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Citation for published version (APA):

Jothikaran, T. A. J., Meershoek, A., Ashok, L., & Krumeich, A. (2020). Older adults in traditional and modern living arrangements in southern India: The importance of maintaining a sense of belonging and positive intergenerational exchanges. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 54, Article 100867. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2020.100867>

## Document status and date:

Published: 01/09/2020

## DOI:

[10.1016/j.jaging.2020.100867](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2020.100867)

## Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

## Document license:

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# Older adults in traditional and modern living arrangements in southern India: The importance of maintaining a sense of belonging and positive intergenerational exchanges

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## Introduction

Rapid economic expansion and the rise of technology on a global scale have undoubtedly brought about many benefits in both developed and developing countries, but some researchers have pointed out that such changes have also significantly altered centuries-old cultural and societal structures that provide stability and continuity. Studying the concomitant impact of such critical transformations, many researchers have labeled these fundamental shifts, among which is the decline of traditional family structures, as almost exclusively negative. An examination of these shifts in a developing country such as India, however, indicates that such interpretations are simplistic in that viewing the decline of traditional values and responsibilities exclusively in terms of 'loss' and a decreasing sense of coherence fails to acknowledge the more nuanced and subtle processes of the realities on the ground. Nonetheless, 76% of the older people in India continue to live with at least one of their children (United Nations Population Fund, 2012). To better understand these processes on the ground, we interviewed various generations living in different arrangements in India about their everyday experiences. This paper focuses on the perspectives and experiences of older persons in these various arrangements.

India is well known globally for its traditional familial structures, in which multiple generations coreside. This form of joint family structure is said to be deeply rooted in the cultural ethos of India and in its pervasive religious ideologies (Croll, 2008; Gupta & Pillai, 2002; Vera-Sanso, 2004). Generally, these family units in India are comprised of at least three generations, a married couple, the parents of the male half of the couple, the couple's sons and their wives, and children and single or widowed daughters, all of whom live together under the same roof (Chadha, 2004; Wadley, 2010).

Over the years, many authors have argued that the essence of multigenerational co-residence and the principle underlying involves a spirit of reciprocity (Cogwill, 1986; Nandal, Dhatri, & Kadian, 1987;

Rajan & Kumar, 2003), where everyone contributes to and benefits from a certain familial or social structure and the relationships that are embodied therein. These authors assert that, in such reciprocal relationships, the parents are assumed to lavish love and affection on their offspring, taking risks, making sacrifices, and expending all their resources on encouraging the optimal development of the children as they grow up (Lamb, 2013). The senior members of a multigenerational family, often the parents of the married couple, are seen as authority figures and are valued for their experience, wisdom, knowledge, and skills (Chadha, 2004). As long as they are able to, they attend to domestic chores and take on childcare responsibilities as well (Rajan, 2008; Sathyanarayana, Kumar, & James, 2012). The younger people in the family routinely consult and seek help and support from older family members about how to handle complex life. When the parents grow older and become more dependent, their children provide them with care and support in return.

This implies that older relatives' physical, emotional, and economic needs are met by a convoy of family members (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Chadha, 2004; Nandal et al., 1987; Rajan & Kumar, 2003; Sivaraju, 2011). In the past, researchers asserted that these intergenerational reciprocal relationship dynamics enhanced the quality of life of older members of the family (Krause, 2001), as well as that of the younger ones (Chadha, 2004). In the absence of any social arrangements provided by the state, these reciprocal support networks were believed to be the main source of the required care, support, and attention for everybody and included care for elderly persons (Gentlemen, 2007). However, these emotional and economic exchanges do not ensure positive relationship shared between older adults and their children (United Nations Population Fund, 2012) in traditional families. For example, Burholt and Dobbs (2014) highlight that the exchange of support between older adults and children or others tend to vary according to the type of family structure and support networks.

However, in the last few decades, India, like many other developing

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2020.100867>

Received 14 February 2020; Received in revised form 13 August 2020; Accepted 26 August 2020

Available online 03 September 2020

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countries, has been experiencing the impact of globalization, which has brought about significant socioeconomic and demographic transitions, one of which has been the out-migration of young adults regionally and internationally (United Nations Population Fund, 2012). These changes have impacted the traditional multigenerational coresidence of Indian families (Chadha, 2004; Samanta, Chen, & Vanneman, 2014). Furthermore, other major demographic transitions, such as the increased longevity of older adults and the reduction in fertility rates (Chadha, 2004; Cohen, 1992; Sathyanarayana et al., 2012), have brought about other crucial changes, which have significantly weakened the family's caregiving potential (United Nations Population Fund, 2012). In addition, urban-centered job markets, which offer the prospect of better incomes and enhanced educational facilities, have proven attractive and have both enticed and pressured young adults into migrating (Cohen, 1992; Lamb, 2013; Samanta et al., 2014), thus also disrupting multigenerational co-residing arrangements. All of these factors have resulted in the rise of Western-type nuclear families (consisting of parents and children who are minors), with more elderly people living alone or only with their spouses both in urban and rural areas (Dhillon, Ladusingh, & Agarwal, 2016; Sathyanarayana et al., 2012).

