

Implications of Adult Children's Successes and Problems for Aging Parents' Well-Being: A Comparison of One-Child Families and Multiple-Children Families in China

Introduction

Parents tend to view their children as an extension of their own lives and consider children's successes as their own achievements, children's problems as their own failures. Adult children's success and problems are often assessed through attainments resulting from their adult roles, such as gaining financial independence, getting married, and having children (Fingerman, Chen, Hay, Cichy, & Lefkowitz, 2006; Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994; Suito, Sechrist, & Pillemer, 2007). Children's success or failure to achieve adult roles is not only perceived as an evaluation of parenting outcomes from the past, but also indicates children's capacity to provide support in the future. Therefore, parents show increased distress toward under-achieving children and improved well-being related to their children's success (Birditt, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2010; Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, & Zarit, 2012; Suito et al., 2017). However, most studies on this topic have been conducted with data from Western countries. Little is known about whether adult children's successes and problems are related to aging parents' well-being in China, where the dominant Confucius culture strongly emphasizes the interdependence between family members and adult children's responsibility to provide care for their older parents.

The rapid changes in the socioeconomic environment in China have resulted in delayed marriage and lower fertility rates, which threaten adult children's attainment of adult roles. Aging Chinese parents may have ambivalent feelings toward unsuccessful adult children because children's continuing dependence violates parents' normative expectations for children's caregiving obligations (Guo, Chi, & Silverstein, 2013; Kim, Cheng, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2015). The difficulties in the parent-child relationship may erode parents' well-being over time. Moreover, the one-child policy in China has added to the complexity of intergenerational relationships. Older parents with an only child invest all their resources in the child. Thus, adult child(ren)'s problems and successes may have a greater impact on their parents in one-child families compared to multiple-children families. In sum, the objective of this study was to examine the associations between adult children's successes and problems and aging parents' well-being in China, focusing on the potential differences between one-child and multiple-children families.

Methods

We used the first wave of the *Chinese Longitudinal Aging and Social Survey (CLASS)*, a nationally representative survey covering a variety of issues about the Chinese population aged 60 and older. The baseline survey was conducted by Renmin University in 2014, including 11,550 respondents aged 60 years and older living in 462 villages and communities. The study sample included 6,946 respondents (aged 60–113) who had at least one adult child. Successes and problems of each adult child(ren) were measured by marital status, employment status, financial status, education attainment, occupational prestige, and home ownership; older parents' well-being was assessed with life satisfaction and depressive symptoms. OLS regression models were estimated for older parents with one child and multiple children, separately. Models controlled for adult parents' age, gender, education, annual income, marital status, rural/urban residence, ADLs, and self-reported health, and number of adult children, as well as gender composition of adult children and parent-child emotional closeness.

Results

For multiple children families, older parents who had any child with a problem reported more depressive symptoms and lower life satisfaction compared to their counterparts with no problematic child. Compared to peers who had no successful child, having a child with a success was associated with fewer depressive symptoms, but was not with life satisfaction, for older parents with multiple children. Further, they reported worse well-being when their adult children had more problems and better well-being when children had more successes.

For one child families, older parents' life satisfaction was negatively associated with the presence and the total number of child's problems. Older parents with one child had greater life satisfaction and fewer depressive symptoms when the child had more successes.

Discussion

Using nationally representative data of the Chinese older adult population, this study added an Asian culture perspective to the scientific literature on parental well-being and adult children's successes and problems. Consistent with Western studies, our findings suggested Chinese aging parents were "as happy as the least happy child"; they had poorer well-being when their children encountered any problems while the total success in the family increased parents' well-being. In one-child families, older parents' well-being was less influenced by children's problems, compared to multiple-children families. Our findings contribute to the understanding of family dynamics and well-being of aging parents in China.

References

- Birditt, K. S., Fingerman, K. L., & Zarit, S. H. (2010). Adult children's problems and successes: Implications for intergenerational ambivalence. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *65*, P145–P153. doi:10.1093/geronb/gbp125
- Fingerman, K. L., Cheng, Y. P., Birditt, K., & Zarit, S. (2012). Only as happy as the least happy child: multiple grown children's problems and successes and middle-aged parents' well-being. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *67*, 184–193. doi:10.1093/geronb/gbr086
- Guo, M., Chi, I. & Silverstein, M. (2013). Sources of older parents' ambivalent feelings toward their adult children: the case of rural china. *Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *68*, 420–430, doi:10.1093/geronb/gbt022
- Kim, K., Cheng, Y.-P., Zarit, S. H., & Fingerman, K. L. (2015). Relationships between adults and parents in Asia (Chapter 7). In S.-T. Cheng, I. Chi, H. H. Fung, L. W. Li, & J. Woo (Eds.), *Successful aging: Asian perspectives* (pp. 101–122). New York: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-94-017-9331-5_7
- Ryff, C. D., Lee, Y. H., Essex, M. J., & Schmutte, P. S. (1994). My children and me: midlife evaluations of grown children and of self. *Psychology and Aging*, *9*, 195–205. doi:10.1037/0882-7974.9.2.195
- Suitor, J. J., Sechrist, J., & Pillemer, K. (2007). When mothers have favourites: conditions under which mothers differentiate among their adult children. *Canadian Journal on Aging = La revue canadienne du vieillissement*, *26*, 85–99. doi:10.3138/cja.26.2.085
- Suitor, J. J., Gilligan, M., Pillemer, K., Fingerman, K. L., Kim, K., Silverstein, M., & Bengtson, V. L. (2017). Applying within-family differences approaches to enhance understanding of the complexity of intergenerational relations. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *73*, 40–53. doi:10.1093/geronb/gbx037

Table.1 Adult Children’s Successes and Problems in the CLASS

	Multiple children family		One-child family	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
At least one child with a problem	63.8%		55.1%	
At least one child deemed successful	62.8%		85.2%	
Total problems	1.60	1.71	0.81	0.87
Total successes	2.51	2.46	1.45	0.92

Note. *N* = 6,946.

Table 2. Adult Children’s Successes and Problems and Aging Parents’ Well-Being (Multiple-Children Family)

<i>Children’ problems and successes</i>	Life satisfaction				Depressive symptoms				
	<i>B</i>		<i>SE</i>		<i>B</i>		<i>SE</i>		
At least one child with a problem	-0.12	***	0.03		0.08	**	0.02		
At least one child deemed successful	0.04		0.03		-0.11	***	0.02		
Total problems				-0.05	***	0.01		0.02	**
Total successes				0.04	***	0.01		-0.05	***

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Table 3. Adult Children’s Successes and Problems and Aging Parents’ Well-Being (One-Child Family)

<i>Children’ problems and successes</i>	Life satisfaction				Depressive symptoms				
	<i>B</i>		<i>SE</i>		<i>B</i>		<i>SE</i>		
At least one child with a problem	-0.10	*	0.05		0.07		0.05		
At least one child deemed successful	-0.04		0.09		-0.11		0.08		
Total problems				-0.08	*	0.03		0.04	0.03
Total successes				0.07	*	0.03		-0.09	*

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.