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## Original Research

# Evolving parent–adult child relations: location of multiple children and psychological well-being of older adults in China

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study examines the interplay among intergenerational emotional closeness, location of multiple children, and parental depressive symptoms in the context of massive migration in rural China.

**Study design:** This study is based on a longitudinal survey.

**Methods:** Longitudinal data were collected from a stratified random sample of age 60 years and older living in rural townships within Chaohu, a primarily agricultural municipal district with massive out-migration in China. In 2009, 1224 individuals completed the survey, and 977 (79.8% of the original participants) were followed up in 2012. We estimate fixed-effects models to examine how changing collective emotional cohesion and the total composition of children's location affect parents' depressive symptoms.

**Results:** Descriptive analyses show that both the composition of children's location and intergenerational emotional closeness are subject to changes during a 3-year survey interval. Results from fixed-effect models further demonstrate that collective emotional closeness and psychological well-being are positively associated with each other. This association is the strongest when all children are local, but it becomes less prominent when there are more migrant than local children.

**Conclusions:** This study has provided important evidence that both intergenerational cohesion and location of multiple children evolve over time and jointly influence parents' psychological well-being in later life. The left-behind older adults are not necessarily the most vulnerable group in rural China. Those with most adult children living close by could also suffer from a deficit in psychological well-being if the emotional bond between them is weak.

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## Introduction

When examining psychological well-being in later life, one can hardly ignore the role of emotional bonds between parents and their adult children. A burgeoning literature has documented the linkage between intergenerational cohesion and parental well-being.<sup>1–3</sup> Close relations with children may directly improve emotional health of older adults, by strengthening feelings of self-efficacy and instilling a sense of intimacy and trust with offspring, while poor relationship quality or negative feelings toward children were found to be associated with psychological distress and declining quality of life.<sup>4–6</sup> However, the quality of the relationship between parents and adult children is often challenging to characterize conceptually or methodologically. It is particularly true when parents have multiple children and may have ties of mixed quality. In addition, relationships can evolve over time as the circumstances of children or their parents change over the life course.

In this article, we extend the existing line of research by focusing on two relatively underexplored aspects in the area of emotional closeness between parents and adult children: first, how changes in emotional closeness could elevate or diminish parental psychological well-being in later life and second, the implications of intergenerational cohesion in the milieu of multiple adult children. The study is set in China, where intergenerational relations are historically strong and adult children have traditionally been the main source of old age support.<sup>7,8</sup> The extent to which filial piety has undergone erosion in the era of rapid economic development and social changes have been a contentious topic among the public and scholars alike.<sup>9,10</sup> In particular, the trend of massive rural-to-urban migration has received an enormous amount of attention. A recent report from the National Bureau of Statistics of China estimated that about 277 million people have migrated from villages to cities in search of work, often leaving their elderly parents behind.<sup>11</sup> Numerous studies, examining the consequence of children's out-migration on parental well-being, have made considerable contribution to understand the well-being of left-behind elderly in the context of China's great migration.<sup>12–15</sup> However, most of these studies focused on parent–child dyads, that is, whether the child is a migrant child or not, and further examined relations between the parent and that particular migrant or non-migrant child, without taking into consideration the location of other children.<sup>15,16</sup> To get a complete picture of how intergenerational cohesion affects old age well-being, it is imperative to go beyond the dyadic relationship between parents and a single child and to take multiple children into account.<sup>1,17</sup> We, therefore, contribute to the existing literature by exploring the health implication of collective intergenerational relationship, both in its emotional cohesion and geographic proximity.

First, we maintain that collective emotional closeness between parents and adult children can be fluid in later life. Affectual solidarity, or feeling of emotional closeness, warmth, and intimacy, among family members is known as one of the key dimensions of intergenerational solidarity, a concept that has been applied frequently on intergenerational

relations and late-life well-being in the aging literature.<sup>18,19</sup> The intergenerational solidarity theory treats intergenerational relationship as an 'open and fluid concept', that is, the balance of intergenerational relations could change over the life course.<sup>20,21</sup> However, compared with many studies focusing on changes in intergenerational exchange and support,<sup>16,20</sup> relatively little attention has been paid to changes in intergenerational emotional cohesion, and it is often treated as fixed in empirical analyses. Using a two-wave longitudinal survey with a 3-year interval, we examine whether changes in collective emotional closeness between parents and all children lead to any subsequent changes in parental psychological well-being.

Second, we argue that it is not the geographic locality of a single child but the composition of all children's location that matters, and the connection between collective intergenerational cohesion and psychological well-being could be conditioned by the specific composition of all children's geographical location. Instead of just distinguishing migrant from non-migrant children in a dyad, we examine the compositional effects of migrant and non-migrant children, using a five-category typology that distinguishes those with all local children from those with a mixture of migrant and non-migrant children to those with all children migrated away. Structural solidarity, often measured by geographic proximity between parents and children, is another key dimension of intergenerational solidarity.<sup>18</sup> Many previous studies have examined the linkage between intergenerational geographic proximity and later-life well-being, especially focusing on children's migration.<sup>22–24</sup> Some found that increasing geographical distance may negatively affect older parents' well-being because it disrupts traditional way of family interactions and leads to a decline in the probability of getting offspring support when parents are in need.<sup>14,15,22</sup> Other studies also documented that migrant children maintain a strong commitment to their aging parents regardless of a lack of opportunity structure for support exchange,<sup>25</sup> with some reporting beneficial effects of children's migration, such as receiving more financial support from migrants than local children and buffering the negative effect of migration.<sup>12,16</sup> However, relatively little research has examined the intersection of affectual and structural solidarity and their effects on parents' late-life well-being. We maintain that proximity could act as a 'double-edged sword.' A high level of intimacy between parents and adult children in general could translate into the biggest advantage for parents if all their children are in close proximity, but weak or distant relationships or relationships with mixed quality could be the most damaging for those parents with children all live close by. For parents with most children having migrated away, their connection may play a lesser role in affecting their emotional health.

## Methods

### Sample

We use data from the 2009 and 2012 waves of a longitudinal study, 'the Well-being of Older Adults in Anhui Province,'

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