

Review

Felt obligation and ageing: a socio-cultural issue

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Abstract

In traditional Indian society, care of the ageing was within the extended family system and family was considered as a unit in our value systems and norms. These societal norms had been passed on from generation to generation. The elderly held an important place in our society and the youngsters sought for the benefit of their experiences. The elderly were not “charity cases”. Rather it was a reciprocal relationship of give and take. Adults used to take care and support their parents. Obligation emerged from society expectations that older parents have a “right” to be taken care of and adult children have a “duty” to do so. Thus obligation toward parents seems to be an important issue for adult children as they approach middle age and anticipate or see the needs of their aging parents. In ancient times, adult children fulfill their duties as of personal choice and affection governing their family relations. But in recent years industrialization and urbanization have weakened the willingness of adult children to care for their elderly parents. Migration of the young to towns and cities for education and jobs, acceptance of small family norms, and more women working outside home has led to decline in traditional values and growing individualism among younger generation. Though adult children still value and practice obligations towards their parents in their day-to-day life, yet the way they express their cultural values has changed in the process of adapting to rapid and massive changes. This paper tries to explore the problems emerging in parent-adult child relations and further tries to extend some suggestions to cope up with such problems.

Keywords: Felt obligation, filial piety, institutional care, parent-adult relationship, migration.

INTRODUCTION

We are witnessing tremendous change in the nature of our population, now being characterized by a markedly increased number of people above 60 years of age. One of the several factors which have contributed to this improvement in life expectancy is improved medical care brought about by technological advancement. It is expected that in the coming decade, there will be a much more increase in the number of elderly people to be supported and cared for. This may be well ahead of institutional readiness to cope with the growing number of the elderly judging by what is happening now.

Impact of changes in norms of the society on status of Ageing

In traditional Indian society, care of ageing was within the extended family system, which had been ingrained in the culture of the people. It was culturally imperative for children to support and respect the aged. For many elderly people, then, the later years were usually the most fruitful years of their lives (Okoye, 2004). In fact, the older had an important place in society and the younger sought the benefit of their experiences.

Thus, the elderly were not 'charity cases.' Rather it was a reciprocal relationship of give and take. The aged people provided their younger ones and society with love, care and support while at the same time they were being taken care of and sustained by them. Thus, members of the elder generation, having maintained and succeeded the

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next generation, will theoretically, expect the younger generation to support them in old age. But in the changing scenario, do people still expect the younger generations to accept this responsibility? It could be that these unwritten family obligations are superseded by the ideology of individualism.

Migration of the young to towns and cities, acceptance of small family norms and increased entry of women into paid employment has led to a general decline in adherence to traditional values and growing individualism among the younger generation which is responsible for the problems in the parent-adult child relations (Sung, 1998 b; Nayar, 2003; Aboderin, 2005). In modern society people have been gradually leaving their traditional patterns of co-residence with the aged parents. It seems that, in recent years, industrialization and urbanization have weakened the willingness of adult children to care for their elderly parents. Though they still value and practice obligations towards their parents in their day-to-day life, yet the way they express their cultural value has changed in the process of adapting to rapid and massive socio-economic changes.

Obligation in Adult Relationships within Family

Obligation is a fundamental principle in theories of family functioning, informal help seeking and family care-giving. Yet, despite its theoretical significance, there have been few empirical studies of obligation in adult family relationships. Historical views of the family emphasize the shift from duty and responsibility to personal choice and affection as primary elements governing family relations since the late nineteenth century (Hareven, 1986). Traditional theories of adult development stress the importance of individuation from family rather than mutual dependence of kin ties (Cohler and Geyer, 1982).

Obligation emerges from societal expectations that elder parents have a 'right' to be taken care of and adult children have a 'duty' to do so (Rossi and Rossi, 1990). Thus, obligation toward parents is likely to become an important issue for adult children as they approach middle age and anticipate the needs of their aging parents. Thus, felt obligation is viewed as expectations regarding appropriate behaviour as perceived within the context of specific, personal relationships with kin across the life cycle (Stein, 1992).