Continuing their positive assessment of traditional family life and structures, the authors mentioned above have interpreted these recent changes as loss because all of the identified advantages to the intergenerational co-residence structures are disappearing along with the dismantling of the family structure (Chadha, 2004; Cohen, 1992; Lamb, 2013; Samanta et al., 2014; Sathyanarayana et al., 2012). Allegedly, the spirit of collectiveness and reciprocity, which has been seen as the hallmark of the traditional multigenerational Indian family, is vanishing (Chadha, 2004; Nagaraj, Mathew, Nanjagowda, Majgi, & Purushothama, 2011; Sathyanarayana et al., 2012) as a result of the sociodemographic transitions caused by globalization, which are believed to permit very limited time for adult children to meet their own care needs, let alone the needs of their immediate family members (Lamb, 2013).

One of the major losses associated with these trends is the disappearance or weakening of the familiar support networks that older people have traditionally relied on as their principle source of security (Brijnath, 2012; Dommaraju, 2016). Dhillon et al. (2016) and Sudha et al. (2004) warn of very limited or no family attention to the care needs of older people given the pace of changes in living arrangement. According to United Nations Population Fund (2012), next to children's migration, older people cited family conflict as the second cause of living independently with or without a spouse. As a result, older adults are often reported to experience feelings of isolation, loneliness, and hopelessness (Desai, Prakash, & Singh, 2010), a development which then negatively affects these adults' aging processes and quality of life. The Indian national policy on older people has given provisions to create structures to meet the psychological and social needs of older people, and subsequently, the Indian government enacted a law regarding the maintenance of parents and senior citizens in 2007 to help families provide care for their older relatives (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2016). Unfortunately, the support structures offered by the government are inadequate (Bloom, Mahal, Rosenberg, & Sevilla, 2010; Rajan, 2008) and fail to meet the care needs of older adults, a development that poses a large threat, principally to older adults in India (United Nations Population Fund, 2012). Because of inadequate support structures, recommendations for older adults to increase their independence have also been made by well-known Indian gerontologists, who have pointed out that educated older people are quite capable of dealing with these more dynamic living arrangements and thus should be encouraged to depend on themselves and exercise self-sufficiency (Lamb, 2013). Even among older adults, a tendency towards independent living has also increased in a smaller proportion (Burholt & Dobbs, 2014; Dhillon et al., 2016; United Nations Population Fund, 2012).

In contrast, other studies point out that the nuclearization of the

Indian family also offers older adults a number of benefits. The enhanced educational opportunities and the improvements to the economic situation that globalization has brought to India, for example, have helped older adults experience and appreciate the importance of privacy and autonomy, conditions that were either limited or non-existent in traditional multigenerational coresiding arrangements (Laungani, 2005; Liebig, 2003). In line with these studies, Kalavar and Jamuna (2011) and Panigrahi (2010) found that educated urban middle-class and upper-middle-class older adults have expressed a desire to have their own space and to make independent decisions, thus asserting their need to transcend traditional family arrangements.

Moreover, family based care and support for older adults continue to exist in-principle and provided when the need arises (Ugargol & Bailey, 2020) among the emigrant households. Additionally, the spread of mobile technology has, in fact, strengthened intergenerational ties among the members of transnational and trans-regional families in India (Bailey, Hallad, & James, 2018). National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data indicate a trend of increased non-family contributions to care for older adults in India linked to changes in living arrangements (Ugargol, Hutter, James, & Bailey, 2016).

Except for a few studies (Bailey et al., 2018; Ugargol & Bailey, 2020), most research highlights the benefits of shifting living arrangements in India based on information about educated older persons from quantitative approaches, and very few qualitative studies show the dynamics in modern care arrangements. Yet, how exactly older persons in India experience nuclearization (in terms of their quality of life) and the changes in the relationships with their family members in day-to-day existence has thus far remained understudied (Ugargol et al., 2016). Moreover, most of the studies have focused exclusively on older adults in changed living arrangements and have not compared their experiences with older adults who continue to stay in traditional arrangements in modern times.

