Filial Piety and Psychological Well-Being in Well Older Chinese

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Chinese older persons (N = 164) recruited from social centers responded to a survey instrument tapping the perceived filial behaviors of children (close vs not close), and the degree to which these behaviors matched personal expectations (filial discrepancy). Across all kinds of filial behaviors, providing attention when the parent was ill or distressed was perceived to be the least performed and was most discrepant with expectations. Whether the children were paying respect and whether they were providing care in times of illness or distress were most important in determining a sense of filial discrepancy in the parent. However, after functional limitations and financial strain were controlled for, only respect emerged as a consistent predictor of psychological well-being. These findings were similar whether the target was the closest child(ren) or less close children. There was no evidence that a child’s overdoing his or her filial role was detrimental to the parents’ well-being among the Chinese individuals in this study.

The family has been central to the social organization of Chinese societies for thousands of years. There is a long history in which the Chinese family functions as a close-knit social unit from which its members draw on each other’s resources for meeting psychological, social, and physical needs. Traditionally, elders were well looked after by the young with minimal state interventions. Confucian ideals bound children to obey and serve their parents—such being the highest of all virtues. Within Confucian teachings, filial piety, or xiao, has been the dominating concept that regulates the relationship between children and their parents (Chow, 2001; Yang, 1997).

Despite the fact that filial piety is an important socialization goal in Chinese societies, social conditions are changing and have come to redefine children’s obligations to their parents (Liu, 2000; Sung, 1998; Teo, Graham, Yeoh, & Levy, 2003). Traditionally, filial piety in the Chinese refers to a range of behavioral prescriptions, including showing respect, being obedient, honoring or promoting the public prestige of the parent and the ancestors, producing a male heir and carrying on the family line, living with the parent (or staying close if coresidence is not possible), taking care of the parent whether healthy or sick, and avoiding injury to self because the body belongs to the parent, among others (see Chow, 2001; Hsu, Lew-Ting, & Wu, 2001; Yang, 1997). However, industrialization and urbanization have brought fundamental changes to the structure of the family so that filial piety is no longer practiced in the context of absolute authority of the male household head who owns the land for economic production and who passes his properties to only sons in a patriarchal system (Chan & Lim, 2004).

In particular, with the advent of the nuclear family as the basic family structure, the expectation for coresidence has declined. To illustrate, population surveys in Taiwan showed that those who believed in coresidence of parents and married children declined from 76.0% in 1984 to 62.7% in 1995, and this decline was true regardless of age and birth cohort (Hsu et al., 2001). In Hong Kong, the norm for coresidence and caregiving has similarly declined, and the number of older persons institutionalized has increased by 300% over the past 15 years (see Cheng, 1993; Cheng & Chan, 2003; Social Welfare Department, 2005). Research has suggested that giving absolute deference to parents’ wishes and continuing the family line are no longer popular concepts among the Chinese, whether old or young (Ho, 1996; Kwan, Cheung, & Ng, 2003; Teo et al., 2003). The diminishing reliance on the eldest son is evident across Chinese societies (e.g., Lin et al., 2003), though the reasons behind this may be different; in China, the one-child policy simply forces many families to give up having a son, which, together with the communist ideology of gender equality, has changed their preference for the son in a fundamental way (Tsui, 1989). In a recent survey involving six major cities in China, around 70% of the older respondents demanded the government to provide material support and social and residential services for them, whereas only some 50% expected financial assistance from children (Kwan et al., 2003). Another study in China showed that adult children felt less obligated to help their parents if this help conflicted with job demands (Zhan, 2004). In fact, the participation of women in the labor force, resulting in relative economic independence from their husbands and their own financial contribution to their families, also helps to redefine their roles and negotiate their share of caregiving responsibilities (Teo et al., 2003). Although traditionally daughters-in-law were the primary care providers in the patriarchal structure, daughters are taking their place now (Zhan, 2004).

