

The Future of Family Support for Thai Elderly: Views of the Populace

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Future cohorts of older Thais will have fewer and more dispersed children. This will result in a continuing decline in coresidence with children that has been the lynchpin of the traditional familial system of old age support. The aim of the present study is to examine how parents who are approaching old age and their adult children view these changes and how they intend to deal them. A mixed method approach is used combining analysis of national survey data and open-ended interviews and discussions. The results reveal widespread awareness of reduced family size, increased migration, and lowered chances that aging parents live with or near adult children. Many near elderly parents express concerns about becoming a burden to their children and thus wish to maintain their independence as long as possible. At the same time, however, strong normative support persists for coresidence or proximal living arrangements and for children to be main care providers when the need eventually arises. Adult children generally proclaim willingness to live with and care for parents but it remains an open question if these intentions will be carried out especially if they have established themselves and their own conjugal families elsewhere. Thus a major disjuncture exists between norms and the changing empirical reality. Several potential solutions to meeting the challenges are assessed in the conclusions including relying on paid caregivers, using community based volunteers, and promoting economic activity of older persons.

Keywords: *living arrangements, filial obligations, elderly well-being, old-age care, old-age support, mixed methods, migration, reduced family size, norms vs. reality*

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Introduction

Thai fertility declined rapidly between the mid 1960s to below replacement levels by the 1990s as survival rates to older ages substantially improved. As a result rapid population aging is underway (Knodel, Chayovan & Prachuabmoh, 2011). Also the ratio of persons in economically active ages to persons past working ages is in precipitous decline. On the family level, the average number of living children of persons reaching the elderly age range is falling. In addition, older persons are increasingly surviving to advanced ages when dependence on others becomes necessary. According to the 2011 Survey of Older Persons, persons aged 50-54, i.e. who will pass age 60 in the next decade, have an average of only 2.1 living children compared to 4.5 children among persons currently 75 and older. Since the total fertility rate has remained below 2 for over a decade, family sizes of elderly will continue to fall into the future (Prasartkul, Vapattanawong & Thongthai, 2011). In addition, children of older persons are increasingly migrating away with the *percent* that live outside their parents' province rising from 28% in 1995 to 39% by 2011 thus further reducing the number of children near enough to provide long-term personal care. One consequence of these trends is that the share of persons 60 and older that live with at least one child declined from 77% in 1986 to 56% in 2011 (Knodel, Chayovan & Prachuabmoh, forthcoming).

In Thailand, as in much of Asia, the family and particularly adult children traditionally played the predominant role in providing old age care and support. A critical issue facing Thailand is how the changing demographic, socio-economic, political and normative context will affect family care and old-age support in the coming years. Although a great deal of research has been done on issues related to aging in Thailand, we know of none that has addressed the issue of how persons approaching older age and their adult children are thinking about their future situation in relation to each other.

The aims of the present study are to examine the following questions related to the challenges posed by the changing circumstances in which the next generation of elderly Thais will live out their lives: How aware is the next generation of elderly, their adult children, and the relevant community personnel of the changing situation and the challenges it poses? How do they view the role of the family and particularly that of adult children and how it might change in the future? Answers to these questions are needed to inform policies and programs addressing the needs of future elderly and their families and in assisting them to adapt to the changing

circumstances. This study addresses these questions using a mixed method approach based on quantitative data from two recent national surveys and qualitative data from individual and group open-ended interviews and focus group discussions.

Consideration of the future of family support for childless elderly is outside the scope of the present study which focuses on the large majority that will be parents of adult children. We recognize that childless elderly, although remaining a minority, will nevertheless represent an increasing share of elderly in the future (see below). However given that they are likely to face a set of challenges that differ from the large majority who do have children, investigating the circumstances calls for research designed to specifically address the issues involved.