Given the context provided, this study uses a qualitative approach to examine in a more holistic way how the transformation in family structures has impacted the perceived wellbeing of older persons in India and how the shifts brought about by modern developments have impacted the quality of life of older adults in India. It explores and reveals how older persons in India experience changes in family arrangements and how they negotiate their way through negative experiences.

## Materials and methods

### Background to the study

This study, carried out in two states in the south of India, forms part of a larger, qualitative multi stakeholder enquiry on intergenerational exchanges and the well-being of older people to more accurately assess what is actually transpiring 'on the ground'. Literacy levels and economic activities were found to influence changes in intergenerational exchanges of care and support (Lamb, 2013; Samanta et al., 2014). To cover the relevant variations in the study, the researchers selected one state whose indicators in terms of these parameters were high and one whose associated performance was low. According to the census 2011, (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2016), and annual report of Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (2015), the state of Tamil Nadu scored high in these parameters, and Telangana scored less well. Furthermore, population aging is similar in both the states. According to census 2011 (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2016), both states have a higher proportion of older people than the National level: 10.4% of total population in Tamil Nadu were above the age of 60 years, 9.8% in undivided Andhra Pradesh (State of Telangana belonged to this state in 2011) whereas the national level was 8.6%. Life expectancy at the age of 60 is around 18 years in both states (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2016). The old age dependency ratio is 15.8 and 15.4

in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh respectively. According to National Sample Survey of 2004 (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2016), older adults living in modern nuclear households (either alone or with spouse only) is roughly 30% in Tamil Nadu and 29% in Andhra Pradesh whereas in traditional households (with children and with or without spouse) accounts to 63.5% and 64.8% in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh respectively.

#### Participants and sampling

Older persons living in both traditional and modern arrangements were recruited from the two selected states for their input. 'Traditional' living arrangements were those where older persons co-resided with their children in the same household. A modern arrangement involved independent households in which an older person or an older couple and their children lived separately. In the case of independent households, parents and children had separate households in the same city, district, or state; further away in India; or even abroad. A total of 26 older persons, 14 women and 12 men, consented to participate in the study. Older participants who were living in the same household with married children (with or without grandchildren) qualified for inclusion, but those with a mental illness or who were not able to hear or speak were excluded. The participants were identified mainly through two sources: non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and senior associations. The age of the participants ranged from 48 to 97 years old, and the mean age was 72.42 years. Among the participants, 13 were widowed, and 13 lived with spouses. In terms of living arrangements, 15 participants co-resided with their children, and 11 lived either alone or independently with their spouses.

No.	Age (in Years)	Gender	Marital status	Location	No. of children <sup>a</sup>	Living arrangement
1	86	Male	Married	Urban	4 (2F + 2 M)	Living with spouse
2	75	Female	Widow	Urban	2 (2 M)	Living alone
3	60	Female	Widow	Urban	5 (4F + 1 M)	Living with a son
4	75	Female	Widow	Urban	4 (2F + 2 M)	Living with a daughter
5	77	Male	Married	Urban	4 (3F + 1 M)	Living with a Son
6	70	Male	Married	Urban	2 (2 M)	Living with spouse
7	75	Female	Married	Urban	2 (2F)	Living with spouse
8	79	Female	Married	Urban	2 (1F + 1 M)	living with spouse
9	80	Male	Widower	Urban	2 (1F + 1 M)	Living with a son
10	63	Female	Widow	Urban	2 (1F + 1 M)	Living with a son
11	65	Female	Married	Urban	2 (1F + 1 M)	Living with a daughter
12	70	Female	Widow	Rural	2 (2 M)	Living with a son
13	66	Male	Married	Rural	2 (2 M)	Living with a son
14	81	Female	Widow	Rural	3(2F + 1 M)	Living with a daughter
15	97	Female	Widow	Urban	2(2F)	Living with a daughter
16	55	Female	Married	Rural	2(2GS)	Living with grandchildren
17	76	Male	Widower	Urban	3(2F + 1 M)	Living with a son
18	76	Male	Widower	Urban	2 (2 M)	Living with a son
19	70	Male	Married	Urban	2 (2F)	Living with spouse
20	84	Male	Widower	Rural	6(5F + 1 M)	Living alone
21	76	Male	Married	Rural	5 (3F + 2 M)	Living with spouse

22	75	Male	Married	Rural	2 (2 M)	Living with spouse
23	74	Male	Married	Rural	4 (2F + 2 M)	Living with spouse
24	65	Female	Widow	Rural	5 (3F + 2 M)	Living with a son
25	65	Female	Widow	Rural	3 (2F + 1 M)	Living with a son
26	48	Female	Married	Rural	3 (3 M)	Living with spouse

<sup>a</sup> F - Female, M - Male, GS - Grandson.

