

Introduction

One of the major achievements of the 20th century was the increased rate of longevity in the world. As a result, populations are aging worldwide and the number elderly in the general population in the future is expected to be much higher in most of the developing countries than in the developed countries (HOW, 1997a).

All over the modern world, adults, and especially the elderly, constitute the population group with the highest rate of numerical growth. For example, while in France it took the elderly population 115 years, from 1865 to 1980, to double from 7% to 14% of the total population, the same process will take only 28 years in China, from the year 2000 to 2028. Of the 1.2 billion people aged sixty and over who are expected to be living in the world in 2020, two thirds will be living in developing countries such as China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, Pakistan, Mexico, Bangladesh and Nigeria. For example, the population of the elderly (60 or older) in China is about 128 million, or one in every ten people, the largest in the world. It is estimated that China will have some 400 million people aged over 60 years by 2050 (taken from the Internet, *The Elderly in China*).

China has changed dramatically in recent years, including in terms of the family structure. In traditional Chinese society, the elderly used to live with one of their children, and children were constantly reminded that they owe everything to their parents and that they must repay this debt in full. Nowadays, however, more and more young adults are moving out of the family home, leaving their elderly parents alone. Many of the young couples who live with their parents now do so not for the sake of family tradition but rather because they cannot afford to buy a house or rent an apartment.

Most middle-aged children have little time to look after their parents, let alone take care of them from the economic, medical and social aspects. The elderly need to make arrangements for their later years when their families cannot care for them.

Following the increased longevity and the changes that have occurred in the traditional family, which involve all aspects of life, the question to be asked is: Who will decide for the elderly whether to stay in their own home or move to a home for the aged? Will it be left to the old people to decide or to their children?

Introduction to decision making

The quantity and quality of the decisions a person must or wants to make change according to the stages of life and are influenced by the social environment in which the person lives. Thus, people constantly face choices, and a considerable part of their mental energy is invested in thinking about those situations about which he/she is required or chooses to reach a decision. In most cases, there is uncertainty, partial or complete, regarding the probability of the desired outcome and the amount of satisfaction involved. The decision maker does not possess full information about all the choices and their payoffs, and the more the decision involves long-term consequences, the more the amount of uncertainty regarding the meaning of its outcomes increases. Hence, almost any decision involving uncertainty includes risk taking (Einhorn & Hogarth, 1981).

The present study focuses on the influence of social ties on individual decision making. Who will decide for the elderly whether to stay at home or move to a home for the aged? Will it be left to the old people to decide or to their children? Naturally, the decision depends on and is influenced by the social environment in which the elderly live, on their economic situation, and on their health.

Affective and cognitive aspects of individual decision making

When the individual faces the dilemma of decision making, he/she is in a state of anxiety, especially regarding the risky alternative, which in our case is moving to an old age home. In a group setting (comprising family/professional staff) the elders' tension and anxiety are reduced, which allows them to reach a decision that previously had been feared. The rewards or punishments involved in the group composition, the personality of the individuals involved and what occurs during the group discussion can change the individual's decision regarding the risk level he/she is willing to embrace. Two hypotheses are included in this category: diffusion of responsibility and risk as a value. The major assumption underlying diffusion of responsibility is that the individuals in a group, and in the present case in the family, are willing to take greater risks and choose a more attractive alternative with lower chances of success, because the shared responsibility protects them in case that the results are negative (Kogan & Wallach, 1964). Actually, some studies indicate that a move toward taking a risk has occurred when the subjects watched or listened to a discussion. These findings demanded the expansion of the diffusion of responsibility hypothesis so that it would account for how subjects can share the responsibility for decision making with people with whom they have no contact and who are not directly involved in the situation (Kogan & Wallach, 1964; Lamm, 1967). Such an expansion was suggested by

Kogan & Wallach (1967), who maintained that a feeling of relief and reduced anxiety could result not only from a shared decision but also from the existence of emotional ties between the group members.