Study Methods

Quantitative data comes from the 2007 and 2011 Survey of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly conducted by the National Statistical Office (NSO). For convenience these are referred to simply as the NSO adult surveys. Each survey interviewed 9,000 persons aged 18-59 in rural and urban areas in all major regions within Thailand. Details of the sampling and methodology are provided elsewhere (NSO, 2007; 2011). The surveys asked about respondents' views and expectations concerning family assistance in old age, expected sources of support, and preparations for care and support in old age. Note that some questions ask about opinions concerning elderly in general while others ask about the respondents' expectations for themselves. For the purpose of the present study it is important to distinguish between these and consider them separately.

Qualitative data come from the "Future of Family Support for Thai Elderly: Perspectives from Family and Community" project centered at the Chulalongkorn University Faculty of Nursing. For convenience it is referred to as the FFS project. Data collection occurred from March 2011 to February 2012 in several locations in all four major regions and Bangkok. The selection of study sites involved a mixture of purposive and convenience sampling. We purposively selected sites in all four regions and in areas where substantial migration of adult children was likely. For practical purposes it was important to choose sites where the Faculty of Nursing investigators had contacts that could act as intermediaries in the recruitment of study subjects. Most contacts were nurses themselves and worked at some level of the public health system.

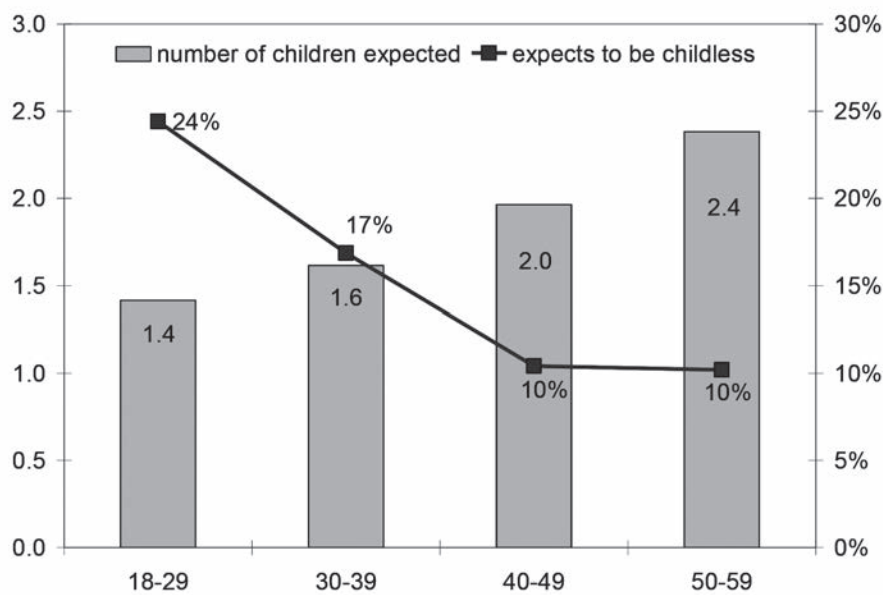
The methods of data collection involved open-ended interviews and focus groups discussions. All data collection was conducted by the key investigators themselves. More specifically, the project conducted 5 focus groups and 22 interviews with parents in their fifties (referred to as near elderly parents) and 15 interviews with adults who had parents in their fifties (referred to as adult children). Most of the study subjects were women although in a few cases of elderly parents we interviewed the husband and wife together as a couple.

Parents aged 50-59 were targeted because they constitute the cohort that will pass age 60 in the next decade and thus enter the age range defined as elderly in Thailand. Restriction to those with one or two children was imposed to reflect the typical family size of persons in this age group and represents circumstances in which fewer children will be available for support and care compared to the current elderly generation¹. Also adult children who have parents in this age range but no more than one sibling were selected because they correspond to the grown children of this group of older parents. Those interviewed were not, however, the children of the near elderly persons interviewed or in the focus groups.

Awareness of changing situation

Fewer children. The 2011 NSO adult survey clearly suggests that the trend towards smaller families is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. As Figure 1 indicates, younger cohorts want progressively smaller families including increased proportions who intend to remain childless. Compared to persons in their 50s, among whom only 10% have no children, almost one fourth of respondents aged 18-29 do not intend to have children. Overall this group of young adults expect to have, on average, only 1.4 children in their lifetime. Thus the decline in family sizes of successive cohorts entering older ages is likely to continue for at least several decades.

