



Family Caring for the Elderly during and after the Pandemic: Perspective from Confucian Familism

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The COVID-19 Pandemic and Social Distancing.

- + Family support is important to elderly persons. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the dilemma between maintaining public health through social distancing and sustaining elderly social-psychological health through familial connection. Social distancing has aggravated the existing social isolation of the elderly, seriously affecting the connection between the elderly and their family members.
- + According to a non-profit organization known for its 24-hour Care-on-Call Service, mental health problems among the elderly have increased dramatically due to isolation and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- + The Senior Citizens Home Safety Association (SCHSA) reported that the number of cases in which the elderly require emotional support has increased by 52% year-on-year, and the number of cases considered as “suicide risk” has increased by 36% (Wong 2020).

Social Distancing and Elders Psychological Problem

- + On 2020, the HKU research team and NGO partners (JC JoyAge n.d.) have conducted a telesurvey on 8,382 senior citizens aged 60 or above. The survey found that 92.5% of elders would avoid gatherings with family and friends in the pandemics, and around one-tenth of elders reported depressive or anxiety symptoms. Elders' psychological problems are generally caused by stress, health problems, and a lack of social familial engagement.
- + The sense of isolation caused by social-distancing measures has harshly impacted those living alone; they can no longer go out freely to see their family members and friends.

Lockdown in Care Homes

- + While lockdown in care homes is very effective to prevent virus transmission, it causes psychological hardship to elders and family members. Elders living in the care homes were experiencing loneliness, feeling being abandoned by their relatives, at the same time, family members also have a sense of guilty feelings (Chow 2021).
- + Social isolation, loneliness and depression may lead to a long-term health crisis in all ages, and the negative effect has been shown to be magnified in elders (Shankar et al. 2015). These may even cause a relapse in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Wong 2020).

Social Distancing and Elders Psychological Problem

- + Indeed, the impact of the pandemic on the elderly is not limited to Hong Kong, but to the global world. Up to date, this condition has affected over 222 million patients in 188 countries around the world, with almost 4.6 million deaths (The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center 2021).
- + This highly contagious and deadly disease has forced the governments to take extraordinary measures in different countries, including declaring a state of emergency, encouraging social distancing, isolating patients and their close contacts, as well as implementing restricted access policies in social and health care facilities.
- + As María Cruz Martín Delgado (2022: 41) states that while these policies are effective to contain the outbreak, they have also “caused patients and their relatives to suffer through the disease in isolation and family separation, even in challenging and unique moments such as end-of-life events.”

Confucian Familism

- + Confucianism emphasizes values of family relationship, considers it as based on human natural affection. Loving one's family and respecting elders are considered as constitutive to one's moral character.
- + 孟子曰：「人之所不學而能者，其良能也；所不慮而知者，其良知也。孩提之童，無不知愛其親也；及其長也，無不知敬其兄也。親親，仁也；敬長，義也。無他，達之天下也。」《孟子·盡心上》
- + Mencius said, 'What a man is able to do without having to learn it is what he can truly do; what he knows without having to reflect on it is what he truly knows. There are no young children who do not naturally love their parents, and when they grow up will not respect their elder brothers. Loving one's parents is benevolence (*ren*); respecting one's elders is rightness (*yi*). What is left to be done is simply the extension of these to the whole Empire.' (*Mencius 7A15*).

Confucian Familism

- + Filial piety (孝) is considered as the core of Confucianism and the foundation of social ethics.
- + 有子曰：「其為人也孝弟，而好犯上者，鮮矣；不好犯上，而好作亂者，未之有也。君子務本，本立而道生。孝弟也者，其為仁之本與！」《論語·學而》
- + Master You said: "It is a rare thing for someone who has a sense of filial and fraternal responsibility (*xiaodi*) to have a taste for defying authority. And it is unheard of for those who have no taste for defying authority to be keen on initiating rebellion. Exemplary persons (*junzi*) concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold, the way (*dao*) will grow therefrom. As for filial and fraternal responsibility, it is, I suspect, the root of authoritative conduct (*ren*)." (*Analects* 1.2)
- + 子曰：「夫，德之本也，教之所由生也。」《孝經》
- + The Master said, "(It was filial piety.) Now filial piety is the root of (all) virtue, and (the stem) out of which grows (all moral) teaching." (*The Classic of Filial Piety* 1)