The elderly are people who have promoted the well-being of their families, communities and nation. More importantly, they are the parents who have reared, educated and cared for their children. Thus, the children owe their parents comfort and aid throughout the parent's lives and it is the moral obligation of the children to respect and care for their parents; filial duty must hold a

major place in their moral values and experience.

Cultural differences related to Felt Obligation

The extent to which the elderly are respected and cared for is likely to vary somewhat by culture, as cultural differences effect on the ways old people are treated. And with regard to care of parents, the people of East Asia and India have a notable tradition. The foundation of this tradition lies in a value known as filial piety, which has long dominated the cultures of the people of countries, such as, China, Japan, Korea and India. The core of filial piety is to respect and care for the elderly with affection, responsibility and gratitude, and the practice of filial piety has traditionally been the obligation of adult children (Sung, 1998 a).

Filial Piety is a social value which has greatly influenced the parent care and parent-child relationship of East-Asian peoples - Koreans along with Chinese and Japanese. The traditional value of filial piety is reflected in the ritual and propriety of these people. Even minute details governing their family system and manners of daily living are touched by the value.

Researches show that the majority of Korean adult children still value and practice filial piety in their day-to-day living (Kauh, 1997; Sung, 2001). However, the way they express their cultural value has changed in the process of adapting to rapid and massive social changes. For instance, many of them live separately from their elderly parents due to job situation, schooling and needs to explore better opportunities. Three typical patterns of practice of filial piety have been observed: (i) co-residence pattern, (ii) distant living pattern, and (iii) community service pattern.

A pertinent question related to these patterns is what observed societal declines or patterns in family support for older people have meant in terms of change or continuity in underlying norms of filial obligation. The authors tried to collect some empirical data on different aspects of obligation in ongoing relationships within family (Singh and Mishra, 2009). Felt obligation measure by Catherine H. Stein (1992) which is a 34 item self-report measure, was administered on a sample of 60 married couples who were following the co-residence pattern. This measure identifies five dimensions of felt obligation as expectations for appropriate behaviour about family: (i) contact and participation in family rituals, (ii) assistance, (iii) courtesy and compliance, (iv) self-sufficiency and personal sharing in specific relationships with kin.

The results indicated that adult children are highly obligated in providing assistance to their elderly parents, i.e., they provide tangible and emotional aid to them while

keeping in mind the wishes and desires of their elderly parents. The adult children were also found to be willing to maintain contact with their family members, give gifts to their elderly parents on special occasions and celebrate festivals and occasions with all family members according to their parent's wish. They also try to avoid conflict within the family and with their elderly parents and show courtesy towards them.

The adult children feel least obligated for personal sharing with their parents. They are willing to share their feelings and talk about their family problems with their elderly parents but are hesitant in disclosing their personal matters and intense feelings to those matters. Another aspect of felt obligation that was observed to be low in this study was obligation for the dimension labeled self-sufficient, i.e., they have a need to maintain self-dependence and identity in the family but maintaining the relationship ties with their elderly parents, showing respect towards them and providing them with appropriate care, usually takes an upper hand. In brief, the results showed that in co-residence pattern children are willing to maintain contact with their parents and provide each and every comfort to them.

However, in today's world there are a growing number of adult children who live away from their parents. Researches by Sung (1998 a) show adult children fulfill their filial duties by way of maintaining contact by telephone, visitation and mail. In spite of their physical separation, most Korean adult children strive to practice filial piety in terms of affection, responsibility, family harmony, repayment, sacrifice and so forth. By expressing and practicing these values using telephones, letters, visitation and other tools for communication, they maintain close relationships with their elderly parents. Even though the children are living distant from their parents due to certain constraints, the willingness to support them in old age and the affection towards their parents can be seen. They made certain visits whenever required as well as on special occasions. They provide them both emotional as well as financial support. The parents also made visits to their children's houses whenever they wished.