Thus, despite different degrees of adherence to traditional values of filial piety, the general pattern of change is similar across different Chinese societies and across age groups. Surprisingly, studies have consistently shown that the older generation has even lower filial expectations for the younger generations than the latter have for themselves (e.g., Hsu et al., 2001; Yue & Ng, 1999; Zhan, 2004; see Ikkink, Van Tilburg, & Knipscheer, 1999 for similar data in a Western sample). For example, a representative survey of the Taiwan population in 1995 showed that whereas 66.0% of those aged 31–35 years...
felt obliged to live with their aged parent, only 57.1% of those aged 66–70 years expected their children to be living with them (Hsu et al.). Two studies conducted in Mainland China consistently showed that young people believed in stronger filial responsibilities, or more traditional expectations by the older generation, than what were actually expected of them by middle-aged and older people (Yue & Ng; Zhan). These data suggest that the older generation appears to adapt to the impact of social changes on intergenerational relationship rather well, whereas the younger generation continues to believe in fundamental responsibilities for parents. Together, the literature suggests that older parents should be quite satisfied with their children’s filial behaviors. But is this the case?

In this study we address three questions. First, to what extent do older persons feel that their expectations for filial piety are met? We call this construct filial discrepancy, that is, the gap between what the children do and what the parents expect from them. We know of no study that has directly measured the perceived gap between expectations and children’s behaviors. Because discrepancy means a lack of xiao from the perspective of older persons, by correlating discrepancy with filial behaviors, we can see if some filial behaviors are valued more than others.

Second, which filial behaviors are predictive of psychological well-being from the perspective of the elderly person? Studies that investigate the relationship between filial piety and psychological well-being are surprisingly lacking, and in this study we attempt to fill this gap in knowledge. We examine the effect of filial behaviors after we control for major determinants of psychological well-being, namely functional health (Kunzmann, Little, & Smith, 2000) and financial strain (Cheng & Chan, 2006; Krause, Jay, & Liang, 1991). A related question concerns the nature of the relationship between children’s filial piety and personal well-being. Studies conducted in the West have shown that both too much and too little support from children can be detrimental to the well-being of older adults (Silverstein, Chen, & Heller, 1996), as when support is not provided on a need-contingency basis (Davey & Eggebeen, 1998). Relatedly, on the basis of a three-generational sample, Levitt, Guacci, and Weber (1992) found that an older person’s affect balance was unrelated to the social support provided by the daughter and the granddaughter, which should not be surprising if a linear model was assumed for what might be a curvilinear relationship. Given the fact that children often hold a higher sense of filial obligation than what is expected of them by their parents, it is possible that, under the Chinese context of xiao being the highest of all virtues, children tend to overdo in supporting their parents, thus cutting into their parents’ autonomy and resulting inadvertently in decreased parental well-being. Nonetheless, such overzealous devotion to the parent is normatively positive in the Chinese culture, and one is often reminded of how blessed one is in social conversations if one has devoted children. It would be interesting to see if too much support from children is detrimental to well-being in Chinese older adults. Our measure of filial discrepancy provides a direct way to assess filial behaviors that are beyond the expectations of the older parent, and how this relates to well-being.

Finally, what is the distinction between close and not-so-close children? When assessing filial attitudes and behaviors, studies have typically referred to “children” without regard to the quality of relationship to the parent. Studies on information processing show that people report information that is most accessible to their minds (Schwarz & Strack, 1999), suggesting that when researchers tap general perceptions of filial piety, it may be information about the child in closest connection that is primarily reported. In this way, the effect that the behavior of elders’ other children has on them is largely left out in the current literature. Traditional concepts of filial piety require devotion by all children, and neglect by any child is conceivably detrimental to one’s well-being. Thus, an investigation of the roles played by the closest child and other not-so-close children is needed. In this study we distinguish the filial behaviors by the closest child and the other children in older persons with multiple children.

**METHODS**

**Measures**

Filial behaviors.—With reference to the local situation and to the literature, we added three items to the six-item measure of Gallois and colleagues (1999) used in the Pacific Rim study. The nine filial behaviors we assessed included maintaining contact, giving practical assistance with daily routines, providing financial assistance, being obedient on important matters, being accommodating on mundane matters, showing respect (deference) before others, taking the parent to the doctor when he or she is ill, providing personal care when the parent is ill, and listening to problems. Participants were asked to nominate a child (or children) “who understands you most” and “with whom you feel most emotionally close,” and provide ratings on each of the filial behaviors on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = almost always) with respect to this child(ren). Ratings with respect to the other children as a group were made subsequently. For convenience, hereafter we use the term “closest child,” although the number of children referred to as closest might be more than one.