#### Study design

The study adopted a qualitative approach that focused on the social and psychological realities as experienced and perceived by older persons (Groenewald, 2004). This focused on why and how developments take place, helped to uncover the underlying meanings in the narratives of the participants about their experiences with and responses to intergenerational relationships within their families (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2005). Accordingly, a semi-structured interview guide grounded in a review of the available literature about the intergenerational exchange of care and support and of living arrangements of older persons in modern Indian society was developed. The guide was translated into two local languages, Tamil and Telugu.

#### Data collection

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE) Ethics Committee (#MUEC/003/2017). The selected participants were approached and informed, both orally and by means of a handout, about the objectives and nature of the research in a language that they understood. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants through signature and thumb impressions; some gave their consent in oral form only. The participants were provided with assurances of confidentiality and were informed that they were free to withdraw from the research if they did not feel comfortable at any point during the process. All participants consented to an audio recording of their interviews; to maintain anonymity, the recordings began only after the participants had provided their demographic details. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional, and the transcriptions were checked for accuracy by the researchers as well.

#### Data analysis

NVIVO 9 software was used to encode the information and identify the range of issues raised by the participants (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). Deductive codes were treated as the starting point and were adjusted and specified based on the interview content during the analysis. After analyzing 12 transcripts, since a certain level of saturation was observed in terms of experiences and perceptions of the participants, a coding scheme was developed. Based on what was identified, the codes were grouped together, and patterns in the phenomena were identified, thus enabling the identification and description of themes and subthemes to take place. This scheme was used to analyze the remaining 14 transcripts. Thence, the themes were refined and adjusted as needed.

#### Results

The study showed that the experiences of the elderly persons in relation to the growing nuclearization of Indian families were somewhat ambiguous and much more nuanced and complex than has been reported. The elderly family members talked about feelings of loss and loneliness, but, depending on the nature of their relationships with their family members, they also highlighted the advantages of privacy and

autonomy. An important observation of the study was that feelings of positivity or negativity did not depend on living arrangements but rather on whether the older adults experienced a sense of belonging, of being useful and valued, and of being appreciated and accepted, even if their children or younger relatives did not live in the same household. In other words, it was not living under the same roof that defined their responses but instead psycho-social factors in terms of the relationship they experienced with their relatives. Family dynamics and relationships, and not household structures, were the critical factor governing the elders' experiences.

#### *Establishing regular contact*

One of the factors contributing to the sense of belonging was whether the participants had the opportunity to maintain meaningful communication with other generations in their families. Participants who were able to maintain regular and purposeful contact with their children reported being positive about their living arrangements regardless of whether they lived in traditional family structures or were part of more modern arrangements. For participants living in traditional households, this contact takes place through day-to-day interpersonal encounters. While talking about her relationship with the grand-daughter, a participant (75 years old, female, widow, urban) from a traditional family stated "She [my grand-daughter] will call me to play.... I love their affectionate talk and [enjoy] their love every day". Another example of a mother-son relationship:

We are maintaining the family values [emotional bonding] in our family. Even now, though he is 40 years old [the son, who is the senior vice-president of a big IT company], he comes in and calls "Amma" ["mother"] as he enters [the] home. That love and affection [has not been] lost. (65 years old, female, married, urban).

For participants who lived greater distances from their children, this contact is less self-evident. However, participants reported various ways in which they do have contact with their younger relatives. Participants mentioned, for instance, that they have regular contact with their younger relatives through electronic media such as the internet and smart phones. One of them (70 years old, male, married, urban) shared an experience of frequent communication with his son living abroad "My son in Singapore calls me once every two days and chats with me for about half an hour or so, sometimes for an hour". Another participant (76 years old, male, widower, urban) shared a similar experience "Every Friday and Saturday, we have a chat on the iPhone and laptop. It is holiday for them, Friday and Saturday".

Furthermore, younger relatives visit their parents, and give extra effort in terms of the time and money they invest in these visits inspired by the emotional bonding; the older adults highly appreciate this contact and feel that their children truly want to stay connected.

