

Older, Fewer and Further: Revisiting the intergenerational contract in Singapore's Ageing Society

Singapore's rapidly ageing society has often been the topic of interest for both academics and policy makers in recent years. The overall makeup of families in Singapore has been affected by falling fertility rates and greater life expectancy, contributing to an inevitable increase of the resident old-age support ratio, with fewer working adults between the ages of 20 to 64 supporting elderly persons above 65 years old. This has obvious implications on the nature and quality of intergenerational relations, along with the social and cultural meanings that are constructed around the family. Based on a series of qualitative interviews, this paper seeks to provide some insights on how intergenerational relations within the Singaporean family have developed, with specific focus on the perspectives of ageing parents.

Two broad findings will be discussed in this paper. Firstly, the social and emotional ties between ageing parents and their adult children have become increasingly ambivalent. Ageing parents are likely to be more receptive to minimal and irregular interaction with their children or grandchildren, often due to their lowering expectations of 'filial piety'. Intergenerational relations of such character are described as a form of 'intimacy from a distance'. As a result, the perceived satisfaction towards such intergenerational relations are increasingly negotiated and redefined by both parent and child. This signals a decline in the social status, or symbolic capital, of parents within the Singaporean family in relation to their children. On the other hand, it suggests that the nature of intergenerational relations within the Singaporean family have become less hierarchical or bound by fewer traditional or cultural obligations as compared to the past.

Secondly, intergenerational transfers of monetary and non-monetary capital are increasingly unidirectional from parent to child. This is where parents continuously transfer financial wealth, personal time and social support to their children even during their adulthood, often with low or no expectations of reciprocity. This has contributed to increasing economic and social strain on the part of low-income families who are unable to maintain such transfers over a sustained period of time. Such scenarios emerge when parents not only are unable to maintain such transfers, but their adult children are caught in situations where they are unable to reciprocate due to rising costs of living, income insecurity and extensive sojourns within the education system. The implication of such a finding suggests that the 'intergenerational contract' may be increasingly difficult to sustain in Singapore, unless one's family stems from privileged socio-economic backgrounds. Consequently, this raises serious questions about ongoing state narratives portraying the family as the 'cornerstone' of society that serves as the 'first line of support' in Singapore's social safety net.

These insights are discussed against the backdrop of recent contributions on intergenerational relations involving the concept of 'intergenerational ambivalence', which seeks to transcend earlier frameworks that highlighted the primacy of either the experience of solidarity or conflict as the underlying interactional denominator between generations in families. The two findings discussed in this paper provide an empirical basis for the existence of sociological and psychological ambivalence, particularly in the case of ageing parents in their efforts to maintain their relationships with their adult children. Finally, Singapore's economy-driven and credential-centred society, which has played a part in accelerating its ageing population, is also seen to be a key factor in the changing dynamics of intergenerational relations.

Author: Kevin S. Y. Tan (PhD, Alberta)

Country primary focus: Singapore

Position and institutional affiliation: Senior Lecturer, SIM University, Singapore

Email address: kevin@unism.edu.sg

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