Living Arrangements of the Elderly in Fiji, Korea, Malaysia, and the Philippines

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Using logit techniques and data from surveys of the elderly conducted in 1984 under the auspices of the World Health Organization, this article investigates socioeconomic, cultural, and demographic determinants of living arrangements of the elderly. Having a spouse or children with whom to live has important effects on living arrangements. The results provide only weak support, however, for hypotheses based on modernization theory and point to the need for detailed data on transitions in living arrangements and for information about the younger generation as well as the older generation, both of which are involved in deciding who lives with whom.

It has been an article of faith in Asia and the Pacific that the family will care for its respected elderly and not abandon them as the West is perceived to have done. Recently, however, there is some evidence that Asian family and household structures have been changing. Lower mortality is improving the survival of family members so that coresidence is possible, but lower fertility is reducing the number of potential relatives for elderly persons to live with. Social changes such as migration, urbanization, and increased female labor force participation mean that the generations of a family may live in different places or in a place where there is not housing to accommodate a multigenerational family or that the traditionally female caretakers of the elderly are working outside the home. Furthermore, there is concern that traditional values of familism and filial piety are being supplanted by Western values of individualism.

How families and household structures change as societies and economies evolve has been a subject of great historical debate for the West as well as the source of much theorizing and considerable speculation for contemporary more and less developed countries (for a review, see Ruggles, 1987:ch. 2). Sociological theories of structural functionalism and modernization argue that with industrialization, urbanization, and overall economic development, household structure will shift generally from an extended to a nuclear form, which, given its mobility and flexibility, is better suited to the new socioeconomic setting as well as to the hypothesized loss of traditional values. Underlying these theories are essentially economic interpretations of the declining economic benefit of coresidence and an increasing ability to purchase privacy. Such theories have not been entirely successful in explaining historical change in the West (Ruggles, 1987), nor has the predicted convergence of contemporary family forms been realized (McDonald, 1987).

The elderly play a central role in these historical and theoretical discussions of the family, since it is their presence in a household that signifies vertical extension or multigenerational living. Furthermore, modernization theorists have argued that the status and well-being of the elderly are closely linked to their living arrangements (Cowgill, 1986; Cowgill and Holmes, 1972). Although family support can be given without living together, coresidence even under circumstances of good health and economic independence of the elderly is viewed as a form of insurance against future need. Thus in the absence of more
specific information, the living arrangements of the elderly may provide some insight into
the family relations of the elderly.

In this study, data from a 1984 round of surveys of persons aged 60 and over, sponsored
by the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Western Pacific, are used
to analyze the living arrangements of the elderly in Fiji, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia,
and the Philippines. Attention is focused on how living arrangements vary with the de­
mographic availability of spouses and children and with different measures of socioeconomic
status. Although data are not available on how living arrangements have changed over time,
the cross-sectional data can be used to investigate whether those with more modern attributes
are less likely to live with their children. The article begins with a brief review of previous
research, followed by a description of the data set and methodology, the empirical results,
and a concluding section.

Research on Living Arrangements of the Elderly

In contrast to the situation in the United States, where only about 15 percent of the
elderly live with their children, the majority of elderly Asians live in the same household
as their offspring (Martin, 1988a). The results from household surveys in the 1970s and
1980s in China, India, and Singapore, as well as the WHO surveys reported on here,
indicate that approximately three-quarters of Asians aged 60 years and over live with their
children. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that the extent of living in multigenerational
households is declining. In Japan, for example, in 1985 only 61.6 percent of persons aged
65 and over were living with their children, down from 75.3 percent in 1970 (Japan Statistics
Bureau, 1973, 1975, 1986). Over the same period, the proportion of elderly Japanese females
living alone or in institutional settings increased from 9.9 to 17.6 percent.

For most Asian and Pacific Island populations, however, little is known about the
differences between elderly persons who live with their children and those who do not. One
exception is Japan, where recent work by Kojima (1987), though not focusing precisely on
the elderly, indicates that the availability of children with whom to live plays the most
important role in the incidence of multigenerational coresidence. Analyzing survey data on
married male household heads with a married child, Kojima found that the number of
married children has a positive effect on coresidence, controlling for socioeconomic char­
acteristics of the older generation.

Building on earlier work by Freedman, Chang, and Sun (1982), Chang (1987) found
for Taiwan that the proportion of parents living with married sons who have wives aged 20–
39 declined from 75.9 percent in 1980 to 68.7 percent in 1986. He estimated the effects of
parental and younger couple’s characteristics on coresidence for couples in which the wives
were 20–49 years old and found that the involvement of parents in nonfarm activity increases
coresidence, whereas higher education of the young husband or the father reduces cores­
idence. Furthermore, the availability of the parent’s spouse reduces the incidence of living
with the younger generation. Although the implied effects of further modernization are
somewhat contradictory, the results indicate that further socioeconomic and demographic
change, such as increased education and increased survival of spouse (as opposed to greater
urbanization), may lead to less coresidence.

The recent round of surveys of the elderly sponsored by WHO in Korea, Malaysia, the
Philippines, and Fiji, although focusing on the health of the elderly, collected valuable
information about living arrangements. The initial cross tabulations presented in the overview
report (Andrews et al., 1986) raise some interesting issues. On the basis of modernization
theory, one might expect the rural elderly to live in a more “traditional” environment and
thus be more likely to live in a multigenerational household. Nevertheless, Andrews et al.
found that in Korea, Malaysia, and the Philippines, living in an urban area is positively