Filial discrepancy.—Participants rated the degree to which the same nine filial behaviors of their children met their expectation, on a 5-point scale (1 = exceeds my expectation, 2 = fully meets my expectation, 3 = slightly below my expectation, 4 = somewhat below my expectation, and 5 = very much below my expectation). Again, ratings were provided for the closest child first and then the other children.

We conducted a pilot study with 28 older persons who had between 3 and 10 children (M = 4.68). Participants responded to the filial behavior and discrepancy items for closest and other children as described herein, and then provided separate ratings for each “other” child one by one. We averaged the latter scores for each item. Paired-sample *t* tests showed no significant difference whatsoever across all behavior frequency and discrepancy items. Average correlations were .75 and .70 across the behavior and the discrepancy items, respectively. Thus our method of obtaining ratings on other children as a group provided reasonably good estimates of the overall perceived devotion of these children, and would not overburden
respondents with the same questions repeatedly, especially those with more children.

**Functional health.**—We used Lawton and Brody’s (1969) Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADL) Scale, which contains eight items measuring the degree to which one can independently perform daily tasks (e.g., shopping for groceries, preparing meals); $\alpha = 0.91$. A higher score indicates better functional ability.

**Financial strain.**—Following Krause and colleagues (Krause et al., 1991; Krause & Liang, 1993), we assessed financial strain with three items: (a) Do you have difficulty paying bills?; (b) Do you have money left at the end of the month?; and (c) Do you have enough pocket money to spend? We coded those participants (29.3%) who reported having difficulty paying bills, or not enough money to make ends meet to the end of the month, or not enough pocket money, as 1 = having financial strain, and we coded the rest as 0 = no strain.

**Psychological well-being.**—We used three scales generating four measures: (a) the five-item Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), rated on a 7-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree ($\alpha = 0.92$), (b) the activation-balanced Chinese Affect Scale (Cheng, 2004), which contains six items to measure positive affect and six others to measure negative affect, rated on a 5-point scale of 1 = rarely to 5 = often against the past month (both with $\alpha = 0.90$), and (c) the four-item Geriatric Depression Scale (Cheng & Chan, 2004, 2005), rated on a yes–no basis ($\alpha = 0.83$).

**Participants and Procedure**

We recruited 206 persons aged 60 or older from social centers to participate in a study on family relations. We assured participants about the voluntary nature of the participation and the confidentiality of their data. Of those who agreed to participate, 134 (65.1%) were interviewed individually whereas the remaining (34.9%) who were literate filled out the questionnaire themselves at the center. The interview took less than 30 min to complete. Two of the participants did not consider any of their children to be close at all; 13 had just one child (and close); and 27 considered all their children to be equally close. Because in this study we intend to investigate the relative roles of close and nonclose children, in the following paragraphs we report detailed data only from the 164 participants who had multiple children and made differentiations on the degree of closeness. Nonetheless, we included the data from the 40 individuals with just one child or with equally close children in additional analyses in order to assess the potential bias of excluding these individuals from the results. For convenience, we refer to these 40 individuals as the “omitted sample.”

The sociodemographic data of the 164 participants are shown in Table 1. Briefly, the sample was predominantly female, poorly educated, and financially deprived, and this is typical of the older population in Hong Kong. Perhaps partly because of the traditional emphasis on sons (especially the eldest son) to take on the caring responsibility, sons were more likely than daughters to be nominated as the closest child. There was no difference between older men and women in whether the closest child was a son or a daughter, or both; $\chi^2(2, N = 164) = 1.19$, ns. The closest child, regardless of gender, tended to be an elder sibling. In addition, the sample was on the whole relatively healthy, although 23.2% suffered from different degrees of functional impairment (whole sample IADL score, $M = 14.9$; $SD = 2.70$).

| Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Sample |
|----------------|----------------|
| Characteristic    | Value          |
| Age (years)       | M = 73.2       | SD = 7.69 | Range = 62–99 |
| Sex (%)           | Female = 70.1  | Male = 29.9 |
| Marital status (%)| Married = 53.1 | Widowed = 44.4 | Divorced or separated = 2.5 |
| Educational level (%)   | ≤ Primary = 82.7 | ≥ Secondary = 17.3 |
| Household income (%)   | < $3,000 = 39.6 | $3,000–8,999 = 36.6 | ≥ $9,000 = 23.8 |
| Housing (public; %)   | 64.4 |
| No. of children      | M = 4.20 | SD = 2.08 | Range = 2–15 |
| No. of sons          | M = 2.07 | SD = 1.16 | Range = 0–6 |
| No. of daughters      | M = 2.10 | SD = 1.54 | Range = 0–9 |
| Closest child(ren) (%) | Son only = 51.8 | Daughter only = 37.7 | Both son and daughter = 11.5 |
| Birth order of closest child   | Son (%) | Eldest = 35.5 | Second eldest = 25.8 |
| Living with (%)      | Any child = 61.0 | Closest child(ren) = 51.8 |

*Note: SD = standard deviation.

*aThis is in Hong Kong currency, pegged at 7.8 to 1 U.S. Dollar.

*bFor number of sons and daughters, 5.1% are without sons and 9.6% are without daughters.
RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analysis

The means and standard deviations of the filial piety items are displayed in Table 2. In general, filial behaviors were perceived to be more frequently performed by the closest child, and discrepancies concerning the closest child were smaller than those concerning other children. Although the closest child made a lot of effort maintaining contact, actual assistance with daily routines (e.g., preparing meals) and listening to the parent’s problems were less likely. For other children, daily assistance, listening to problems, and providing care when the parent was ill were most unlikely, suggesting that the primary responsibility of taking care of the ill parent fell on the closest child. Forty-three elderly persons (26.2%) felt that their closest children exceeded their expectation on one or more filial obligations, but only 16 (9.8%) felt the same way for their other children.

We conducted two multivariate analyses of variance, both using the closest child’s filial behaviors as the set of dependent variables. In our first analysis, we examined if filial behaviors varied according to whether the closest child was a son or a daughter; we found no gender difference (Pillai’s $F < 1$). Thus, a further breakdown of the data set on the basis of gender of the closest child was not necessary. In the second analysis, we compared responses from the omitted sample with those of the main sample in a between-subjects design. Our result was Pillai’s $F(9, 194) = 1.01, ns$. Clearly, excluding those without multiple children and without differentiated closeness to children did not bias the estimates of filial behaviors to a significant extent.

Factor Analysis

Before proceeding to a further analysis, we conducted a series of analyses to see if we could reduce the large number of variables. This was pivotal in tackling the problems of statistical power and multicollinearity in subsequent analyses. First, we performed a principal component analysis with oblique rotation on the filial behaviors. We analyzed behaviors from closest and other children separately. In both cases, roughly 75% of the variance in the nine filial behaviors could be accounted for by three common, moderately correlated factors, each measured by three items (all with loadings $\geq 0.60$). We call these factors daily maintenance (e.g., maintaining contact, assisting with daily routines, and assisting with finances), respect (e.g., deferring, accommodating, and obeying), and sickness care (e.g., providing care when ill, helping with doctor’s visits, and listening to problems). We formed composite measures of these three variables by averaging the scores of the items (see bottom of Table 2). The alpha coefficients, for closest child and other children respectively, were $\alpha = 0.70$ and $\alpha = 0.78$ for daily maintenance, $\alpha = 0.79$ and $\alpha = 0.87$ for respect, and $\alpha = 0.91$ and $\alpha = 0.88$ for sickness care.

We performed another series of factor analyses on the discrepancy items. Regardless of the child target, we extracted only one factor explaining approximately 74% of the variance, with loadings $\geq 0.76$ across all items. Clearly, we tapped a general sense of discrepancy in relation to the filial piety of children ($\alpha = 0.95$ for closest child and $\alpha = 0.96$ for other children), and we computed composite scores formed by averaging the item scores (bottom of Table 2).