Institutional Care and services required for elders

The literature also brings out that sometimes the situation is such that institutional care is required. The children need help from outside to care for their elderly parents and here community should provide them helping hands like NGOs, old age care centers, institutions, hospitals, etc (Raikhola and Kuroki, 2009). The establishment of social programmes has done much to relieve adult children of the duty to support and care for

elderly parents, thus making help to parents more likely to be based on volition than on necessity or social obligation. Thus, the nation needs expand public services while retaining the cultural tradition that has had valuable results in the integration of the elderly with family and society.

We may say that in general adult children are willing to care for their elderly parents (Quinn, 1983; Freeberg and Stein, 1996; McAuliffe, 2010) but there are also some cases where children are not willing to provide adequate care to their parents and are demanding societal old age care provisions (Simmons, 1945; Cottrell, 1960; Grundy, 1995; Naegele and Walker, 2002; Bengston, et.al, 2003; Daatland and Herlofson, 2003; Johansson, Sundstrom and Hassing, 2003; Katz et.al., 2003). Increasing number of institutions for the elder people shows that some adult children perceive their elderly parents to be a burden and some of them take care of them not because of love and warmth towards them but due to societal pressures. These instances suggest lack of psychological closeness in parent-adult children relations.

Reasons for decreasing Psychological Closeness between adult children and parents

During the interview authors found out that one of the plausible reasons for decreasing intimacy between them is incompatibility of views. Adult children feel that the elderly parents are highly orthodox and rigid in their views and do not try to view and understand things from their perspective. They have differences in their views of working both at official and household level making the things more difficult for both of them. The incompatibility in ways of perceiving and thinking obstructs them in being close to each other and thus reduces their willingness to fulfill their duty.

Another reason was communication gap between them. Parents and children do not share their views with each other. Parents feel that the old ways of living were better and thus are not ready to accept and adapt to the new ways of living. For example, during sickness, the elderly often depend on their traditional belief system for the diagnosis as well as mechanisms of cure, instead of taking advantage of the advanced medical system available. This mental rigidity becomes more pronounced with advancing age. They do not openly talk to their children and the effort is missing from the adult side as well.

The interference of elderly people into lives of their adult children makes the conditions even worse. The youngsters do not want their lives to be guided by others. They want to live their life freely having no restriction from their parents. They support their elderly, provide them

with appropriate care but do not want any obstructions in their lifestyle.

In addition they are moving in the direction of modernization which further creates a large gap in the relationship. Modernization brings with it challenges and opportunities that will give them higher positions that may lead to wealth and socio-political influence.

Okoye (2004) in his research clearly states that modernization has also brought with it changes in the value system. Therefore, things that were highly valued before are no longer of great importance today. Education has improved people's awareness to the point that they no longer depend on the elderly for advice and other duties rather they can always find ways to get around it. This being the case, the elderly appear to be fast becoming irrelevant in the lives of young people and the society in general.

Popular misconceptions and stereotypes about the aged also affect the parent-adult child relations. Adult children perceived the aged as stubborn, touchy and as being engaged in frequent quarrels with their kin. On the other hand, elderly people have so many misconceptions about their self such as that they are too old to learn new skills, they are becoming forgetful, and they cannot hold up under pressure as well as they used to. Instead of adjusting their activities to conform to their physical and mental state they withdraw from all activities. So the feeling of inferiority and inadequacy that comes with changes in physical and mental capabilities in old age again have negative effects on their relationships.

In some situations older parents must move in with one of their children. Such moves usually occur after decades of both generations living independently. This pattern holds for most cultures around the world (Morioka, 1990; Hareven and Kathleen, 1996). The history of independent living sets the stage for adjustment difficulties after the move because both of them need to accommodate their lifestyle for each other. When there is misbalance between the expectations and needs of the parents and care provided by children then it will lead to unhappiness and adversity between the two.