Confucian Familism

- + According to Chinese characters, the Chinese word 孝 (filial piety, *xiao*) is the combination of two words: 老(old) and 子(son).
- + The word 老(old) is on top of 子(son); it means that the son should take on the responsibility of caring for the elderly parents,
- + Traditionally, the majority of elders were cared for by their family members, especially when they developed severe diseases or lost the ability to work. It was quite natural for family members to take up such responsibility because every generation of them lived under the same roof.
- + Offspring, particularly sons, were responsible for taking care of older adults until the end of their lives.
- + Furthermore, the combination of the words 老(old) and 子(son) also implies that there exists a kind of unity and continuity between generations.

Confucian Familism

- + According to Fei Xiaotong, a prominent Chinese sociologist, children are always considered by their parents as part of their selves, the second life of themselves.
- + 「在父母的眼中，孩子常是自我的一部分，子女是他理想自我再來一次的機會。」
(費孝通 1998: 201-2)
- + Generally, the elders are concerned very much about their family relationship; they usually cherish moments of getting along with their children and grandchildren.
- + For traditional Chinese family culture, the lives between parents and children are closely connected, their dignities are very much inseparable, both share glory and disgrace together. In short, for traditional Chinese, both parents and children are highly interdependent; they share a common identity.

Confucian Familism

- + Thus, there are many teaching about caring for children and parents in Confucian texts. Such care is not only for the survival of family members but for the goal of being *ren* (仁), that is, providing comprehensive care for the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of family members.
- + Unlike Western culture, because of the value of filial piety, traditional Chinese will take up the bi-directional caring model.
 - + Parents take care of the young; and when they have grown up and get married, they must take care of the young and their elder parents. And when they are old, they rely on their adult children to take care of them.
- + Based on the emphasis on traditional family values, Chinese people have a higher sense of family ties and norms of reciprocity in intergenerational relationships (Xu et al. 2007).

Resilience and COVID-19 pandemic

- + I would argue that such value of parent-children mutual support, familial caring and relationship should be emphasized in the face of COVID-19 pandemic because it is highly related to one's character of resilience.
- + Resilience is defined as the capacity to recover from difficulties. It refers to one's ability to withstand adversity and bounce back and grow in face of crisis.
- + However, COVID-19 presents unique challenges because people are physically distancing, and social connections, as a key factor in enhancing resilience, have become difficult (Richards & Dixon 2021).

Resilience and COVID-19 pandemic

- + A survey conducted by Zhuang et al (2021) in Hong Kong shows that although about one-third (30.6%) and one-tenth (11.5%) respondents report a moderate or severe level of psychological distress due to financial and emotional problems under the influence of COVID-19, family support and community resources can be an important protective factor that fights against risks and adversities with positive outcomes.
- + In particular, family support and family leisure activities can positively contribute to family members' mental health. Family leisure activities in which parents and children can spend time together in recreational activities can create a sense of rhythm within the family and cultivate the inner confidence to cope with unpredictable changes (McCubbin and McCubbin 1988).
- + This finding is consistent with previous studies, showing that family cohesion, integration, intimacy, and relationships are important protective resources for individual mental health in face of stressful situations, such as earthquakes (Cao et al. 2013) and health-related epidemics, such as SARS (Main et al. 2011).

Resilience and COVID-19 pandemic

- + As Zhuang et al. (2021) state, “Family support was found to be the strongest mediator of the negative influences of COVID-19-related stressors on psychological distress. The results imply that even though the families are negatively influenced by life stressors, support, such as alliance, feelings of belongingness, guidance and reassurance of personal worthiness provided by family members, is important family factor that can facilitate family members’ positive adaptation in the face of stressful situations. It is suggested that family members with the common belief of ‘being in it together’, can collectively share difficult feelings, maintain connectedness despite heightened family stress.”
- + Zhuang et al. (2021) further state, “Regarding family leisure activities, our findings suggest that it exerted an indirect protective effect through improving family support, which then led to better family functioning. Essentially, everyday low-cost leisure activities can provide a safe and positive context in which family relationships can be enhanced and feelings of family connectedness and integration to be increased. In turn, this may contribute to better psychological health.”