Finally, we performed a principal component analysis on the four psychological well-being variables. Only one factor explaining 64.0% of the variance emerged, with loadings of $\alpha = 0.76$ for life satisfaction, $\alpha = 0.84$ for positive affect, $\alpha = 0.85$ for negative affect, and $\alpha = 0.74$ for depression. Apparently, the four variables tapped a common construct. We formed an overall measure of psychological well-being by subtracting the standardized scores of depression and negative affect from the sum of the standardized scores of life satisfaction and positive affect.

Variations in Filial Behaviors

Six composite filial measures (daily maintenance, respect, and sickness care by both closest and other children), representing two within-subjects factors (filial performance and closeness), were subject to repeated measures analysis of variance to see if there were variations in filial behaviors performed by the same child target as well as across different child targets. We included whether the participant was living with children or not as a between-subjects factor. We had a dual purpose: (a) to partial out the effect of coresidence before examining the effect of closeness because the elders were more likely to be living with the closest child, and (b) to see if any of the effects differed by residential arrangement (i.e., interaction effects). Results revealed a main effect for performance, Pillai’s $F(2, 161) = 24.92, p < .001, \eta^2 = .24$, and closeness, Pillai’s $F(1, 162) = 82.95, p < .001, \eta^2 = .34$, as well as an interaction between them, Pillai’s $F(2, 161) = 7.84, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$. As one can see from Table 2, the closest child was judged to have displayed more filial behaviors than the other children. Moreover, across the three categories of filial behaviors, sickness care was performed less frequently by the closest child, but both sickness care and daily maintenance activities were less frequent among other children. Hence, disregarding closeness with the child, an elderly person in Hong Kong obtained respect from his or her children more readily than supportive behaviors when ill, whereas daily maintenance was more likely to be the responsibility of the closest child. Although, expectedly, the

Table 2. Ratings of Filial Behaviors and Discrepancy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Filial Piety Variable</th>
<th>Closest Child Frequency</th>
<th>Closest Child Discrepancy</th>
<th>Other Children Frequency</th>
<th>Other Children Discrepancy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>4.21 (0.93)</td>
<td>2.16 (0.75)</td>
<td>3.27 (1.09)</td>
<td>2.58 (0.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistance with daily routines</td>
<td>3.37 (1.48)</td>
<td>2.26 (0.86)</td>
<td>2.70 (1.42)</td>
<td>2.72 (0.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial assistance</td>
<td>3.94 (1.30)</td>
<td>2.20 (0.85)</td>
<td>3.35 (1.32)</td>
<td>2.62 (0.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obedience</td>
<td>3.75 (0.98)</td>
<td>2.18 (0.76)</td>
<td>3.34 (1.06)</td>
<td>2.69 (0.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>3.71 (0.91)</td>
<td>2.25 (0.81)</td>
<td>3.38 (0.97)</td>
<td>2.64 (0.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>4.06 (0.82)</td>
<td>2.13 (0.78)</td>
<td>3.58 (0.96)</td>
<td>2.62 (0.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take you to doctor when ill</td>
<td>3.50 (1.26)</td>
<td>2.25 (0.96)</td>
<td>2.95 (1.20)</td>
<td>2.81 (1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal care when ill</td>
<td>3.51 (1.19)</td>
<td>2.22 (0.93)</td>
<td>3.06 (1.15)</td>
<td>2.79 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to your problems</td>
<td>3.29 (1.28)</td>
<td>2.28 (0.98)</td>
<td>2.95 (1.21)</td>
<td>2.77 (0.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily maintenance</td>
<td>3.84 (0.95)</td>
<td>3.11 (1.07)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>3.84 (0.76)</td>
<td>3.43 (0.89)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sickness care</td>
<td>3.43 (1.14)</td>
<td>2.99 (1.07)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>2.22 (0.73)</td>
<td>2.69 (0.80)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Ratings are in means; standard deviations are shown in parentheses.
but the difference was small.