So, he [my grandson] was to go to Iceland, but when he heard that his grandfather was not well, he cancelled his trip, paid [a] higher amount to travel to India without telling anyone. He came via London and Bombay to Chennai. From London, he called his father, and my son told him, "Let's keep it a surprise for the grandparents". So he went out as if he [were going to] some other work and hired a car and brought back his son. I was busy with some work inside; my son suddenly calls me out, and when I went out, this boy [was] standing there. I could not believe my eyes. He was visiting only for 5 days; he had spent so much of money, nearly 1 lakh. And that's love. (76 years old, female, married, urban).

Sometimes even the willingness to make a special visit is enough for older relatives to feel that their children care for them.

We call him Bindu at home. I called him and told him, "Bindu, I miss you and I feel like hugging you." He'll say dad you want me to come, there is a ticket available tomorrow shall I book it. I told him out of affection only I told you don't do that. (76 years old, male, widower, urban).

Although contact in traditional living arrangements seems self-evident, not all participants experienced meaningful interaction with their younger relatives.

They [children] won't listen. Nowadays no one will listen, sir. They think that this old person keeps on telling something and they go away. (85 years old, female, rural, widow).

As a result, these participants, even though they lived under one roof, felt unrecognized by their family, given that their involvement in the family's social dynamics and relations was minimal or nonexistent.

Additionally, some elderly people who live on their own no longer have contact with their relatives.

I lost my husband nine years ago. When he was alive, they (our children) used to visit us. Now, after his death, they don't come. (72 years old, female, widow, urban).

Yes, I see them [grandchildren] when passing by on the road and they won't talk to me and I also don't talk to them. They won't ask anything, and I also don't ask anything to them, as strangers, they go their way and I go my way. (75 years old, female, widow, urban).

I called him over phone on the day they were photographing me (to apply for a national identity card). He did not answer. He disconnected the line. (76 years old, female, widow, urban).

Irrespective of living arrangement, regular contact with younger relatives rooted in love is important for participants to feel connected. Whereas in traditional living arrangements, contact may be considered self-evident, some older persons mention that they barely talk with their relatives and they do not have meaningful interactions with them either. Additionally, older people in modern living arrangements do not always have contact with their families. However, given that more effort needs to be put into keeping in touch when living separately, older persons feel recognized as important family members if their children and grandchildren invest in this contact.

#### *Receiving support*

A similar pattern can be noticed with regard to support. While in traditional living arrangements, it may be self-evident that younger relatives provide support to their (grand)parents if needed, not all participants experience this support. Living in a traditional coresiding arrangement does not guarantee an exchange of love and affection in some families. As one of the participants shared,

What she [my daughter-in-law] did was only torturing me and nothing else.... I cry when I think of all of this and pray Lord, please take me to you. (80 years old, male, widower, urban).

The lack of care experienced by some participants in traditional living arrangements when their younger relatives deprive them of their basic needs, even while they are living within the same household, is all the more proof of them not being loved and appreciated. Others, however, do receive support from their children, which helps them to feel acknowledged:

I feel strong with her help. She is my daughter, and she is alone with me to console. If I cry [because] of feeling sad, she will come in support of me and enquire. (75 years old, female, widow, urban).

Similarly, participants living in modern living arrangements feel supported by their younger relatives. One participant explained that his son comes to support him whenever he is sick:

Both the sons care for me very much. My elder son visits me immediately when he finds out that I am sick. He helps me to go to the doctor, etc. (70 years old, male, urban, married).

Other participants mentioned that their children organize all kinds of things for them and their spouses:

My daughters used to encourage us to live into old age happily

without worrying about anything. They even arrange for us to go on tours to touristy places. They want us to dress well also. They are very affectionate to me. (75 years, female, married, urban).

They may also receive support of their children because the children just enjoy being there and interacting attentively with their parents:

He (son) moves with me like a friend, such as holding my hands while walking along, or he will have his hand on my shoulder, and he makes a lot of funny observations about me. (70 years old, male, married, urban).

#### *Providing support*

Another element that contributes to a sense of belonging consists of the opportunity to give support to their children and grandchildren. In traditional living arrangements, older family members do, for instance, participate in household tasks, care for their grandchildren or play and socialize with them. With a sense of gratitude, one of the participants (77 years old, male, urban, married) stated "I am happy and thankful to God that he has given me a chance to help my children and grandchildren in whatever small way I can".

Apart from giving support in daily activities in the household, some older family members support their family economically:

I am getting [a] pension of about INR 60,000. I am giving some 20,000 Rupees to my daughter-in-law to support common family costs. (76 years old, male, widowed, urban).

Additionally, participants in modern living arrangements mention that it is important for them to support their children. Some do visit their children to support them in household tasks and provide support in raising grandchildren:

My son is in Singapore, so when I go home, I spend time taking my grandchildren to and from school. I take care of the family of my daughter-in-law and grandchildren. (70 years old, male, urban).

