

The Effect of Intergenerational Dependence on Family Status of Older Rural Migrants in China

Abstract: During the urbanization in China, an increasing number of older rural adults migrate to urban areas to live with their adult children in order to help raise grandchildren and secure old age care. This kind of interdependent relationship between older rural migrants and their adult children is common and is characterized by social exchange in economic capital, labor, and emotion. This study examines how intergenerational dependency is associated with the status of older rural migrants in the family, using innovative survey data on 726 older rural migrants. Results show that the authority of the older rural migrants declined in the interdependence relationship. The economic dependency of children on their parents helps to enhance the family status of the older adults. However, the economic dependency of older adults on their children is not associated with their family status. The more children depend on their parents for family labor, the higher the family status of the rural parents. In contrast, the dependency of parents on their children for assistance will lower their family status. The closer the emotional relationship between generations, the higher the family status of the older adult. We find that intergenerational reciprocity is still very important in family.

Key words: Intergenerational Dependency; Intergenerational Relationships; Older Rural Migrants; Family Status

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Introduction. In the context of population mobility, population aging, and the gradual relaxation of fertility restrictions in China, more and more older rural adults migrate to urban areas to live with their adult children for the purpose of caring for their grandchildren or receiving old age care from their children. In such families, mutual intergenerational dependency between older rural migrants and their children is quite common. Compared to older urban people, older rural migrants engage in agricultural labor with lower income and have less accumulated capital. After migrating to cities, they generally face adaptation difficulties, and changes in family status directly relate to their well-being in old age. Whether urban children's dependence on their older parents for home care can contribute to the improvement of their family status deserves further study. Most of the existing Chinese family research attempts to explain the widespread intergenerational dependency phenomenon using theories such as the principle of family reciprocity, intergenerational solidarity theory, neo-familism, intimate kinship, and intergenerational symbiosis theory. However, there is little research that focuses on the connection between intergenerational bidirectional dependency and the family status of older rural migrants. This study examines the relationship between intergenerational dependence and family status of the older rural migrants, which helpful to provide efforts to improve intergenerational relations and enhance the family status of older rural migrants.

Objectives. This study examines how intergenerational dependence affects the family status of older rural adults who have migrated into urban with their children. We categorize intergenerational dependence into three dimensions: economic dependence, labor dependence, and emotional dependence. Previous research has described the phenomena of intergenerational interactions in terms of economy, labor, and emotions, but has never taken intergenerational dependence as the main theme for study. Then, we explore the relationship between intergenerational dependence and the family status of older rural migrants. Finally, we propose strategies which help improve the well-being of older adults.

Data and Methods. The data for this study comes from the "Survey of Older Rural Migrants" conducted by the School of Sociology of Huazhong University of Science and Technology in August 2023 in two administrative districts of Wuhan, Hubei Province. The survey collected a total of 754 valid questionnaires, and based on the research objectives, key variables with missing information were proposed, and the actual sample size of older rural migrants included in the analysis is 726. Family status is measured by two indicators: economic decision-making power and decision-making

power on family important affairs, the economic decision-making power involves daily family economic control, and external interactions for routine or frequently occurring family matters, while the decision-making power on family important affairs refers to major family matters such as engaging in production, choosing or building housing, purchasing high-end goods or large-scale production tools, investing, or taking out loans. Then we used Entropy Weight method to combine the two indicators into a composite indicator named comprehensive decision-making power representing family status. Ordinal probit model and OLS model were used in this study.

Results. The results suggest that intergenerational dependency is associated with older rural migrants' status in family, with the dependents are more likely have lower family status. In particular, we find the following findings: 1) Older rural migrants are generally in a disadvantaged position in their children's family, which is consistent with the modernization theory's discussion of the decline in the status of elderly parents. 2) The deeper the economic dependency of the younger generation on the older generation, the higher the family status of the older generation becomes. 3) The more children depend on their parents for family labor, the higher the family status of the rural parents, while the dependency of parents on their children for assistance will lower their family status. 4) The closer the emotional bond between generations, the more the parent's power in both economic decisions and family important affairs is enhanced, and their overall family status also rises. 5) The intergenerational dependency factors that influence the economic decision-making power and decision-making power on family important affairs of older rural migrants differ.

