

## **Introduction**

As life expectancy increases, the growing population of older adults is reshaping family structures. Multigenerational households, consisting of two, three, or more generations, are becoming increasingly prevalent. These complex relationships introduce unique challenges, including caregiving responsibilities that flow both upwards and downwards, resource allocation across generations, and intergenerational tensions that affect each generation's physical, emotional, and social well-being. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for effective later-life care and planning, as it addresses the needs of the elder generation, the sandwich generation facing dual caregiving pressures, and the increasingly burdened younger generation.

However, existing research has predominantly focused on two-generational family dynamics, with limited attention to the intricate dynamics of three-generational families. Additionally, Chinese culture emphasises Confucian values such as filial piety and family obligations, making care provision for older parents and children a common experience. Yet, studies exploring these dynamics in Asian societies like Hong Kong remain scarce. Moreover, the relationships within three-generational Chinese families are further complicated by differing values, life stages, and expectations across generations. Most studies have relied on quantitative methods to examine caregiving roles and family obligations, but these methods often fail to fully capture the complicated dynamics within families. Qualitative approaches, on the other hand, would be more beneficial in obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of how each generation perceives and navigates their intergenerational relationships.

Thus, this study aims to adopt in-depth qualitative interviews to better understand how solidarity, conflict, and ambivalence manifest within contemporary three-generational Chinese families in this unique cultural and familial context.

## **Method:**

The present study employed in-depth individual qualitative interviews to explore the intricate family relationship dynamics within three-generational Chinese families. A total of 120 participants from 40 Chinese-speaking families (one member from each generation) were purposively sampled from various channels between September 2023 and March 2024. Each interview lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours and was audio-recorded with the respondents' consent. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using NVivo 14 software. Both inductive and deductive coding methods were applied to conduct the data analysis. Supermarket cash vouchers worth HK\$400 were provided to each participating family member to compensate for their time and effort.

## **Results:**

A total of 120 participants, representing three generations from 40 three-generational families (one member from each generation), were included in this study. The average ages of the three generations were as follows: the youngest generation had an average age of 24 years (with 70% females), the middle generation averaged 55 years (with 75% females), and the eldest generation had an average age of 82 years (with 62.5% females).

The dynamics within three-generational families were examined through the lenses of conflict, solidarity, and ambivalence. The detailed themes, subthemes, and participant quotes are presented in Table 1.

Family conflict emerged through three main themes: **Initially**, care responsibility and resource allocation highlighted the pressures faced by the sandwich generation, who shoulder caregiving responsibilities for both older and younger generations, often leading to resource drain and diminished personal well-being. Sibling and gender disparities in caregiving for the elder generation were also observed. **Subsequently**, evolving intergenerational power dynamics revealed tensions as parental authority gradually shifted to dependency over the life course. Unresolved negative treatment from childhood further complicated these dynamics, influencing overall family power structures. **Additionally**, perceived intergenerational value shifts, such as family planning and parenting styles, served as key sources of family conflicts. These differences in values created communication barriers and undermined relationships across generations.

In terms of solidarity, three key themes were identified: affectual closeness, normative solidarity, and functional solidarity. **Affectual closeness** was strengthened through effective communication, direct care, and evolving reconciliation within the family. **Normative solidarity** was facilitated by the inheritance of shared family values across generations, as well as the collective support and responsibility of family members, including siblings and extended relatives. **Functional solidarity** was fostered by a shared understanding and consensus around intergenerational resource investment, with selfless contributions and reciprocal support between generations contributing to maintaining family harmony.

Ambivalence within three-generational family dynamics was evident in four key areas. **First**, participants described how unresolved resentment from childhood mistreatment impeded their willingness to fulfil filial obligations, creating tension between past grievances and current caregiving responsibilities. **Second**, shifting filial expectations and reduced parental expectations demonstrated that amidst the reported decline in filial reciprocity across generations, parents found themselves in a complex position. On the one hand, they continued to contribute altruistically to their children, yet on the other, they had to adjust to reduced expectations under evolving filial norms. **Third**, relational resilience emerged despite intergenerational divergences, such as different generations holding divergent perceptions of the same relationships and conflicting values. Nonetheless, participants expressed a commitment to maintaining family bonds, motivated by a shared desire to preserve their connections. **Fourth**, a recurring challenge was the pressure to balance the immediate and increasing demands of elder care with the need to invest in the future generation, leaving many participants feeling caught between competing caregiving priorities.

## Discussion

This qualitative study comprehensively explains the dynamics within three-generational Chinese families. By integrating conflict, solidarity, and ambivalence theories, our research reveals how competing interests and resources shape family dynamics, offering pathways to manage conflicts, strengthen bonds, and resolve ambivalence.

This study holds both research and practical implications. First, with the increasing life expectancy contributing to a growing elderly population, this study calls for attention to the

emerging issue raised by the varying family structures. Second, the research makes a meaningful contribution to the literature by shedding light on these underexplored dynamics in multigenerational families, particularly in the context of Chinese culture. Finally, the study provides culturally and contextually specific insights that can inform the development of policies and practices to support intergenerational relationships and elder care. By integrating these insights, society and policymakers can create more effective strategies to enhance family harmony and address the needs of all generations.