¹ For example, according to results of the 2011 National Survey of Older Persons in Thailand, 60 percent of parents age 50-59 have either 1 or 2 living children (Knodel, Chayovan & Prachuabmoh, forthcoming)

Figure 1: Number of expected children and percent expecting to be childless, by age

Source: 2011 Survey of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly Issues

FFS project results make clear that virtually everyone in the study was fully aware that family size has already declined sharply and many could readily articulate the reasons why. Frequently mentioned was the rising costs of raising children, often citing the need for increased education and the costs this entailed as a key reason underlying the trend.

“People nowadays have fewer children than those in the past. My generation thinks more about our economic situation when we want to have children. We realize that now it is difficult to earn our living. For this generation, we have to send our children to school... When I was young... people finished only 4th grade and quit school to work but now our children must be educated.” [Near elderly parent, Northeast]

Increased migration. There is also close to uniform recognition that children are more likely than in the past to migrate away from their parental locality and that this is linked to the changing nature of employment in an economy in which agriculture is of declining importance. At the same time, migration is often viewed in a positive

light benefiting both adult children and their parents under current circumstances when parents are still reasonably healthy and able to work.

“It’s very common for people around this area to go to work elsewhere... This is because people have more chances to study. In those days, people had less chance to continue their study since universities were far away. Wages in the area were low.” [Near elderly parent, South]

“If children stay here... the whole family will be in trouble. We’ll get poorer and worse off than before. Farming gives us little income... When children get higher education they hope to have a better job with high salary. Then, they will support their parents to have a better life... When we’re not well or ill they can at least send money for parents to see the doctor. We’ll have money to buy medicine.” [Near elderly parents in focus group, North]

One reason migration is not viewed more negatively is the ability to keep in contact with migrant children by phone calls now that cell phones are close to universal in Thailand. FFS project results clearly confirm this. Virtually all the near elderly parents with migrant children as well as the adult children who lived away from their parents mentioned they had frequent phone contact. In many cases, phone contact was daily. Comments by the near elderly parents suggest that this fulfilled much of their need for contact with children that lived at a distance.

“Giving me a phone call is already good enough when children cannot come. They may come only during weekend or holidays... My children like to call every evening to ask did the father come back home yet, something like that. If anything happens even at two or three o’clock in the morning, they will come right away.” [Near elderly parent, North]

“I want my children to feel comfortable with their life. If they cannot come they can call me. Now, we can see faces of each other on the phone.” [Near elderly parent, 56, Northeast]

Increased longevity. Most near elderly parents and adult children that were interviewed did not recognize that older persons are living to more advanced ages than in the past. In fact, a majority expressed just the opposite belief citing increased risks from various environmental factors, shifts to unhealthy diets, the AIDS epidemic, and perceptions that diseases such as cancer and hypertension have increased. Only

a few recognized that improved circumstances including better nourishment and health services have had a positive influence on longevity.

“People nowadays) like to eat a lot of fat that could result in a lot of illness. Some people have diabetes. People in old times had longer lives. They didn’t eat much meat and vegetables were safe from chemicals.” [Near elderly parent, South]

“People now have long life... now it is convenient to go to see doctors. The community hospital and the municipality office occasionally arrange activities for old people including physical check ups.” [Near elderly parent, Northeast]

The relatively common lack of recognition that longevity is increasing may be attributable to the less obvious nature of the trend compared to declining family size and increased migration of adult children as well as the need to think in aggregate terms to recognize it. Also health risk issues likely receives more mass media coverage than the slow and steady progress towards improving health and may distort perceptions of their prevalence.

Normative change. Views concerning changes in norms governing filial support and care were quite mixed. Some persons perceived filial obligation as declining although near elderly parents often qualified this view by adding that their own children were not like that. Others thought filial piety remained strong and stressed that if parents raised their children properly, they would provide care and support to parents in old age. Some commented that young people today are spoiled and disobey parents citing the internet, computer games and mobile phones as bad influences.