Conclusion and Discussions. Intergenerational interdependence brings changes in the power structure of the family, with the dependents are more likely have lower family status. And the principle of reciprocity continues to play an important guiding role in intergenerational relations. To enhance the well-being of the older adults, it is essential to focus on building close emotional ties between generations, while also maintaining economic independence and good health, to avoid becoming the dependent party in intergenerational relationships.

Preliminary Results

Table 1. Descriptive Statistical Information of Variables (N=726)

Variable	%/Mean	Sd
Dependent variable		
Economic decision-making power(1-5)	3.1	1.42
Decision-making power on family important affairs(1-5)	2.38	1.11
Comprehensive decision-making power (1-100)	42.09	23.95
Independent variable		
Economic dependency		
Parents' income dependency on children(no)	68.73%	
Children's daily expense dependency on parents(no)	82.23%	
Children's major expense dependency on parents(no)	53.72%	
Labor dependency		

Children's labor dependence on parents		
Number of types of household labor provided by parents(0-5)	1.66	0.65
Self-evaluation of the importance of parental provision of domestic labor for children	0.99	0.78
Parents' assistance dependence on children	1.73	0.98
Parents' labor dependence on children(no)	43.94%	
Emotional dependency		
Emotional dependency(no)	31.13%	
Control variable		
Gender		
Male	25.34%	
Female	74.66%	
Age	64.52	7.23
Residential status		
With spouse	65.6%	
Without spouse	34.3%	
Health status		
Good	61.29%	
Poor	38.71%	
Monthly income (ln+1)	6.15	2.94
Generational gap in years of education	8.29	5.35
Children's gender		
Son	71.76%	
Daughter	28.24%	

Table 2. Regression Results of Intergenerational Dependency on the Family Status of the Older Rural Migrants (N=726)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Economic	Family important affairs	Comprehensive
	B(SE)	B(SE)	B(SE)
Economic dependency			
Parents' income dependency on children(no)	0.036 (0.098)	-0.123 (0.098)	-1.829 (2.042)
Children's daily expense dependency on parents(no)	0.38** (0.12)	0.145 (0.116)	6.401** (2.425)
Children's major expense dependency on parents(no)	0.133 (0.082)	0.216** (0.081)	4.583** (1.694)
Labor dependency			
Children's labor dependence on parents			
Number of types of household labor provided by parents(0-5)	-0.081 (0.069)	0.031 (0.067)	-1.004 (1.403)
Importance of self-tasking by parents (Ref: low)	0.183** (0.056)	-0.051 (0.055)	2.133+ (1.142)
Parents' assistance dependence on children	-0.089* (0.044)	-0.052 (0.043)	-1.979* (0.903)
Parents' labor dependence on children(no)	0.124 (0.084)	0.147+ (0.083)	3.642* (1.724)
Emotional dependency			
Emotional dependency (no)	0.16+ (0.088)	0.279** (0.088)	5.663** (1.827)
Gender (Male)			

Female	0.105 (0.102)	-0.161 (0.099)	-1.233 (2.078)
Age	0.006 (0.006)	-0.024*** (0.006)	-0.274* (0.125)
Residential status (Ref: without spouse)			
With spouse	-0.01 (0.089)	0.207* (0.089)	2.717 (1.843)
Health status(Poor)			
Good	0.231** (0.085)	0.17* (0.084)	5.206** (1.755)
Monthly income(ln+1)	0.081*** (0.016)	-0.014 (0.015)	0.747* (0.322)
Children's gender (Son)			
Daughter	-0.036 (0.092)	-0.143 (0.091)	-2.376 (1.899)
Generational gap in years of education	-0.032*** (0.008)	-0.007 (0.008)	-0.516** (0.168)
Cut1	-0.288	-2.21	
Cut2	0.862	-1.256	
Cut3	1.189	-0.453	
Cut4	1.712	0.336	
Wald χ^2	123.55	76.07	
	Pr(0.00)	Pr(0.00)	
Constants			52.812*** (9.774)
Adj R ²			0.1411

Data source: "Survey of Older Rural Migrants" conducted in two administrative districts of Wuhan City, Hubei Province in August 2023.

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; + $p < 0.1$

Robustness Checks

We use linear Ordinary Least Squares model and robust linear regression model to check the robustness of the models. Specifically, we replace the regression models for economic decision-making power and decision-making power on family important affairs with linear Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression based on the least squares method. For the robustness check of comprehensive decision-making power, we switch to a robust linear regression model based on robust estimation methods. The results from robustness checks support our main results above.