Technology during COVID-19 Pandemic

- + Indeed, in response to the problem of social distancing during COVID-19 pandemic, technology has been heavily used to mitigate these negative effects, providing individuals with many digital alternatives to daily activities that can no longer be completed normally.
- + The use of technology, such as smartphones, tablets, personal computers with SKYPE, ZOOM, TEAMS or chat tools, to stay connected with family members and friends has become an important way to fight against these negative effects caused by prolonged isolation and loneliness. Online lectures and academic conferences have also become the new normal in many institutes.
- + However, while technology may have greatly mitigated the negative effects in the general population, the situation in the elderly population is more complicated.

Technology during COVID-19 Pandemic

- + Compared with young people, the ability of elders to acquire and use technology is much lower. Martins Van Jaarsveld (2020) calls such long-standing uneven technology acquisition and skill distribution “the digital divide”; and such gap will be continuously increasing as the rate of technological innovation speeds up.
- + While the problem of the digital divide is not new, its seriousness has been magnified and becomes obvious because of the pandemic which has already caused so many elders to suffer the negative effect but are unable to acquire help from technological achievements.
- + Thus, Martins Van Jaarsveld (2020) argues that it is necessary to pay more attention and resources to improve the elderly digital literacy.

Technology during COVID-19 Pandemic

+ Martins Van Jaarsveld (2020) states, “research suggests that the main determinants of this divide are low motivational access, and a general skills deficit. A recent study showed that elderly individuals who reported disliking technology mainly attributed this to the belief that it was inconvenient, or that the costs outweighed the benefits. The task of closing the digital divide therefore becomes an issue of not only improving elderly access to technology, and offering skills training so they can develop digital skills, but also implementing programs to increase the elderly population’s motivation to use technology, and better understand the benefits it can offer.”

Technology during COVID-19 Pandemic

- + Thus, Martins Van Jaarsveld (2020) suggests,
 - + In the short-term, governments and care homes should provide digital resources to the elders and to take measures to ensure that the elders are aware of the resources available online during this pandemic.
 - + In the long-term, governments should aim at reducing the digital divide between older and younger population, they should take the opportunity to implement digital literacy programs for elders, to increase their motivation for technology use, and to enhance their digital skills.

Confucianism and Online Relationship

- + Some critics think that Confucianism is old school and outdated, it will reject technology and online relationship.
- + Some scholars even criticize Confucianism for emphasizing *Tian/Dao*, family relationship and cultural values that are unfavorable to technological advancement (Dang & Ma 2013).
- + It is true that Confucianism emphasizes spiritual and moral character more than innovation of technology and instrument.
 - + 子曰：「君子不器。」《論語·為政》
 - + The Master said: “Exemplary persons (*junzi*) are not mere vessels.” (*Analects* 2.12)
 - + 「形而上者謂之道，形而下者謂之器。」《易經·繫辭》
 - + “*Dao* is metaphysical, while vessels are only physical.” (*Book of Changes*, author’s own translation)

Confucianism and Online Relationship

- + It is also true that Confucianism is cautious of overemphasis of technological advancement which may inhibit one's spiritual moral cultivation and relationship development (Tang 2008).
- + However, Confucianism does not reject technology *per se*. Sun Junhong's (2007) exploration of Pre-Qin Confucianism shows that the emphasis of respecting *Dao*, learning and appropriate application by Confucianism had a profound contribution to the development of ancient Chinese science and technology.
- + In particular, if the use of technology can enhance one's caring of family members, there is no reason that Confucianism would reject it.

Confucianism and Online Relationship

- + Basically, I agree that technology can mitigate the psychological problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, such online relationship is still not enough.
- + From Confucian perspective, such online relationship is still too disengaged and disembodied.
- + Confucian understanding of human nature is always an embodied self. For Confucianism, one's moral cultivation (修身 *XiuShen*) and experience (體驗, *TiYan*) always involve one's body (*ShenTi*). One can never truly acquire knowledge, know others, and establish meaningful relationship in a detached, disembodied mode (Hung 2013).

Conclusion

- + The restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic should not reduce our familial caring and relationship. In fact, in the situation of a pandemic, caring between family members becomes even more important especially for the elders.
- + The healthcare system and its professionals must adapt to new situations and achieve innovation, not only by using technology, but also find ways or measures to maintain human bodily familial connections as a key factor in providing the best and holistic care for patients and their families.

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