

The Relationship between Ties with Adult Children and Life Satisfaction among the Middle-Aged, Young-Old, and Oldest-Old Koreans

Extended Abstract

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1. Introduction and Theoretical Background

One of the prominent determinants of well-being during later life is the relationship with adult children (Connidis, 2009). This is especially so for Korea, due to its strong emphasis on expectations and responsibilities based on the virtue of filial piety. Through contact with adult children and exchanges of support, Korean older adults find meaning in life and maintain successful aging (Sung, 2001). There are many ways to measure how strong a person's ties with children are, one of which include using social network indicators. Social network refers to a "range of social ties which people maintain with others, which provide them with ... feelings of solidarity and belongingness" (Litwin, 1995, p.156). It generally consists of three dimensions; structural, interactional, and functional. Structural refers to the people included in a network, interactional refers to contact among people within a network, and functional refers to the sharing of support within a network. This study measured ties with adult children using these three dimensions.

In studying the role of ties with children for life satisfaction during later life, it is also important to note major role changes across later life span that may have different implications for individual's ties with children. More specifically, for the middle-aged, roles and responsibilities are the most dynamic and active: children leave the nest, couples have more time to rebuild their relationship, and the dependency of aging parents begins (Lewis, 1990). As for older adults, studies suggest that the elderly need to be viewed as two heterogeneous groups, consisting of the young-old and the oldest-old who live qualitatively different lives (Neugarten, 1974). The young-old are independent and socially active, while the oldest-old are highly fragile and are in need of great support. Such differences may have implications for aging parent's ties with children as well, particularly in terms of support received and support provided.

However, although there are many studies that examine the role of ties with children for older adult's well-being, very few studies take into consideration the heterogeneity among the older population. As for the middle-aged adults, their ties with children and its implication for well-being has been relatively understudied compared to that of older adults. Therefore, based on the three dimensions of social network to measure the extent of ties with adult children, this

study aims to examine and compare how different types of ties with adult children affect life satisfaction of the Korean middle-aged, young-old, and oldest-old.

2. Research Methods

1) Data

This study used data from the first and second waves (2006, 2008) of the Korean Longitudinal Studies of Ageing (KLoSA). The sample included in the analysis was Korean adults aged 45 and older who had at least one adult child (N=6,005). For the purpose of comparison between age groups, the sample was divided into three groups by age: middle-aged (from 45 to 64, n=3,065), young-old (from 65 to 79, n=2,543), and oldest-old (80 and older, n=397).

2) Measurement

(1) *Dependent variable at wave 2: Life Satisfaction.* Life satisfaction was measured by creating a latent variable composed of four different dimensions of satisfaction: Satisfaction with economic status, health, family relationship, and overall quality of life. Each of the dimensions ranged from 0 to 10.

(2) *Independent variables at wave 1: Ties with Children.* To reflect diverse forms of ties with children based on the three dimensions of social network, this study included five indicators of ties: number of children and coresidence with children for structural dimension, frequency of contact with non-residential children for interactional dimension, and receiving support from non-residential children and providing support to non-residential children for functional dimension. Coresidence with children was coded as dichotomous variable, with 0 = not living with children and 1 = living with at least one children. Frequency of contact ranged from 0 to 10 (0 = no contact at all ~ 10 = almost every day), and receiving and providing support were measured by adding two dichotomous responses about receiving/providing financial and nonfinancial support.

(3) *Covariates.* Covariates included in this analysis are: Age, gender, employment status, education level, marital status, household income, and health status.

3) Analysis

The analysis was performed in two steps. Using Mplus 7.31 with full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation, we initially examined the effects of ties with children on life satisfaction for the three age groups. In the second step, multi-group analysis was performed to test for the significance of between-group differences regarding the effects of ties with children. Multi-group analysis was done by first, constraining all parameters to be equal across all groups, and then freeing one parameter at a time for free estimation of effects to see if model fit shows significant improvement.

3. Preliminary Findings and Implications

Table 1. The effects of ties with children on life satisfaction of the mid-aged, young-old, and the oldest-old ($N = 6,005$)			
Independent Variables	Mid-Aged ($n=3,065$)	Young-Old ($n=2,543$)	Oldest-Old ($n=397$)
	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
Covariates			
Age	0.01	-0.03**	0.01
Gender	0.03	-0.06	-0.05
Employment	0.26**	0.26**	0.12
Education	0.42***	0.41***	0.38*
Marital Status	0.43***	0.07	-0.15
Income	0.11***	0.08***	0.10*
Chronic disease/disability	-0.45***	-0.35***	-0.14
Ties with Children			
Living with children	-0.11 ⁺	0.01	0.50*
Number of children	0.05	0.04	0.05
Support from children	0.05	0.25***	0.1
Support to children	-0.06	-0.20***	-0.07
Contact with children	0.17***	0.19***	0.20**

+ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 1 presents the effects of ties with children on life satisfaction of the three age groups. For the middle-aged, living with children had marginally significant negative effect on life satisfaction, whereas contact with children had a positive effect. For the young-old, receiving support from children was associated with increased life satisfaction, while giving support was associated with lower satisfaction. Contact with children maintained its positive effect for the young-old as well. Finally, for the oldest-old, both living with children and contact with children were positively related with life satisfaction. The follow-up multi-group analysis that tested for the significance of these between group effects showed that the contrasting effect of coresidence with children for the middle-aged and oldest-old was significant ($\Delta X^2=10.16(1)$, $p < .001$).

These results shows that for structural ties, living with children has opposite implications for middle-aged and the oldest-old. For the oldest-old, living with children could be a benefit because children are an important source of support for daily living and every day functioning. Considering increased need of assistance among oldest-old adults due to declining health and lack of strength, having an adult child living together could be a significant resource for this age group. On the other hand, for the middle-aged, having an adult children living with them appears to be a source of dissatisfaction. This may be caused by prolonged dependency of adult children on their parents, when the general expectation is for children to be independent once they reach adulthood. This difference is further highlighted by the multi-group analysis result

which showed significant group differences in the effects of coresidence with children between the middle-aged and the oldest-old.

Second, functional ties, as measured by support received from and given to children, were significantly related to life satisfaction for the young-old. This suggests that exchanges of support become particularly important for this age group. The young-old are in their retirement phase with declining resources, but are also likely to have dependent oldest-old parents who are in need of support. Such contextual constraints create more burden for the young-old parents, leading provision of support to children more stressful compared to other age groups. On the similar note, this also means that receiving support could be particularly beneficial for the young-old, since the young-old are faced with multiple sources of needs. For the middle-aged and the oldest old, the implications of support exchange with their children may not be as significant because they either have enough resources to support multiple generations (middle-aged), or other forms of support becomes more important than the exchanges of support (e.g. coresidence with children for the oldest-old).

Finally, frequency of contact was found to have a significantly positive influence on well-being for all three age groups. This indicates that among the diverse forms of ties with children, the importance of interactional ties persist over multiple stages of life.

In summary, these findings show that different types of ties with adult children have distinct effects on well-being according to age group. Structural ties had contrasting implications for the middle-aged and the oldest old, possibly due to the distinct contexts surrounding the two age groups. Functional tie was particularly significant for the young-old, perhaps due to resource constraints caused during this age. However, for interactional ties, it turned out to be an important contributor of life satisfaction for all three age groups. Such findings are meaningful in the sense that it shows how ties with children can have different meanings for older adults at different life stages. In addition, these further suggest possible future directions for policies and interventions that aim to improve older adults' well-being.

5. References

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