“Compared to children in old days, the ones nowadays are worse (have less filial piety)... Partly it may be because of changes in our society. I’ve seen this from children of other people but my children are not like that.” [Near elderly parent, South]

“I think filial piety, or care and concern from children to parents are still the same as they were in those days. As children see parents take care of grandparents they would do the same things to their parents. Children should absorb the same feeling from parents.” [Migrant daughter, 32, Bangkok]

Overall, statements that adult children no longer provide support or care were largely absent in FFS project interviews and discussions. Frequent mention was made that there were few if any elderly in their community deserted by their children. Quite a few drew contrasts to a popular television program that often features cases of deserted or neglected elderly denying that this existed in their locality or region.

“In my hometown there are no old people who are deserted like we’ve seen on TV... There are quite a number of children that go to work elsewhere and leave their children to be taken care by grandparents. Children may work in factories but go back and forth to hometown during farming season.” [Migrant daughter, age 32, Bangkok]

General opinions on old age support and care

Old age support has several dimensions including material assistance, functional support involving personal care, and social contact. Distinguishing among these is important since the ability of children to provide them varies with their location relative to parents (Litwak & Kulis, 1987). Personal services including long-term care for frail elderly are dependent on frequent face-to-face contact over long durations and clearly require residential proximity. Monetary transfers, however, can be readily implemented over distance, even from abroad. Social contacts and emotional support in the absence of face-to-face interaction can be sustained over the phone, by email or text messaging. Also, some services require physical presence for only brief durations. For example, care during acute illness can be provided through short visits by migrant children if they can take temporary leave from work and are increasingly enabled by quick notification of need by phone and improved means of transportation.

Living arrangements. Although currently in decline, coresidence with one or more adult children, typically in a stem family configuration, has been a long standing norm in Thailand and traditionally viewed as an essential way to meet the needs of older dependent parents (Knodel, Saengtienchai & Sittitrai, 1995). Respondents in the 2011 NSO adult survey were asked where older persons should live in relation to their children and grandchildren. The results, summarized in Table 1, indicate virtually unanimous consensus that older persons should live either with or near children and grandchildren. Moreover there is little difference by age cohort, gender or area of residence. Apparently normative change has yet to adjust to behavioral change with respect to living arrangements.

Table 1: Opinion about where older persons should live in relation to children and grandchildren, 2011

Current age of respondent	in same house	next door or nearby	elsewhere	total
	%	%	%	%
Total	80	19	1	100
Age				
18-29	80	19	1	100
30-39	79	20	1	100
40-49	81	18	1	100
50-59	81	19	1	100
Gender				
men	80	19	1	100
women	80	19	1	100
Area				
urban	78	21	1	100
rural	81	18	1	100

Source: 2011 Survey of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly Issues

Note: Difference by age group, gender and area are all statistically non-significant at the .05 level.

Given the widespread normative preference for coresidence, it is not surprising that FFS project qualitative data reveal that the most common concern for well-being in old age in the future is the risk that no child will coreside or live nearby when functional support and personal care is needed.

“Now people have fewer children... When they get older they feel they have too few children and none are at home because the children were allowed to move out to work and get ahead.” [Near elderly parent, North]

“In the future, older people are likely to have less chance of having children live with them. It won't be the same as in the past. Now, children are likely to scatter from parents; ... go to work elsewhere. Older people who don't have children living with them and cannot help themselves will face difficulties.” [Adult daughter, 24, Central]