generally higher expectations about children than women did,

Gendera Age .07 .08 .06 .11 .10 .02 .11 .10 .05
t

not report different frequencies in their children’s filial
discernence concerning other children, with men perceiving
discernence concerning the closest child, and only gender predicted
with any child. The results are presented in Table 3.

tcate that data were not entered. M1, M2, M3

Sickness care

Respect

Daily maintenance

Closest child — — —

Other children — — —

Other children

Other children

Closest child

Closest child

Other children

Other children

Closest child

Closest child

Other children

Other children

K² .02 .02 .05 .06 .34 .03 .03 .43

Notes: Figures shown are standardized regression coefficients; dashes indicate that data were not entered. M1, M2, M3 = Models 1, 2, 3, respectively (in M3, filial behaviors were entered stepwise).

main effect for coresidence was significant, $F(1, 162) = 7.69$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$, it did not interact with closeness or performance, suggesting that the effects we observed were the same no matter what the living arrangement was. Judging from the effect size, we found that coresidence alone was not a major determinant of children’s filial support to older parents.

Predicting Filial Discrepancy

Ho’s (1996) review suggested that more traditional filial attitudes were held by those who were older, male, and less educated, and so these people might hold attitudes that are more discrepant with reality. To see if this is true, we regressed filial discrepancy first on age, gender, and educational level. We subsequently entered coresidence status, and finally we entered filial behaviors to see which of these behaviors, when lacking, predicted discrepancy. Because the three types of behaviors were intercorrelated, we entered the predictors in a stepwise fashion to minimize the problem of multicollinearity. We analyzed the measures for closest and other children separately, but in light of the high correlation between the two discrepancy measures ($r = .70$, $p < .001$), we combined them to form an overall discrepancy index in the final analysis. The measure of coresidence used was target specific (i.e., living with close or nonclose children), and in the case in which overall discrepancy was the dependent variable, coresidence simply meant living with any child. The results are presented in Table 3.

None of the sociodemographic variables predicted discrepancy concerning the closest child, and only gender predicted discrepancy concerning other children, with men perceiving more discrepancy than women. Because men and women did not report different frequencies in their children’s filial behaviors (all $r < 1$), such a finding suggested that men held generally higher expectations about children than women did, but the difference was small.

Daily maintenance did not emerge as an independent factor in discrepancy. Whereas respect and sickness care were more or less equally important in predicting a sense of discrepancy regarding other children, respect was clearly more important than sickness care when these came from the closest child. (Including the omitted sample produced essentially the same results.) Apparently, it is not whether one is cared for, but how, that matters most.

We performed a supplementary analysis to see if these effects on discrepancy depended on the gender of the closest child. Traditionally, personal care and attention is more in line with the female gender role (Holroyd, 2001; Matthews, 1995). Hence the importance of filial behaviors, say sickness care and daily maintenance, might vary by the child’s gender. We explored this issue by testing if the child’s gender moderates the relationship between filial behavior and discrepancy in three separate analyses, one for each behavior category. Thus, in the first analysis, we regressed discrepancy concerning the closest child on the child’s gender, daily maintenance, and gender $\times$ daily maintenance (along with coresidence and other demographic factors as in Table 3). This was repeated similarly for respect and sickness care. Neither the child’s gender nor any of the interaction terms emerged as a significant predictor in all the analyses. Thus the same expectations were held for sons and daughters, although we did not explore the possibility of the son and his wife sharing the duties together in this study.

When we combined the two discrepancy measures and allowed filial behaviors from closest and other children to predict it together, only respect from the closest child and sickness care from other children met the criteria for entry, with the former being a more important predictor. Whereas only 34% of the variance in discrepancy was explained by the behaviors of either closest child or other children alone, the combined analysis explained 43% of the variance in the overall discrepancy measure, suggesting the value of examining filial piety from different child targets. Taken together, the results appear to suggest that what matters to elders depends considerably on the quality of relationship with children. For those children who are already very attentive to the day-to-day needs of the parent, it is the way they treat the parent that matters most. In contrast, although children not closely connected may not be expected to fulfill all obligations to parents, not showing concern even when their parents are ill would likely be perceived negatively (hence a sense of disappointment and discrepancy on the part of the parent).

