

ROLE OF JOINT FAMILY SYSTEM IN SUCCESSFUL AGING AT DIR LOWER, KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of the joint family system on the aging process. This study highlights that a joint family system brings a positive impact on the aging process. Data has been collected from male senior citizens who were residing in a joint family system in the village of Bagh Dushkhel, District Dir Lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Data were collected from respondents through in-depth interviews as well as focused group discussions. Respondents were identified through snowball sampling techniques. Thematically analyzed data reveals that in a joint family more manpower, strong social proximity, and easily available company in the joint family have a positive social, psychological, and economic impact on the aging process of older family members. The study suggests that awareness among the young generation regarding the importance of a joint family, grant of social status according to the role as well as the financial contribution of employed women may preserve the joint family system and ultimately successful old age.

Keywords: Joint family system, Ageing, Dir Lower, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

In Pakistan, life expectancy has increased considerably. The increase in average life expectancy is considered a result of improvement in the medical field. The increase in average life expectancy is evident from the data from different decades. In Pakistan, the average life expectancy in 1960 was 46.84, in 1980, 58.34 years, 63.96 years in the year 2000, while in 2011 the average life expectancy increase to 66.42 years (Oman, 2011). As a result of an

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increase in average life expectancy, the demographic transition began in the 1990s (Arif & Ahmed, 2010). The number of elderly (aged 60 years and above) as enumerated in the 1998 population census was 7.34 million which was nearly 6 percent of the total population while 40% of households contain an elderly person (Government of Pakistan, 2002). Keeping in view the increase in average life expectancy, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that by 2025 the population of senior citizens will be 43.3 million in Pakistan (Dawn, 2015).

Elderly people have biological, psychosocial, and economic needs (Cantwell, 2008). To realize these needs, the elderly rely on a network of relationships ranging from family, relatives, friends, and neighbors. However, in other conventional societies like Pakistan, care of the aged is considered the responsibility of the concerned family (Ashiq & Asad, 2017).

Different types of family structures are found in Pakistan. The types of families predominately found in the rural social structure of Pakistan are nuclear, semi-nuclear, joint, and extended families. Nuclear and semi-nuclear families can be found in urban centers while joint and extended families exist in both urban as well as rural areas of the country. Joint and extended families consist of large family sizes with many generations living together (Tabassum, 2016).

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In a joint family system, a woman besides her husband and children lives with her in-laws consisting of her husband's parents, brothers, sisters, and sometimes some other family members (Thapa & Kattel, 2019). With the passage of time, modernization and cultural changes are affecting the joint family system. The nuclear family system now replaces the breakdown of the joint family system. The nuclear family system is relatively weak in terms of social proximity, care, and support. The nuclear family system usually created problems for the aged members of the family (Ashiq & Asad, 2017). For example in a nuclear family, the elderly cannot exercise their traditional authority over the young generation (Malik & Azam, 2018). Compared to the nuclear family the joint family system is more supportive

of its senior members. The elderly family members are given more attention and respect. The young ones are expected to get the guidance of elder family members otherwise they are considered to be a rebel or self-centered members of the family (Khan, 2017).

1. What is the role of a joint family setup in the economic well-being of the aged members?
2. How a joint family does play a role regarding the health care of elder family members?
3. What is the impact of joint family on the mental well-being of elders?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The aging of the world's population is about to enter an accelerated phase, and the structure of population aging in developing countries has undergone major changes. It is estimated that nearly two-thirds of the total population aged 60 and over live in developing countries. In the next few decades, by 2050, the elderly population will increase rapidly, and eight out of ten of the elderly population will live in developing regions (United Nations, 2013). Through changes in the age composition of the population (Abdullah and Nathan, 2010) and associated with rapid declines in fertility and mortality (Mbamaonyeukwu, 2001), changes in the aging process in developing countries have been observed.

In Pakistan, the joint family system has always been the universal family system. Most elderly people rely on their children for support i.e. financially, physically, and socially. Providing this kind of support, especially material support, is more common in the joint family system. As far as the satisfaction of the elderly is concerned, compared with other family systems, the elderly in the joint family system are more satisfied. It is found that the important factors of satisfaction of the elderly in this type of family are related to general support such as social psychology and physiology (Itrat, Taqui, Qazi, and Qidwai, 2007).

In addition, the financial support obtained by the middle-aged and elderly family members of the joint family also helps to increase the satisfaction of the elderly. Similarly, it is difficult for nuclear families with weaker economic strength to provide their older members with the expected standard of living like a joint agency (Das, 2011). In Pakistan, only a few elderly people are financially independent. Only those who are employed by

the government can receive financial benefits in the form of pensions (Afzal, 1997). Pakistan's current social protection programs operating in the private and public sectors cover only an estimated 20 percent of the elderly population (Mahmood & Nasir, 2008). Those who are not government employees rely on family members for financial support (Sabzwari & Azharm, 2010)

A joint family provides a protective environment from different types of abuse. The practice of elder abuse is higher in nuclear families than in joint families (Quickedit, 2012). A joint family setup is considered important for the mental health of the elder family members. In a joint family, strong social relations provide psychological support and protect the elderly from psychological problems (Das, 2011).