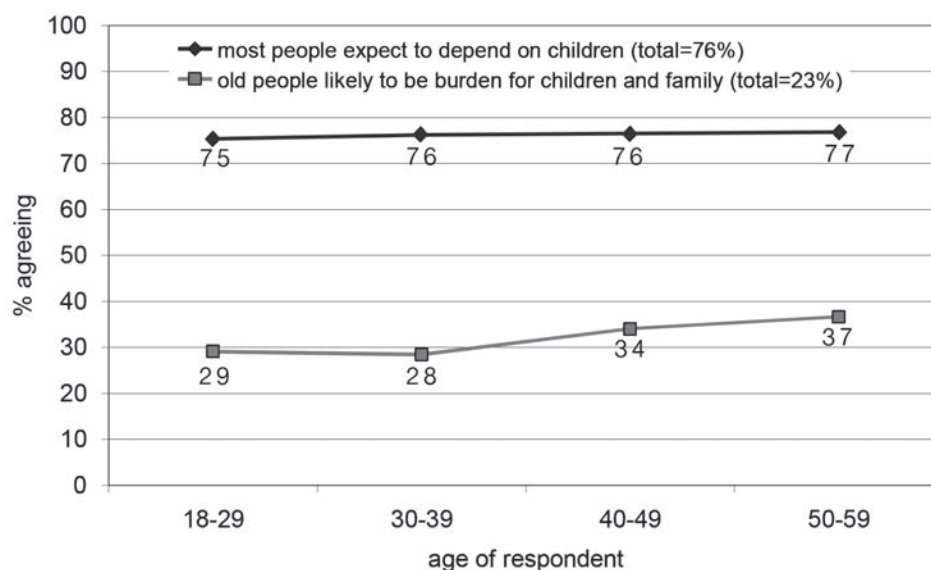
There was little support in both NSO adult surveys for the idea that older person should live in old age homes. In the 2011 survey over 90% of respondents disagreed. FFS project results, however, reveal a more mixed set of reactions. Some viewed living in a home for the aged as the ultimate abrogation of filial support. Others viewed it more neutrally as simply one alternative in case children were unable to coreside with parents when long-term care was needed. Several persons even mentioned that living in a home for elderly would provide opportunities to socialize with other older persons and hence prevent loneliness.

“My children won’t let me be there (in an old age home) because they are afraid of losing their reputation... If they let me be there people would gossip saying (to my children) you are good looking and rich, why do you send your parents there?” [Near elderly parent, South]

“If people really don’t have anyone (to care for them) they may want to live there. At least, they’ll be taken care of and don’t have to be alone.” [Migrant daughter, 25, Bangkok]

Filial support. The NSO adult surveys asked whether or not respondents thought that most people generally expect to depend on children in their old age and whether older persons are likely to be a burden for adult children, grandchildren and family. As Figure 2 reveals, regardless of age, fully three fourths of 2011 survey respondents thought that most people expect to depend on children. Thus agreement with the norm of filial support remains quite widespread. In addition, only a minority of respondents agreed that elderly would be a burden for children and family. This view is somewhat more common among older respondents and especially those in the near elderly ages 50 - 59.

Figure 2: Percent agreeing with general statements about filial and family support in old age, by age of respondent, 2011



Source: 2011 Survey of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly Issues

Note: Results regarding expectation to depend on children excludes those who were not sure.

Although not shown in Figure 2, it is interesting to note that there is little difference in the percentages of men and women (75% vs. 77%) who believe that most people expect to depend on children in old age although persons in urban areas are somewhat less likely than those in rural areas (71% vs. 79%) to believe this is the case. Moreover, there is little difference both between men and women (32% vs. 33%) and between urban and rural respondents (30% vs. 33%) in terms of the believing that that old people are likely to be burden for children and family.