Finally, it is worthwhile to note that across the three dependent variables, coresidence did not emerge as a predictor. Hence although filial behaviors were rated as less frequent when the child was not residing with the parent, the degree of discrepancy from expectations was not affected, suggesting that the elders were adapting to realistic constraints rather well.

Predicting Psychological Well-Being

Our final purpose in this study was to see if filial behaviors and discrepancy predicted psychological well-being, and if too much filial devotion actually resulted in reduced well-being in the parent. We performed a three-step hierarchical regression on each of the four psychological well-being variables as well as their composite (Table 4). To simplify presentation, we
allowed the sociodemographic variables (age, gender, education, and marital status) as well as IADL and financial strain to explain well-being first. We followed this by the filial behaviors of closest and other children entered in a stepwise fashion to see which of these behaviors predicted well-being beyond the effects of sociodemographics, health, and financial strain. Finally, we entered discrepancy and its squared term; we included the latter to test if a curvilinear relationship between discrepancy and well-being existed. Because coresidence was strongly correlated with marital status (75% of those widowed, compared with 47.7% of those married, were living with children), and because it was uncorrelated with any of the well-being variables, we excluded it from the equation so that we could more accurately assess the effect of marital status.

Consistent with the literature (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999), the relationships between the sociodemographic and the psychological well-being variables were generally weak and nonsignificant, although there was a mild upward trend between age and depressive symptoms in this age group (Davey, Halverson, Zonderman, & Costa, 2004). Across the well-being variables, the overwhelming importance of respect from closest and other children was evident. Respect (and occasionally sickness care from the closest child) added some 7% to 15% of explained variance beyond that contributed by sociodemographics, IADL, and financial strain; discrepancy added another 3% to 8%. None of the squared terms of discrepancy was significant; thus there was no evidence to suggest that too much devotion and support from children would result in reduced well-being in the Chinese context. Together with the findings on predicting discrepancy reported in the previous section, respect from children was most important among the different filial behaviors in terms of accounting for one’s psychological well-being, having both direct effects as well as indirect effects through lowering discrepancy. The present findings should not be taken to mean that only respect counts. It is worthwhile to note that what were assessed in multiple regression were unique effects; as such, measures to ease the financial strain of the aged parent, such as providing pocket money, would also raise the well-being of the parent.

**DISCUSSION**

The present study provides support for the continuing importance of filial piety in the Chinese society of Hong Kong. The older persons in this study had hoped that their children could do more to support them, although on the whole they appeared to be reasonably satisfied with what their children (especially the closest ones) offered. The data also corroborate other studies in pointing to changing expectations for filial piety. Respect from children, whether close or not, was most important in determining a sense of filial discrepancy and psychological well-being on the part of the elders. It appears that as society becomes more affluent and urbanized, and as dual-earning families become the norm, expectations for filial piety have shifted somewhat from material and day-to-day practical assistance to emotional support. Along the lines of similar data (Hsu et al., 2001) and suggestions (Liu, 2000), living apart from children did not contribute to a sense of discrepancy nor to reduced well-being. Not only is this another piece of evidence that coresidence is becoming less of a requirement in modern urbanized societies, but it also suggests that the frequency of interactions is less important than the quality of them, and hence the importance of respect. Furthermore, although the majority of the participants chose a son to be the closest child, the sizable proportion choosing a daughter even though they had one or more sons suggested...
that the traditional emphasis on sons had declined substantially (Teo et al., 2003). Judging from the present data and our own observations, in contemporary families, it is the elder children, without regard to sex, who tend to shoulder more filial responsibilities.

The ability of the elders to adapt to changes over time is remarkable. This cohort has come through a rapid process of industrialization and urbanization in Hong Kong over a period of some 40 years. They witnessed the high authority and even absolute deference given to their elderly parents in the agrarian household, but also the fast erosion of their own authority and esteem as society modernized. Nonetheless, relationships with children and grandchildren continue to make up an important part of their quality of life (Cheng, Chan, & Phillips, 2004). Their willingness to make accommodations in changing times might be seen as a motivated effort to stay close to their children (see Carstensen, 1995), lest conflicts with them arise.