RESEARCH METHODS

The current qualitative study focused on the facilitating role of a joint family in the successful aging of its older members. Data for this study were collected in village Bagh, Dushkhel, Dir lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The universe of this study is a rural village with a traditional male-dominant culture. Although gradually the concept of family nuclearization is emerging in this area due to education and modernization, however, the cultural norms resist family nuclearization. As a result of cultural resistance to family nuclearization, most of the elderly in this world are living in a joint family setup. In the target area, people particularly the older participate in religious activities, including prayer in the mosque. According to the culture of the area, any public issue may be discussed in the mosque after prayer. After the afternoon prayer, a resident introduced me to the participants. I set in the mosque with the respondents and explained the purpose of my discussion/data collection. I collect the required data from the respondents through focus group discussions as well as in-depth interviews. After data collection from the respondents in the mosque, I realized that the study has not achieved the point of saturation. The potential respondents, who were not available in the mosque, were identified through snowball sampling techniques and were interviewed in their houses. In addition, observation was also used as a tool for data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Joint Family and Financial Support of Elder Family Members

In Pakistani society, the personal economic position of most of the

senior citizens is weaker due to the non-availability of jobs, lack of old age pension, and social security system. The senior citizens themselves as well as the economic position of the family both are considered responsible for the problems of senior citizens. Moreover, economic orders compel poor families to focus more on amenities than the aged people (Ashiq & Asad, 2017). However, the economic position of senior citizens living in the joint family system is better than those living in a nuclear family setup. The respondents of this study also support the idea of the economic benefits of a joint family. A respondent commented as

“The earning and expenditure responsibilities are shouldered by my sons. I am not directly concerned with financial matters; however they (my sons) fulfill my needs like other family members”.

Usually, in the joint family system, the senior male family member exercises control over property, and the quality of the life of old people depends on the size of their landholding. Those who own more property, cattle, and other sources of revenue receive more attention and special treatment from their caregivers. Some old people are culturally authorized to choose the best caregivers if they are not satisfied (Mengesha, 2002). The expected economic benefits from the elder family members motivate the younger family members to take care of their elderly. In this regard a, respondent commented as

“My children award me respect and dignity. The Pakhtun culture, religion as well as the expectation of my children to get share property inheritance are playing a role”.

In a joint family, the economic needs of elderly family members are easily fulfilled. There is more manpower and usually, their earning is considered common. This practice brings financial pressure on earning family members but the elderly members, women, children, and non-earning family members are economically relaxed. Ahmad (2011) also found that young earning family members find it difficult to support older persons financially as well as to afford the expenses of better education for their children and their own health needs.

In this a respondent said

“We are eight family members with one earning son in Saudi Arabia. His earning is sufficient for the fulfillment of our needs”.

Results of the research study conducted by Ahamd (2011) in Lahore, Pakistan reveals that a small portion of respondents said that they had never received financial support from their close circles during the last year. The majority of the respondents received occasional financial support from their close ones. Resultantly, the majority of the respondents were not working or engaged in low-paid informal activities. Thus this situation led them to poor economic position and made them dependent on their families. Though the majority of the elders receive casual or no financial support from their families, however, their utmost needs were fulfilled in the joint family system. In a joint family, due to more earning members, the elderly consider themselves economically relaxed and the sons who are living with their parents consider themselves responsible for the economic support of the elder person.

Financial support is linked with the well-being of the elderly and this support helps people, particularly those having low income, to deal with setbacks and facilitate access to medical services (Ahmad, 2011).

Joint family and Health Care of Elder Family Members

The joint family system is an important informal institution of the rural social structure of the subcontinent where several generations reside together. The elderly enjoy respect from the younger family members but this important institution has also transformed during the last twentieth century due to, mass education, urbanization, modernization, women's employment, and empowerment (Amonkar, Mankar, Thatkar, Sawardekar, Goel & Anjenaya, 2018; Qidwai, Khushk, Allauddin & Nanji, 2017).

Mass Education in general and women's education, in particular, has brought many changes to the joint family system. These changes can be observed in the feelings, attitudes, and ideologies of the people both. In addition education and more job opportunities for women have also brought changes in their social status. As they earn for themselves which has made them economically independent. This rise in the social status of women and the economic independence of women has badly affected the joint family system. It is very difficult for a formally employed woman to manage household responsibilities as well as her job (Aamir, 2004). In joint families, women in general and married women, in particular, are lacking employment outside the house.

Regarding the role of women in the joint family system a respondent said

“In my family, women shoulder the responsibility within the house including cooking, laundry, house cleaning, child caring and rearing as well as care of sick and elders”

Regarding the role of joint family in addressing health issues another respondent commented as

“In a joint family, the presence of youth and diverse professions of male family members facilitate the health expenditure of elders in the house while the presence of daughters, granddaughters, and daughters-in-law as housewives facilitate the nursing of aged”.