The second hypothesis, that of risk as a value, was suggested by Brown (1965). It assumes that risk taking is a value in the Western culture and therefore risk taking is more desirable in terms of the prevailing norms than hesitancy and caution. Brown (1965) claimed that people tend to assume that their personal position regarding risk taking in certain situations is compatible with the acceptable social value of risk taking. When individuals are exposed to group discussion, they discover that they actually took a smaller risk than other members in their group. This social comparison makes them change their mind when they are asked to make their decision following the discussion. They change their initial decision so that it will more closely resemble what they "discovered" as an accepted social value, that is, taking greater risks.

To take into account the dilemmas in which people tended to be cautious, Brown revised the hypothesis, claiming that any problem involving a risk raises accepted cultural values in favor of the risky alternative, or in favor of the cautious alternative. He maintained that in some situations, culture attaches great value to hesitancy and conservatism, such as in China. Traditionally, grown children took care of their parents when they became old. About 70 percent of China's elderly people, particularly in rural areas, live with their children or relatives.

Research population

Fifteen elderly people aged 70 to 80, 8 males and 7 females, living in a village that is about 500 kilometers from Beijing. The elderly people lived with their family relatives, taking care of the house and their grandchildren.

Fifteen children aged 35 to 40, 8 males and 7 females, married with children; however, each family has only one child. These subjects were working long hours and their old parents took care of the house and their grandchildren.

Research tool – questionnaires

Two questionnaires were used, one for the elders and one for the children.

Findings

To present the parent's and children's perceptions about living together and economic support in the rural areas, similar questions were presented to the parents and their children. Table 1 summarizes the main findings.

Table 1: Attitude questionnaire on perceptions regarding shared living of parents and children

	Yes	No
Would you like to continue living with your child/parents?	Parents: 38.9% Child: 66.7%	Parents: 61.1% Child: 33.3%
Would you like to move to another place, such as a home for the aged? Would you like your parents to live somewhere else, for example with another relative or in a home for the aged?	Parents: 50% Child: 57.1%	Parents: 50% Child: 42.9%
Can you afford to move to a home for the aged? Can your parents afford to move to a home for the aged?	Parents: 38.9% Child: 64.3%	Parents: 61.1% Child: 35.7%
Would you like to participate in activities such as Tai Chi, lectures and trips together with people of your own age? Would you like your parents to participate in activities such as Tai Chi, lectures and trips together with people of their own age?	Parents: 55.6% Child: 64.3%	Parents: 44.6% Child: 35.7%
Would you like to move and live in a protected place, where you will be taken care of in terms of your health, social life, culture and safety? Would you like your parents to move and live in a protected place, where they will be taken care of in terms of their health, social life, culture and safety?	Parents: 64.7% Child: 64.3%	Parents: 35.3% Child: 35.7%
Are you taking care of your grandchildren? If your parents wanted to move to a home for the aged, would you finance that move?	Parents: 55.1% Child: 42.9%	Parents: 44.9% Child: 57.1%
Would you prefer to continue to take care of your grandchildren? Is it convenient for you to live with your parents? That they're helping you with the house chores? Taking care of the children?	Parent: 27.8% Child: 64.3%	Parent: 72.2% Child: 35.7%
Would you like to keep on doing the household chores? Is the time you spend with your parents decreasing?	Parent: 66.7% Child: 57.1%	Parent: 33.3% Child: 42.9%
Do you support your children financially? Do the young have less respect for the elderly?	Parent: 22.2% Child: 57.1%	Parent: 77.8% Child: 42.9%
Would you like to leave home for half a day and go to a day care center for the aged? The pace of life is increasing, your work is more stressful - does it affect your relationship with your parents?	Parent: 22.2% Child: 57.1%	Parent: 77.8% Child: 42.9%