Emerging Issues related to felt obligation

The problems stated above raised certain issues about filial obligation norms. In the study of Finch and Mason (1990, 1993) they showed that filial obligation norms are not to be seen as rules but as 'normative guidelines' which are commonly recognised and which guide children in 'working out' their responsibilities and commitments to aged parents. In almost all cultures the task of looking after the aged usually falls on daughter or daughter-in-law. For example, even though in Japanese

culture, the oldest son is responsible for parental care, his wife actually does the day-to-day care-giving (Morioka, 1990). In our country also, daughters-in-law have to shoulder the responsibility of performing daily routine caring activities for their in-laws (Cohler and Gayer, 1982; Hagemann-White, 1984; Stein, 1992; Singh and Mishra, 2009). It may have been simpler for women to bear that duty 30 or 40 years ago, but today most women have to juggle that elder-care role with a job outside the home.

Thus, one issue that can be raised is 'Does felt obligation towards parents still abide or is slowly evaporating in the fast pace of working of the society?' Children are motivated by a strong sense of duty, yet the arrangement often places family relationships under severe strain. Children conceive that they have a responsibility to support their aged parents in return for or 'repayment' of the parental care and support they received from them in childhood. There is much evidence that a mutual helping relationship between parent and child continues throughout life (Bengston, 2001). This help may be instrumental (transportation, housekeeping and rearing grand children) or affective (companionship, sympathy) in nature.

The researcher found out that adult children reported that it is their duty to take care of their parents and they feel a sense of obligation to help an aging parent. According to Blenkner (1965), at sometime in middle age the adult child reaches a greater sense of maturity in the filial role, beginning to look at the parent as an individual with personal needs and goals and taking on a sense of responsibility or caretaking role with the parent. These obligations exist because some children are motivated by a sense of duty, but others may be more motivated by affection or a combination of affection and obligation.

This further raised another question how support shifts or patterns across societies have related to underlying filial obligations norms? Families' structural circumstances are such that the capacity of adult children to support their aged parents is restricted. In traditional society where joint family system was prevalent there used to be many persons for sharing the care-giving responsibility of aged, i.e., grand children, other family members or siblings. But due to the strengthening of nuclear family, the hands sharing the responsibility reduced. Grandchildren move out usually for higher education, siblings to get better jobs. Thus, the burden is left on those who have stayed behind.

Caring for one's parents presents a dilemma feeling obligated to care versus focusing on one's family and career (Aneshensel, et.al., 1995; Stephens and Franks, 1999). Most adult children feel a sense of responsibility called filial obligation, to care for their parents if necessary. For example, adult child givers sometimes

express the feeling that they 'owe it to mom or dad' to care for them; after all, their parents provided for them for many years and now the adult child has the chance to give something back.

Much research over the past few decades clearly documents that middle age adults expend a great deal of energy, time and money helping their older parents (Stephens and Franks, 1999). In fact, nearly 90 per cent of the daily help older people receive comes from adult children and other relatives. These efforts pay off family care helps prevent or at least delay institutionalization (Brody, 1981). Sometimes their motivations may be good, they want to do everything for their parent but when capacities are limited they are not able to provide them with appropriate care.

This leads to another issue that if the capacity is limited then how filial obligation norms operates in practice? There is very little understanding and responses to such questions, however, there are certain rules and conditions attached to it which help in the interaction between an adult and parent. Aboderin (2005) reported in his study that children are obliged to provide support only to the extent that they are in a position to do so. There is a clear normative hierarchy of priorities in family obligations, i.e., adult children whose resources are severely constrained reduce their support to aged parents in order to meet the needs of their conjugal family.