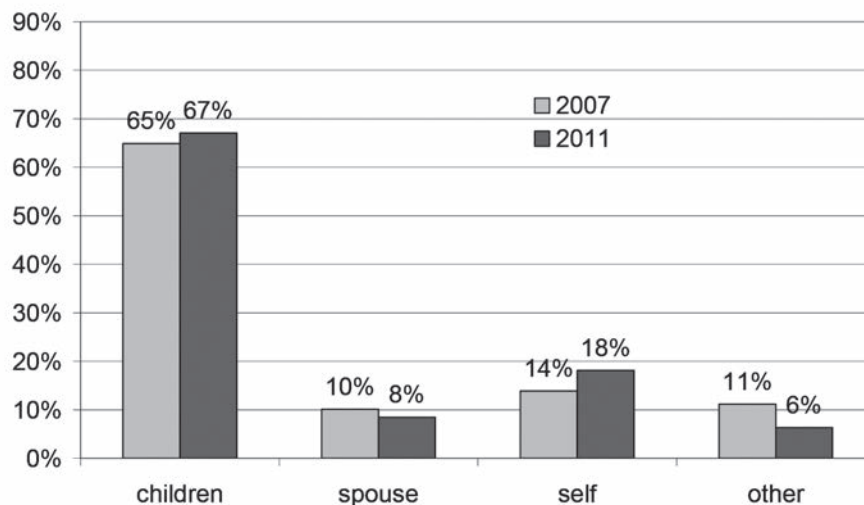
FFS project qualitative data help understand the widespread agreement in the survey that older persons expect to depend on children. Commentaries about Thai values have long noted that filial support in old age is viewed as a form of repayment to parents for having borne and raised an individual. This concept of parent repayment is deeply rooted in the secular and religious cultures and firmly entrenched in the broad normative structure of Thai society for uncounted generations (Phillips 1965; Engelmajert & Izuhara, 2010). Although this does not mean it might not change, spontaneous comments by both near elderly parents and adult children suggest that widespread acceptance still prevails.

“Since parents worked hard before, now they should get a more comfortable life. In other words, parents raised and gave us support, at a later stage we have to give them support.” [Migrant daughter, 25, Bangkok]

“(Support and care for parents)... has been the culture from old times that has been kept until now. Parents give their life to children. When children are young we raise them up and when we’re old it’ll be their turn to take care of us.... I think it has to be this way.” [Near elderly parent, North]

Personal care. According to the NSO adult surveys there is general recognition that at some point older persons need a care provider (87% in 2007 and 86% in 2011) and should prepare for one (86% in 2007 and 83% in 2011). Results summarized in Figure 3 show that in both surveys, children were cited as the ones who should be the preferred main carer by about two thirds of respondents, well ahead of all other choices. The view that old persons should mainly take care of themselves increased modestly between the two surveys but remained below 20%. Spouses were cited by no more than 10% in each survey.

Figure 3: Opinion about who should be the main provider of care for the elderly



Sources: 2007 and 2011 Survey of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly Issues

Notes: Other includes relatives, government and other. Differences between the two surveys are statistically significant at the .000 level.

In neither survey did viewing children as the most appropriate main carer vary by respondents' age (not shown). Thus even though the younger respondents expect fewer children than the older ones, they still subscribe to the same norm. Also in both surveys women were modestly more likely to cite children than men although both men and women overwhelmingly cite children over other options.

The fact that the concept of parent repayment was stated so often by subjects in the FFS project is evidence that children are thought to have an obligation to care for parents in old age. Other statements also confirm that many consider the most appropriate persons to be main caregivers for elderly parents to be their children. However there is also recognition among near elderly parents that this may be problematic for their children if they have families of their own. At the same time, virtually all adult children denied that care of elderly parents would be a burden and many considered it an obligation they willingly accepted.

“If children have their own families to be responsible for, how can we force them to give us support and care?... Everyone wants to depend on children... It'll be good if children are concerned about us. Deep in my heart, I want to depend on them but if one day in the future, they don't support us we'll be sad and unhappy.” [Near elderly parent, Bangkok]

“When they didn't have enough money for our schooling they had to work harder as hired laborers, didn't have a comfortable job like mine now. I pay them back by sacrificing myself taking care of them. I don't think it is a burden. No matter how old or frail they'll be, I'm very pleased to take care of them.” [Adult daughter, 23, Northeast]

However, when interpreting the virtually unanimous agreement among the adult children that old-age care and support of parents is not a burden, it is important to recognize that their parents are only in their 50s and still mostly healthy and economically active. Thus at present the parents require minimal if any personal care and are able to contribute to their own support.