Would you like to move to another town? Did you become accustomed to the change?	Parent: 58.5% Child: 78.6%	Parent: 41.2% Child: 21.4%
Do you think your children mind that you are living with them? Is it difficult to get used to the change?	Parent: 22.2% Child: 64.3%	Parent: 77.8% Child: 35.7%
Would you like to decide whether to keep on living with your family or move to a home for the aged? Do you consider it a burden that your parents are living with you?	Parent: 27.3% Child: 71.4%	Parent: 72.7% Child: 28.6%
In your opinion, can the family decide, in some cases, about the change or about moving to a home for the aged or to a day care center? Is this a costly burden?	Parent: 55.6% Child: 71.4%	Parent: 44.6% Child: 28.6%

As can be seen from the table, the findings are not conclusive. For the children, the convenience of having their parents living with them is a significant consideration in their refusal to countenance their parents leaving the home. On the other hand, the parents present an economic liability and their staying at home makes it difficult for the children to become independent and move to a modern life style. From the parents' perspective, their desire to live with their children is decreasing but they are afraid to move to a home for the aged and leave the safe family framework.

In addition, the parents were asked about their perception of old age and the elderly. Table 2 summarizes the major findings:

	Yes	No
Do you feel that the family members have less patience and respect for the elders in comparison with the past?	20%	80%
Did the pursuit of money and the long working hours lead to a change in the intergenerational relationships?	20%	80%
Does this change make you feel sad?	20%	80%
Could this change be avoided?	20%	80%

It can be seen that the parents do not feel any change in attitudes toward the elders and deny changes in the intergenerational relationships and the process of modernization in general.

Discussion

The main goal of this research was to find who will make the decision for the elders in China as to whether to move to a home for the aged or stay in their children's home: the elders themselves or their children.

The results indicate that in the rural areas the elders prefer to stay with their children. Tradition is very strong among the rural elders and they feel certain that only their children should take care of them.

On the other hand, the children, who, as a result of the one-child policy were raised as "little emperors" and are used to seeing themselves as being in the center, would like to release themselves from the chains of tradition and move on and acquire education. They would like to send their parents to a home for the aged in order to make things easier for themselves. Nowadays, they have started to consider their parents a "burden" and not as an "asset", as they did in the past.

For elderly people, the decision to enter an institution is usually the result of complex interactions which involve not only themselves but also professionals and family members. Traditionally, grown children took care of their parents when they became old. About 70% of China's elderly people, particularly in rural areas, live with their children or other relatives.

Because of the one-child policy, elderly people will have fewer children to take care of them in the future, and by 2024 it is estimated that a third or more of retired Chinese parents will have no living sons whose traditional duty was to support elderly parents.

These days many children do not want to shoulder the burden of taking care of their parents or don't have room in their homes. In some cases children are shirking this responsibility.

Many villages across China are already filled with old people, and the proportion of elderly living alone and/or suffering from depression is rising. There are even stories of elderly people being abandoned in hospitals or suing their children for financial support.

Conclusion and recommendation

In summary, the decision about moving to a house for the aged depends on several factors and is not unequivocal by any means. Does the elder have the money to move to a home for the aged? How does he/she feel health-wise, and what kind of a relationship does he/she

have with his/her children? Also, do the family members have the economic and physical ability to live with the elderly and provide for an extended family?

The decision in the rural areas about making a change in the elders' situation and that of their families depends primarily on the decisions of the Chinese government. For example, establishing an old age insurance system in rural areas is an important response to population aging, family planning and the reversal of the birth sex ratio in China.

The decision to bolster rural healthcare and, as mentioned above, establish a better social security system has in the past been motivated by a single realization: many Chinese families are no longer adequately to provide for their older members.

While the average life expectancy is steadily increasing, China finds itself lacking in related areas: expert geriatric care, dementia and Alzheimer's diseases, and understanding of the psychological conditions of the elderly.

After all the above mentioned parameters are taken into consideration, the decision whether to move to a home for the aged, attend a day care center, or stay at home will be made easier both for the elders and for their family members.

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