Thus, what kind of cognitions and behaviours may be responsible for reducing or increasing obligation in adult children? Any relationship may be perceived as burdensome, rewarding or both. If the adult children see that they are not only giving to their parents, but are also getting back in the form of satisfaction, meaning and feelings of continuity (Marshall, et.al., 1993), they will feel greater obligation toward their parents. The attitude of children towards fulfilling their duties and responsibilities for their elderly parents also makes a lot of difference. If the adult children are taking it as a reward then they will bear the stresses and strains happily while taking care of them. They will cut their expenditure to meet the needs of their parents. Care-givers, who appraise stressors as benign, use appropriate coping skills and have good social support, have better psychological outcomes and report better mental health (Goode, et.al., 1998).

But if parents do not receive well the help provided by their adult children, misunderstandings can occur, and the frustration caregivers feel can be translated directly into negative interactions. This may also reduce felt obligation towards parent.

Though adult children may feel obligation in terms of norms, yet the assessed severity of stressors and the costs to be paid by them for care-giving may refrain them. From translating those norms into behaviour, i.e., in

enacting their role of the caregiver.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The issues raised above points out that felt obligation is reducing due to two reasons. One is the loosening of affectional bonds and secondly due to situational constraints. Situations can be controlled if both parents and adult children reduce their expectations towards each other. Affectional bonds can be made stronger by increasing psychological closeness between them.

To maintain psychological closeness between the parents and adult children certain measures should be adopted by relational partners. Parents should understand that in order to adapt to new social requirements in the changing society modification of certain phases of traditional value is necessary. Adult children themselves should take initiative to help parents learning new ideas and ways of living.

One of the main reasons for the increasing communication gap between the two is the education level which is modernizing day-by-day. This enhances the conflictual relationship between the two due to the different views each of them holds. So the aged could start learning the new patterns and values to increase communication with the young, hopefully reducing the communication gap between them. On the contrary adult children and grandchildren should give their helping hand and patience to their parents and grandparents so that they can cope up and match with the new trend.

In order to adapt to new social requirements in the changing society modification of certain phases of the traditional values is necessary, for instance moving from authoritarian and patriarchal relationship to egalitarian and reciprocal patterns of mutual help and respect between generations.

Instead of making the elderly sit in just one corner of the room, adult children should involve parents in some small household task or provide them things to relax. If they will be engaged in something of their own interest they will stop interfering in lives of their children.

Nayar (2003) found out that physical disability in the aged often gives rise to profound anxiety and a sense of apathy and helplessness. This situation is indeed very difficult, since the aged in such conditions invariably tend to be withdrawn, negative and inflexible. In such cases, the role of the family is crucial and calls for greater sensitivity and tolerance and so with joint effort misconceptions between them can be removed. Thus, adult children should make sure that their parents are saved from falling into the cycle of anxiety and depression. Besides, their importance in the family should also be ascertained.

Both of them should make joint efforts to maintain closeness in their relationship. Parent should adjust their global expectations for care to reflect the specific realities of their adult children lives, whereas, children and grand children should try to balance the needs of their dependent elders with those of their own, then it is more likely that they will have a healthy relationship.

Physical distance between parents and adult children and also between grandparents and grandchildren is being created due to the new job opportunities coming up. But technology has provided them various means through which they can always keep in touch, e.g., e-mail, telephone or internet facilities. The old people are to be convinced and should be made well versed with the basic computing and e-mailing to squeeze the distance in their relationships. The motivation that through these means their near and dear ones are only a few clicks away would enable them to change their attitude.

In the end, it could be seen that though technology and modernization has increased the well being and life span of people but our traditional values and culture of family as a unit had formed the grounding root of our society. With the new trends of modernization and industrialization the conflict from which the youths are suffering are such that they are unable to make a balance between the old guidelines and drastically changing scenario of present. Hence, an effort should be made where a blend of technology and modernization and traditional values and culture could be obtained to help the adult children in overcoming this imbalance. This will not only help in sustaining our cultural norms and values but this blend will make the conjugal bond, love, respect and affection between elderly parents and adult children more strong.

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