**Table 1. Themes and Subthemes in Three-Generational Family Dynamics**

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotes
<b>Conflict</b>		
<b>Care responsibility and resource allocation</b>	Dual caregiving pressures and the toll on personal well-being	<i>"I feel that being in this role (the sandwiched generation) has been very hard for me... The relationship between the three of us is...it's really tough right now, I can't take care of myself." (Case 04, G2)</i>
	Sibling and gender disparities in elder care responsibilities	<i>"My wife is the main caregiver for the family. She handles everything; I just go to work." (Case 33, G2)</i> <i>"In terms of caring...my son is more careless, and my daughter is better..." (Case 29, G2)</i>
	Tension in transition: from parental authority to dependency	<i>"Sometimes I speak quite harshly, but my mom is very forgiving. She used to be very strict, but I think now she feels like she has to rely on me. I can feel it." (Case 13, G2)</i>
<b>Evolving intergenerational power dynamics</b>	Impact of childhood inequities on power dynamics	<i>"... There's a lot of unresolved resentment accumulated over time. Sometimes when my mom brings up things from the past, it makes me very unhappy." (Case 14, G2)</i> <i>"...My mom had three children. She cared more for the youngest one...I received the least care because I'm the eldest..." (Case 30, G2)</i>
	Perceived value shifts implied intergenerational conflict	<i>"Lately, we've been arguing because they want us to have kids, but we're not ready yet." (Case 29, G3)</i> <i>"In the old days...if you were wrong, they (the parents) would hit you...but now...parents will teach you." (Case 29, G2)</i>
<b>Perceived intergenerational value shifts implied conflicts</b>	Value differences as barriers to communication	<i>"...I have tried taking action (to communicate) over the years, but I found that it wasn't very effective...as our mindsets are so different." (Case 13, G3)</i>
<b>Solidarity</b>		
<b>Affectual closeness</b>	Effective communication	<i>"...I usually tell my mom first. Basically, whatever decision I make, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone, she supports me." (Case 13, G3)</i>
	Direct care strengthens kinship	<i>"...I raise them until (they went to) kindergarten...there's a lot of emotional connection." (Case 30, G1)</i>
	Evolving empathy builds emotional bonds	<i>"In the past, when parents didn't know how to teach...they had no patience, and they worked long hours for little pay. So it was normal for them to vent their frustration at home. We didn't understand that back then, but as we grew up, we learned to empathize. After becoming parents ourselves, we finally understood their position." (Case 29, G2)</i>
	Inheriting family values	<i>"I believe that witnessing how my parents cared for my grandparents has certainly influenced me." (Case 29, G3)</i>

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotes
<b>Normative solidarity in filial piety</b>	Shared filial responsibility and collective support in elder care	"... My relationship with my mom...has been bad, but my husband has helped me heal a lot...my mindset is much better now." (Case 13, G2)
	Altruism, reciprocity, and generational investment foster family harmony	"It depends on their abilities. For example, two or three years later, when they have their own families and children, I think they should focus on their own families first." (Case 30, G2)
<b>Functional solidarity</b>	Children's achievements brighten family's future	"It was tough... I saw how my grandparents selflessly sacrificed for me; they never saved any money for themselves, putting everything into my education. So now I feel that I have to do the same, as they never thought of themselves, and now I must think more for them." (Case 13, G2)
		"They are all diligent and hardworking...none of them are lazy, which is really comforting..." (Case 29, G1)
<b>Ambivalence</b>		
<b>Filial obligation and lingering resentment from past mistreatment</b>		"I continue to adjust my mindset. Like my husband says, 'They used to hit you, but would you feel better if you hit them now?' So I let it go. Now my husband helps me process these feelings." (Case 14, G2)
		"I believe it's my responsibility as a daughter to understand my mother better, even though she treated me badly...But deep down, I can't help feeling uncomfortable." (Case 04, G2)
<b>Shifting filial expectations and reduced parental expectations</b>	Decline in filial reciprocity over generations	"Young people today seem a bit more distant from the elderly...I'm not sure if it's due to Western influence in Hong Kong?" (Case 30, G1)
	Parental altruism and reduced expectations in changing norms	"...You raise them to succeed, but you know that the farther they fly, the less they'll be by your side. I asked myself, 'Do I want her to fly farther or stay close?' If she flies far, you can't expect her to fly back. I've come to accept that I'll take care of myself when I'm older." (Case 38, G2)
<b>Relational resilience among divergent perceptions</b>		"Everyone has expectations, but I'm being realistic. I know my son is going to emigrate. He'll leave and focus on his own family. I only have one son, so I can't rely on him." (Case 39, G2)
	Divergent relationship perceptions across generations	"We talk about everything... there's nothing we don't discuss." (Case 29, G2)
<b>Intergenerational caregiving: competing priorities</b>	Shared desire to maintain relationship	"I might not share everything with them. I try to process some things on my own or chat more with friends." (Case 29, G3)
		"It's tough with parents, but there's no other choice. We have to adapt to their way of thinking. They're already in their 80s. How many more years will you see them?" (Case 13, G2)
		"For me, my children come first. Unless there's a serious issue with my parents, I prioritize my kids. (Interviewer: Why is that?) I feel more love for my kids, while with my parents, it's more about responsibility... but when my parents were in hospital, I kind have to sacrifice my children back then..." (Case 03, G2)