Another participant (75 years old, female, urban) mentioned about her support, "I used to visit and stay at home whenever she had to go out of city for marriages, etc. to take care of the house".

Household tasks are less often completed by older persons living apart from their family; however, these older persons do support their children in other ways, for instance, by sending things that are not available in the places their children live:

He [my grandson living in the USA] is very brainy and a voracious reader. I used to buy and send books from here [Chennai, India]. He wanted some five books by APJ Abdul Kalam [former President of India]. I sent them to him. (79 years old, female, married, urban).

Or they support their children by advising them on major decisions in life that have to be made as quoted by a participant (74 years old, male, married, rural) "Whenever a huge decision has to be made, they definitely ask me".

Additionally, in modern living arrangements, older people sometimes support their children financially:

We are helping them a lot; actually, we are paying the education fee of our grandchild too. We do not want our grandchildren to miss anything. (48 years old, female, rural, married).

Therefore, it is not so much the type of living arrangement that makes the participants feel lonely or lost. Much more important is whether they experience a sense of belonging, which arises in situations where family members are able to create meaningful contact, in person or through modern technology, and where older relatives provide or receive support from their younger relatives. Being able to provide support gives them the feeling that they can contribute something. However, having contact with their relatives and receiving support provides them with the feeling that they are meaningful to their relatives. Especially when they live apart, the sense of belonging is strengthened by having contact because older people realize that their

younger relatives have to put extra effort into this.

#### *Conflict resolution: bridging differences, and feeling instrumental and productive*

Both types of households stated that if a sense of belonging fostered by meaningful contact and mutual support existed within the household, they were able to resolve intergenerational conflicts and differences among the family members. If conflicts arose in either type of living arrangement and a positive, mutually supportive atmosphere was present, any differences and negative emotional exchanges remained for only a short time and would eventually disappear.

It [conflict with children] is like passing clouds only. We [are] angry for the time being only...I take liberties with my son and he does with me also. He used to advise me on do's and don'ts and I did the same for him. (79 years old, female, married, urban, modern living arrangement).

In other words, they felt that positive emotional exchanges enabled them to develop resilience to resolve conflicts swiftly among the family members and keep those differences under control without issues escalating or festering. In some families, participants said that they have open communication and can disagree with the opinions of their younger relatives without creating problems:

If she is angry about something and shouts, I pacify her, and if her problem is money, I give her whatever I have. And when I shout at her, sometimes she will not talk back. This way we tolerate and are at peace with each other. (75 years old, female, widow, urban, traditional living arrangement).

The participants felt instrumental and productive, as those instances enabled them to use their life experiences and wisdom to resolve conflicts and uphold the traditional family value of togetherness:

They (my son's family) had been living in Singapore, and they came back to settle here. I told them to move in to their flat when they landed here. But my daughter-in-law said that they would live with us in my house first. But we had a small friction that made them move to their flat. This is what I had advised her, and had they accepted my advice this unpleasant friction in the family could have been avoided. (70 years old, male, married, urban, modern living arrangement).

Nevertheless, some participants indeed expressed that certain differences in their families were more complex and remained for a longer period of time; this was experienced more by the participants with a weak or no sense of belonging with their kin. These unresolved conflicts within the family are a matter of concern for older adults. One of the participants explained the issue as follows:

She [one of my daughters-in-law] wants some part of the ground floor and some part of the first floor. She is demanding INR 500,000 more, actually, that is INR 600,000 or 700,000, but she is demanding INR 1,200,000. My son is not able to pay that much and with my pension, I can't. My elder daughter's husband also died. My elder daughter and her two sons are also staying with me. That's the problem now; god knows how it will go. (72 years old, male, urban, married, traditional living arrangement).

I suffered a lot to bring them [my sons] up. I used to walk long distances to work and wouldn't have tea with others in order to save money. All these efforts have gone to waste in their eyes....They don't care about me. (75 years old, female, urban, modern living arrangement).

#### *Freedom, control, and autonomy*

While negative or positive experiences depend on the success with which traditional values such as reciprocity and a sense of belonging



are enacted, participants also underscored the advantages of modern living arrangements. Older persons living in modern households, for instance, spoke about the freedom to make independent decisions on the new arrangements offered them. They no longer felt that their children were trying to impose their values and interests upon them: They appreciated having their own autonomy. The physical distance from their children helped to prevent any invasion of personal boundaries and space, thus minimizing conflicts and enhancing positive relationships.