Less sanguine views were more common among the near elderly in reference to their current or past experience in caring for their own parents including situations of parents no longer in good health or able to support themselves. Their comments are thus more likely to reflect a realistic understanding of the demands that could be involved. In several cases, care for aging parents was acknowledged as competing

with raising their own family. Still, despite it being a burden, some considered it emotionally fulfilling.

“(Looking after my mother is) a big burden. I am so tired because she had bedsores around the buttocks and smells... I try to dress the wound, apply the wet pack and feed her everyday. I feel so tired but deeply happy because I have a chance to look after her and repay her my gratefulness.” [Near elderly parent, North]

When discussing whether support and care by their own children to themselves would be burdensome, some near elderly parents thought it was the natural thing for children to do and that the children would accept it as such. But more common were expressions of concern for their children, especially if the children had their own families. Some who recognized this said they wanted to minimize the extent this would be a burden or even avoid it completely; others felt that despite in being a burden it was still an obligation.

“I don’t want to be a burden for my children. On the wedding day of my daughter, I told her that she can support me if she wants; if she doesn’t want to, I wouldn’t force her to do so. She hasn’t given me (financial support) since she has her own family’s burden. I understand her situation. In those days, during the time to raise my children, I had the same big burden.” [Near elderly parent, Bangkok]

“Is it a burden for children? Partly, it is. It’s a burden but anyway children should take care of parents. It’s a responsibility of all Thais.” [Near elderly parent, Central]

Non-filial care arrangements. The FFS project revealed that despite virtually uniform agreement that a child is the preferred personal caregiver, there was also recognition that this was not always possible. Attitudes with respect to paid carers depended in part on the nature of their role. Filling in when a coresident child is at work or assisting when the child is present is generally viewed as acceptable. Situations in which a paid carer is a full-time replacement for an adult child that lives elsewhere tended to be viewed less favorably, especially among the adult children.

Among near elderly parents, many considered that having a full-time caregiver when children are no longer living nearby as a tolerable, especially if adult children would

cover the cost. Some mentioned that even though they might accept a paid caregiver grandchildren, siblings or other family members are preferable to paid professional caregivers as alternatives to their children.

“I don’t think a paid caregiver can substitute for children in giving care to parents. If children cannot return to live with parents because of their work or having their own families they may have to leave parents to be taken care of by relatives. I don’t like the idea of hiring a caregiver. If we have to do so we must hire someone we know well who we can trust to take good care of our parents.” [Adult daughter, 23, Northeast]

“We may have to hire a paid caregiver to live with us. We wouldn’t put a burden on other people and wouldn’t bother our child who has no sibling. Our child will have her own family, I’m talking about the future, and she wouldn’t have time to give us care.” [Near elderly parent, Central]

Most near elderly parents and adult children interviewed in the FFS project were unaware of the Thai government’s Home Care Service Volunteers for the Elderly Program. Also none mentioned other government programs as a possible source for long-term care except occasional reference to the very limited number of government homes for the aged. The lack of saliency of the government programs related to long term care may be attributable to the fact that the study subjects were not current targets for them. In addition, it is probably unrealistic to think about volunteers as a solution to long-term care needs for frail old age persons who require daily attention with no one else to provide it.

Self-reliance and work. According to the 2011 NSO adult survey there is considerable support for the idea of being self-reliant in old age with 60% of respondents endorsing the view that older persons should depend on themselves in all ways. Also only 35% agreed that older persons should stop working implying that it is good for older persons to help support themselves. Over 90% agreed that persons should prepare financially for old age and all but 12% reported that they had at least thought about accumulating savings or property for old age and over half said they had acted on this intention.

FFS project results suggest that these views reflect a combined desire to avoid being a burden to their children in the future and a desire to reduce uncertainty concerning the extent to which family members will provide needed support.

