population (United States Census Bureau, 2013). For the oldest-old in urban China, while their frailty continues to increase (National Institute on Aging Demography Center, 2010), their adult children's availability to provide family caregiving has begun to diminish (Chen & Ye, 2013; Gu, Dupre, & Liu, 2007), and their long-term care needs and associated costs are anticipated to increase significantly (Peng, Ling, & He, 2010).

As the largest and most developed city in China, Shanghai is confronting not only the sheer size of its general population but a record-setting increase in the aging population. In 2015, the population aged 60 and over was about 4.40 million, or approximately 30.2% of its 14.4 million registered residents (i.e., *Hukou*), with a 5.3% annual increase rate (Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, 2016). In particular, the oldest-old population (80+) had a 3.6% increase rate, reaching 0.78 million (Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, 2016).

With this rapid growth of the aging population, older adults' utilization of nursing home care in Shanghai has increased by 38.4%, from 505 facilities in 2006 to 699 in 2015. The year 2015 alone saw an increase of 11,000 nursing home beds (Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, 2016). However, the 126,000 beds in the 699 nursing homes in Shanghai in 2015 only covered less than 3% of the aging population in the city (Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, 2016). Despite the tension between institutional caregiving and filial norms, there is evidence of increasing popularity of nursing homes among the Chinese oldest-old in urban areas (Gu et al., 2007). However, the development of formal support specifically targeting the oldest-old has lagged behind. The shift from traditional family caregiving to nursing home care among the oldest-old population calls for an exploration of how these families decide to institutionalize. Specifically, this study aims to analyze the nuanced power relations and ambivalence in the intergenerational communication during the decision-making process around institutionalization.

Literature review

Uneven power relations exist in the dynamics of intergenerational communication (Barker, Giles, & Harwood, 2004). Power refers to an individual's ability to influence others' thoughts or behaviors and to resist such attempts to influence by other individuals (Pecchioni, Wright, & Nussbaum, 2005).

[☆] This paper is a part of the book (Chen, 2016).

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During their life course, individuals take on different family roles, and these roles possess different levels of power within the relationships among family members (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). For example, parents control a number of resources when their children are younger, such as money, affection, and material possessions, and they may use these to try to influence their children's behaviors and decisions. As parents age and children become adults, the power stream may reverse, favoring the children. Relevant to this study, the distribution of decision-making power regarding institutionalization may favor the younger generation. That is, adult children may be more involved in the decision-making process around institutionalization than their parents, or even decide for their parents (Moye & Marson, 2007). As such, both generations strive for greater power during the decision-making process around institutionalization. Informed by power relations, this study intends to capture the nuanced dynamics of how each generation reacts to the other's stance during the decision-making process around institutionalization.

Although qualitative methods allow researchers to develop a rich understanding of the psychosocial factors behind individuals' complex decisions to seek caregiving support (Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007), most qualitative studies on caregiving decision-making have investigated only one generation. For example, Johnson, Popejoy, and Radina (2010) identified two themes, "They put me in here" and "I/we made the decision," in terms of American elderly residents' experiences of being institutionalized. Studies from adult children's perspective also reported deterioration of independence and confusion as the primary reasons for institutionalizing their elderly parents (e.g., Cohen-Mansfield & Wirtz, 2009). These findings from Western contexts seem to simply dichotomize generations' power relations during the decision-making process, in particular, emphasizing the younger generation's greater power while leaving much of the nuanced communication content unattended to.

However, older adults in China may continue to feel entitled to decision-making power and strive for autonomy because filial piety—the Chinese caregiving tradition—validates the power of elderly parents (Zhang, Harwood, & Hummert, 2005). Filial piety refers to an unconditional attitude, value, and behavioral obedience of the younger generation to fulfill the older generation's needs for care and support (Cheung & Kwan, 2009; Chou, 2010). With the evolution of filial piety in urban China (Cheung & Kwan, 2009), older adults' attachment to traditional notions of filial piety and their adult children's recognition of their generation's advantages—such as higher levels of education, greater financial resources, and living more independently than their elderly parents (Du, 2013)—may contribute to widening gaps in power relations between the generations. Such advantages can lead the younger generation to assume that their elderly parents have limited autonomy and/or knowledge about long-term care, and as a result, dismiss their parents' decision-making power (Giles, Ryan, & Anas, 2008). Consequently, conflicts and compromises may take place in intergenerational communication, which reflect generational values and expectations. Indeed, examining intergenerational communication can reveal how broad sociocultural shifts (e.g., urbanization) manifest in interpersonal behaviors at an individual level (Zhang et al., 2005).