In a joint family system, parents, their children, grandchildren, and children's spouses all live together in coherence. Mostly men work and women handle domestic responsibilities. So, the elder people's care is not a problem (Das, 2012). In the Pakhtun society particularly the rural area where modernization is lacking, the common family type is joint. In a joint family, the easily and frequently available company makes it easier to jointly shoulder the problems more easily. If any of the family members are either weak, disabled, or aged and needs proper look after, then it is a source of tension for the whole family. In a joint family, living together makes it easier as the responsibility for caring for the weak is shared (Aamir, 2004).

In a joint family system, the affectionate environment and friendly relationships among the members gave recognition and security to the elders of the family (Gulzar et al., 2008). A research study conducted by Itrat, Taqui, Qaz, I, and Qidwai (2007) regarding the perception of elderly patients toward the family system, found that a significant number of respondents were willing to accept and adopt the joint family system despite certain weaknesses. Also, the majority of the elderly population preferred the joint family system despite certain shortcomings.

Regarding the loving atmosphere of the joint family, a respondent expressed his views as

“A joint family is a blessing for me to live with my entire family in one house. My grandchildren take care of me more than my sons. Earning family members share their earnings. The senior make sacrifices for the junior while the junior does not hesitate to serve the senior and elderly family members.”

At age, the development of various types of disabilities is a common biological process (Albert, 2004). Data regarding disability show that the disability rate increased with increasing age, particularly after the age of 50 years. Disability among people aged 50-54 is almost double the disability of the population aged below 50 years. Overall, the disability rate for people aged 50+ years was 36.1 per 1000 population as compared to 11.9 per 1000 people aged below 50 years (Ahmad, 2011). However, social and emotional support play an important role in the minimization of the impacts of disabilities (WHO, 2002).

In a joint family system, family members share the burden of illness and other unforeseen problems. For example, if someone is old or seriously ill and needs full-time care, that can be a real problem for families. Living together makes life easier due to shared caregiving responsibilities. This makes it possible to build bonds and strong relationships (Aamir, 2004).

Joint Family Set-Up and Mental Well-Being of Elderly

The process of aging leads to psychological changes among the elderly. Unemployment, loss of income, respect, dependency on others, and changing social status push the elderly towards feelings of neglect and humiliation, and reduce physical and mental activities. The disintegration of the joint family system, urbanization, and changing social values toward the elderly are considered responsible for psychological problems among the elderly (Dhara, & Jogsan, 2013). Caregiving to elderly family members promotes a sense of purpose and meaningful life which promote mental well-being among them (Xu, Tang, Li, & Dong, 2017). Type of family has an association with elderly mental and psychological well-being. Psychological well-being is defined as the evaluation of life by people themselves. Such evaluation may be cognitive judgment or responses to events. Psychological well-being is the degree to which people feel they have meaningful control over their activities and lives (Chamuah, & Sankar, 2017).

Respondents of this study were almost free from psychological disorders like anxiety, stress, depression, helplessness, hopelessness, loneliness, etc. They were satisfied with their lives. The respondents availed their families in the house as well as the companies of their fellows in the community to share their feelings.

Religiosity tends to be more linked with happiness as people get older. Older people often adopt religion as a “coping mechanism (Tran, Quy Nguyen, Vu Van, & Doan, 2015). Some of the respondents were confronted

with issues in the form of poverty and general uncertainty which may instigate psychological disorders. However, the respondents thought that they ignore the issues over which they have no control. Moreover, religion is strictly followed, particularly in old age in the universe of this study which promotes satisfaction among the elderly.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In Pakhtun society, the popular family system was the joint family system. This popular family system is disappearing rapidly due to modernization, the materialistic attitudes of young family members, and women's empowerment and employment. A joint family consists of a significant number of members. In such a family the elder family member usually an elderly man avails the decision-making power and high social status. In a joint family, the earning responsibility is shoulder by young family members while elder family members are free from earning responsibilities.

There is a division of labor in such a family. Women shoulder domestic responsibilities including the care of elder family members. Health care of elderly family members is not an issue in such families. In such families, the elders are protected from those health issues which are faced by elders in a nuclear family. Moreover, the large family members provide company to the elder of the house. The availability of better mental health of the elders in a joint family.

The joint family system is considered a blessing for senior citizens. The introduction of modernization, materialistic attitudes of young the generation, women's employment, brain drain, and rural-to-urban migration are contributing toward the decline of joint families in Pakistani society. The following suggestions are forwarded for the preservation of the joint family system.

- To create awareness among women regarding the importance of a joint family system
- To grant due respect and rights to the earning family members.
- To inculcate in the youth the importance of joint family from the perspective of old age
- To highlight the economic benefits of the joint family system
- Parents should show displeasure over the trend of family

nuclearization

- Earning women should provide financial relief to the family and in response, the earning women need to be granted relaxation by house women.

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