For example, while talking about her modern living arrangements, a 79-year-old married woman from an urban community stated the following:

My son used to say he wants to come back to India [from the US].... When I told him [the following], "Even if you come back, I will settle you in a separate house", he asked me why. I replied that "You will suggest that I do this and not do that, [which is something that] I don't like. I want to have a peaceful life."

Other respondents described how the personal space created by modern living arrangements made participation in various social and spiritual engagements possible, since these new arrangements gave them the opportunity to pursue their interests, independent of any interference from their children. Active participation in those activities not only helped respondents broaden their network of social relations beyond those of the family but also redefined their identity and their purpose in life. These newer experiences deepened their understanding of their kin's privacy and priorities and made their family relationships stronger. The social and developmental interests that defined them in their earlier lives are now being pursued once again, which offers them a sense of contentment in their retirement:

I am busy still. When I was working, I could not join the Rotary Club, etc. because you have to attend weekly meetings; as I could not do justice [to these activities], I did not join. And after my retirement, people from the KK Nagar Club came and invited me to join. They insisted that I join because that would add some value to the club. So I joined the club and became the president also. (79 years old, female, married, urban).

Not all of the participants had such positive experiences, however. Some participants expressed feelings of isolation and abandonment, as they felt left out of the intimate social network. They were also the ones who found it hard to recreate an extended social network outside the family. Due to these negative experiences, these participants felt that there was a breakdown of the traditional values in their families:

My sons don't visit me...Nowadays they don't visit at all. It is more than 3 years since they visited last. (86 years old, male, widow, urban)

In the next street only, once in a while she (another daughter) comes to enquire about me. That is all; they don't do anything with me. (75 years old, female, widow, urban).

In particular, daughters-in-law are blamed for this decline in family values. Some participants feel that their daughters-in-law are more focused on their relationships with their husbands and children and do not share an emotional attachment with the grandparents, even though they make all possible attempts to develop a positive relationship:

From the moment we decided to have her as our daughter-in-law, we have been doing everything for her as we would do for our daughter, buying dresses and all other things. But maybe she is worried about her own family and may be thinking that living separately will be good for her family.... I can't understand why the intimacy of the family relationship is missing in her. (48 years old, female, married, rural, modern living arrangement).

I was very affectionate towards my daughter-in-law, but I don't know what she has in her heart. In spite of being nice to her, she has taken my son away from me. I used to wonder about him. (75 years old, female, widow, urban, traditional living arrangement).

However, some of the participants who lost their intimate social network deal with the loss differently. They seek various social programs and support services from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious groups to negotiate the losses caused by separation from their kin. Through these engagements in various social and religious programs, they have developed an extended convoy of relations with non-kin connections from whom they receive more than tangible benefits, including emotional support and person-specific care:

After I started coming to ARUWE (an NGO), I came to know how they treat us, how they take care of us, etc. The sister (caretaker) here and Thara madam (a residential social worker), they all look after us very affectionately with love. Even our own children don't look after us so well. (75 years old, female, widow, urban, traditional living arrangement).

## Discussion and conclusion

Our study revealed that, for older adults, reciprocal care arrangements, emotional support, and many other traditional Indian values contribute to a sense of belonging that plays a vital role in generating positive and negative feelings towards the quality of life they experience. In contrast to prior studies reporting that a collapse of traditional, reciprocal care relationships in modern living arrangements affected Indian elders' quality of life (Dhillon et al., 2016; Lamb, 2009), and that emotional exchanges among family members were on the decline because of sociodemographic transitions (Krause, 2001), our study clearly showed that it was not the nature or structure of the living arrangements (traditional or modern) per se that was the source of the positive or negative feelings that the participants experienced but rather whether they felt love and affection, a sense of belonging, and had meaningful communication with their family members that led to an enhanced sense of wellbeing. In other words, it was psychological and social factors and the availability of interchanges that defined the quality of life for older adults and not the living arrangements themselves.

Older adults residing in both traditional and modern living arrangements expected to receive support in the form of emotional exchanges, the provision of healthcare and home care, participation in family functions and activities, and contributing to the education of their grandchildren. Although these expectations are generally associated with 'traditional' values that are particularly practiced in traditionally structured households that embody Indian cultural and spiritual values (Bailey et al., 2018; Burholt & Dobbs, 2014; Gangopadhyay, 2017; Rajan & Matthew, 2008; Sathyanarayana et al., 2012), our study paints a more nuanced picture, indicating that these values can also be central to families in modern living arrangements even though older adults and their younger relatives live apart.