The conflicts and compromises in the intergenerational communication relate to another concept—intergenerational ambivalence. It refers to a simultaneous mixture of harmony and conflict in intergenerational relationships (Connidis, 2015; Guo, Chi, & Silverstein, 2013; Lüscher, 2002, 2011; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998). This concept moves beyond dualistic views of intergenerational relationships, emphasizing the coexistence of positive and negative feelings and behaviors between generations (Connidis, 2015; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998; Merz, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2007).

Intergenerational ambivalence is multilevel, an intersection of individual, family, and structural levels (Connidis, 2015). On the individual level, psychological ambivalence refers to simultaneously holding contradictory sentiments about family relationships (Connidis,

2010). These psychological sentiments can lead to contradictions between behaviors and sentiments (Connidis, 2015). On the family level, sociological ambivalence involves family dynamics and is manifested in interactions among family members (Connidis, 2015). On the structural level, the negotiations between generations, regardless of harmony or conflicts, or even the mixture of harmony and conflicts, inherently relate to social structures, such as institutions and social policies (Connidis, 2015; Lorenz-Meyer, 2004). Given the evolving concept of filial piety in China, social changes can lead to intergenerational ambivalence (Connidis, 2015; Guo et al., 2013). Although the concept of intergenerational ambivalence is rooted in Western contexts, this study extends the efforts of previous work by applying this concept to communication dynamics during the decision-making process around institutionalization in Shanghai.

In addition, a majority of nursing-home residents in urban China maintain relatively high cognitive functioning (Chu & Chi, 2008), suggesting the need for further research. To date, only a few qualitative studies have specifically focused on the decision-making process around institutionalization in urban China. Cheng, Rosenberg, Wang, Yang, and Li (2012) interviewed nursing home residents and their relatives in Beijing and found various types of access—geographical, economic, and sociocultural—influenced their decision to institutionalize. However, they did not examine intergenerational communication during the decision-making process. Zhan, Feng, and Luo (2008) interviewed nursing home residents and their children in Nanjing to examine their attitudes toward the evolving filial piety related to their experience of institutionalization. But the study did not report on the decision-making process in detail. Although the first Chen (2015) analyzed the decision-making process around institutionalization based on both generations' experiences, the study did not explore power relations and intergenerational ambivalence that took place in these conversations.

Methods

Study design

The original study used a descriptive phenomenological approach (Husserl, 1965) to explore the decision-making process around institutionalization among nursing home residents and their adult children in Shanghai. The current study analyzed the data based on the dynamics of intergenerational communication during the decision-making process.

Phenomenology was the product of Husserl's belief that psychological phenomena could be examined in a rigorous manner (Husserl, 1965). Husserl (1967) argued that consciousness could provide meaning for reality or the world of experience. What appears in consciousness is a phenomenon, providing the impetus for experience and for generating new knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). In other words, what is important for a phenomenological study is to investigate the essence of what people experience and how they interpret or make meaning out of these experiences.

This study paid special attention to the natural attitude and lifeworld of descriptive phenomenology, because these were particularly revealing in the intergenerational communication regarding to the decision to institutionalize. Participants' intentionality and epoché also transformed before and after institutionalization. The examinations of intentionality and epoché in the same project were reported in another article (Chen, 2015).

Natural attitude

Natural attitude refers to a unified world of meaning, which individuals assume is shared by others who share the same culture (Schütz, 1967). Individuals are unaware of various natural attitudes in their life, because of their taken-for-granted nature (Bevan, 2007). These natural attitudes construct individuals' everyday lives and bear the meanings of their lives—their taken-for-granted world (Merleau-

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