Nevertheless, the elders in this study still have genuine needs in times of illness and difficulties. What the elders had wished for more were, in particular, that their children would spend more time listening to their worries and problems, and that they would deliver more personal attention when they were ill. Besides tangible help in times of illness, these wishes clearly point to some psychological needs on the part of the participants that are not so well attended to by their children. Education programs to improve intergenerational communication might enhance children’s understanding of their parents’ needs, thus enabling them to perform their filial roles in more effective ways.

We did not replicate the Western finding that overmeeting the expectations of the parents was detrimental to their well-being (Silverstein et al., 1996). Perhaps there is a fundamental difference in the norm for filial responsibility between East and West. Whereas, in the West, filial responsibility is meant to fill the needs of the parents when they are not able to take care of themselves (such being the dominant theme in the gerontological literature), in the East, where Confucian ideas take hold, filial care is supposed to demonstrate how devoted the children are to the parent, and thus instill a sense of being esteemed no matter what. Given such a subtle difference in the meaning of filial responsibility, it is no wonder that overdevotion by Chinese parents. More research is needed to fully understand this interesting cross-cultural phenomenon.

The present data corroborate other studies in pointing to the role of financial strain in psychological well-being in later life (Cheng & Chan, 2006; Krause et al., 1991). This being the case, the data also show that whether children contribute financially (subsumed under the daily maintenance factor), however, is not crucial. This echoes findings in China that consistently show that monetary support from children is least expected by older persons (Kwan et al., 2003; Yue & Ng, 1999). Unfortunately, in order to contain government spending in social welfare and to allegedly preserve the functioning of the family, an older person in Hong Kong is required to bring all his or her children to the Social Welfare Department, who will declare that they all are unwilling or unable to support their parent, before the older person is eligible for public assistance. The disgrace associated with this process has led many older persons to decline the benefits and live in poverty. Those who do choose to apply for assistance are unnecessarily stigmatized. The impact of this stigma attached to a salient social role (Krause, 2004) for both the parent and the children remains to be investigated. A revision of the policy might be necessary to prevent an erosion of the self-esteem and well-being of the recipients of public assistance and their family members.

The present study also suggests the value of distinguishing the contributions of children who are not so close from those who are close. These children are expected to play different roles in the support of their parent. The daily maintenance of the older parent is typically the primary responsibility of the closest child, although all children are expected to pay respect to the parent. When the older person is ill, the caring responsibility typically falls on the closest child as well, but if the other children would express concern and share the caring responsibility, it would mean a lot to the parent. After all, social support is most needed when one is weak or facing difficulties, and it is during these times that the lack of support is most felt.

There are a few limitations to this study. First, the data were all reported by the elderly person, whose ratings of the children’s filial behaviors might be biased by his or her subjective closeness to them. At the same time, these measures shared similar measurement errors caused by a common reporting source. The former might lead to an overestimation of the difference in the filial behaviors between close and nonclose children, whereas the latter might result in inflated correlations between the measures for the two child targets, and thus a potential underestimation of their relative independent effects on well-being. Second, although the participants in the present sample were not free of functional impairments, they were still relatively healthy. A related issue is the size and the convenience nature of the sample and the fact that the participants all resided in Hong Kong; thus the generalizability to Hong Kong and especially to other societies that likewise espouse Confucian values remains to be investigated. Finally, longitudinal data will provide more definitive conclusions concerning the causal relationship between filial piety and psychological well-being.

Despite these shortcomings, this study provides valuable data on how children’s behaviors contribute toward a sense of filial discrepancy from the point of view of the elders, and how these factors predict their well-being. In summary, contemporary elders still hold expectations for children’s filial behaviors, though the need for respect is no longer regulated by the traditional norm of absolute obedience. Certain things are rather basic, such as regular contact and maintenance, and care when ill, but not all children are expected to play all the roles. There is no evidence that in the Chinese context of filial devotion, overmeeting parental expectations brings adverse psychological effects to the parent.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We thank Mike Cheung for his advice on our statistical procedure.

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Received September 27, 2005
Accepted January 25, 2006

Decision Editor: Thomas M. Hess, PhD