In concert with Ugargol and Bailey (2020), we found that the care and support for elderly is present in-principle and offered when the need arises in the dynamic living arrangement. The present study contributes that regular, informal and ongoing relational dynamics are more important than an occasional support exchange when needed. Older adults indicate that, in spite of living apart, visible efforts made by their younger relatives to establish consistent communication, pay regular visits, and provide all kinds of mental, emotional, financial, and practical support reassured emotional connection. However, the perception of older adults towards the visible efforts made by their kin and support provision is likely to differ from person to person based on their expectations. Although it is obviously easier to communicate, show love and affection, and do things together when living in the same household, family members living apart from their older family members could overcome this merely by the effort they demonstrated to stay in touch or provide (mental) support. The fact that younger adults still consulted older family members about decision-making processes (United Nations Population Fund, 2012) related to marriage, property

issues, and economic investments and included them in crucial family decisions in social activities made the older family members feel like productive and valued family members, even if they do not live under the same roof.

In short, contrary to studies that ascribe problems of older Indian people to the collapse of multigenerational living arrangements (Chadha, 2004; Gangopadhyay, 2017; Nandal et al., 1987; Rajan & Kumar, 2003), our study shows that the 'traditional' values associated with this family structure and a sense of belonging can be ensured in both living arrangements as long as the younger kin make an effort to maintain social bonds and interaction through the use of new communication technologies. Moreover, care and support extended by the older adults in varying degrees (Burholt & Dobbs, 2014) strengthens the sense of belongingness and reduces pressure in the intergenerational care relationship with their kin (Ugargol & Bailey, 2018).

On the other hand, older adults who experienced problems in maintaining a sense of belonging associated these with their younger relatives' focus on their careers, jobs, and incomes, irrespective of whether they were coresiding or living independently. Our study showed, in other words, that many modern households in India embody traditional values. Older persons in both types of living arrangements felt positively when these values remained intact and negatively when they perceived the loss of them.

In addition, our study showed that older people also found other ways to compensate for the loss of emotional support from their families (Ladusingh & Ngangbam, 2016). They turned to other social networks (friends, other relatives, community, NGOs and religious groups) to receive and provide support or engage in various recreational activities resolving the gap highlighted by Ugargol et al. (2016). This alternative social network with non-kin connections not only offered emotional support but also several alternative care arrangements. Yet again, these alternatives were relevant for both older persons living in modern households and those living in traditional households. However, having a distribution of support networks with kin and non-kin improves older adults' well-being, whereas limited family and restricted non-kin support puts older adults at the risk of loneliness (Burholt & Dobbs, 2014).

Whereas Panigrahi (2010) and Kalavar and Jamuna (2011) emphasized the negative impact of changing living arrangements by stressing that there are older adults in India who chose to live independently in order to enjoy more privacy and independence, the present study moves beyond this debate by showing that older adults who say that they appreciate privacy and independence do so because modern living arrangements have enhanced their understanding of their kin and their respect for their children's interests, private space, and choices and have thus eventually strengthened intergenerational relationships.

Ultimately, older people were positive about their lives if they experienced a sense of belonging (being able to both support and receive support in meaningful ways as a valued member of the family) irrespective of living arrangements. They experienced this as long as they felt that their offspring adhered to traditional values expressed via intergenerational exchanges.

Our study shows that despite profound transformations, many Indian families are keeping with the traditional family values of the exchange of care and support across different generations and that families who adopt modern living arrangements often make use of communication technologies to overcome the practical problems in maintaining these values.

Alternatives for traditional families could also help tackle the gaps experienced in a sense of belonging and quality of life. Not all older persons, however, felt that their children enact traditional values, and as our study indicates, for those whom this undermines their sense of belonging and well-being, alternative networks (NGOs, religious groups, and community initiatives) may offer solutions.

Much debate exists around the intergenerational dynamics in

traditional and modern living arrangement and its impacts on quality of life of older adults. The present study shows a sense of belonging and usefulness within the family and beyond improves well-being. Therefore, the aged care policies and programs need to consider measures to promote and strengthen intergenerational communication in both types of families, and the role that the older adults can play in the family and outside (using alternative networks) to enjoy meaning in their life.

## Acknowledgements

We express our sincere gratitude to all participants who spent their valuable time and shared their experiences in response to our questions. Many thanks to Heritage Medical Centre in Hyderabad, HelpAge India (Tamil Nadu and Telangana Branches), ARUWE in Chennai and Senior Citizens Associations in Chennai and Hyderabad for connecting us with the study participants. We acknowledge the support of NUFFIC, Government of the Netherlands for funding the study (Grant # 30.95.6343-N).

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