“I’ve tried to tell everyone that we shouldn’t expect to depend on children since they will have their own burden. Just try to have them finish their education and be responsible for themselves. We shouldn’t expect to rely on them as long as we can take care of ourselves and are strong enough to earn our living.” [Near elderly parent, Central]

Many near elderly parents said they wanted to continue working as long as their health permits, although typically at a reduced pace. Besides the reasons cited above, some worked because they needed income but others wished to remain active and busy or to have social contact to avoid loneliness and boredom.

“I want to work as long as I can. I don’t want to stay still and no matter how old I am I will work. It’s not difficult to run our shop since it’s our own shop and we can do it as long as we want... If we do not work our mind will not be at rest. We should be a useful old person.” [Near elderly parent, Northeast]

Personal expectations for old age support and care

Sources of income. The NSO adult surveys asked respondents if they expected to receive income during old age from various sources and which would be their main source. As evident in Table 2, regardless of survey or age group, a large majority expect income from work, increasing from 83% to 87% between the two surveys. Also, younger persons are more likely than persons in their 50s to expect income from work. Together these findings suggest that the idea of increased self reliance in old age may be gaining acceptance.

Table 2: Sources of income expected during old age

	Total sample (ages 18 - 59)		By age of respondent 2011			
	2007	2011	18 - 29	30 - 39	40 - 49	50 - 59
<i>% who expect to receive income in old age from:</i>						
own work	83	87***	87	89	88	83***
spouse	68	69	69	71	69	65***
children	79	77	73	73	79	81***
grandchildren	41	39	40	33	37	45***
relative	42	40	42	38	39	40

Table 2 (cont.)

	Total sample (ages 18 - 59)		By age of respondent 2011			
	2007	2011	18 - 29	30 - 39	40 - 49	50 - 59
savings, property	79	81	82	82	81	79*
retirement benefits	23	22	30	23	20	18***
govt. allowance	48	72***	71	72	72	75*
<i>Expected main source of income (% distribution)</i>		**				***
own work	27	34	39	35	32	30
spouse	7	7	6	7	7	6
children	33	30	24	24	32	38
grandchildren	1	1	1	0	0	1
relative	1	1	1	0	1	1
savings, property	23	22	25	26	20	17
retirement benefits	4	3	2	3	4	3
govt. allowance	4	4	3	4	5	4
total	100	100	39	35	32	30
<i>% expecting income from spouse if married or expect to marry</i>						
any income	n.a.	73	75	76	73	68***
main source of income	n.a.	7	7	8	8	6
<i>% expecting income from children if has children or expects to have children</i>						
any income	n.a.	84	81	81	85	87***
main source of income	n.a.	33	27	26	35	41***

Sources: 2007 and 2011 Survey of Knowledge and Attitudes on Elderly Issues

* = the difference between the two surveys/age groups is statistically significant at the .05 level;

** = at the .01 level; *** = at the .001 level.

Over three fourths of respondents overall in both surveys indicated they expect to receive income from children. The percent increases with age suggesting that expectations of filial material support may be on the decline. Large majorities anticipate income from savings or property. The sharp increase between the two surveys in the percent who expect to receive government allowances for elderly corresponds to the major expansion of the program in 2009 which made coverage

close to universal rather than need-based (Foundation of Thai Gerontology Research and Development Institute, no date). Somewhat surprising are the substantial minorities who expect income from grandchildren or relatives given that in national surveys of older persons only small minorities report such income (e.g. Knodel & Chayovan 2008; Knodel, Chayovan & Prachuabmoh, forthcoming).

Own work and children are most frequently mentioned as expected the main income source followed by savings and property although citing own work increased while children declined between the two surveys. Expectations of own work decline with the age while children as main income source increases. In addition, expecting to depend mainly on savings and property is higher for younger than for older respondents. These differences together further suggest that reliance on oneself may start to replace dependence on children for income in the future.

The 2011 NSO adult survey also included questions about expectations to marry and to have children. As shown at the bottom of the table, among those who are married or expect to marry, younger cohorts are somewhat more likely to expect spousal support than older cohorts. Regardless of age, however, only very modest percentages expect their spouse to be their main income source. Expectations of income from children among those who have or expect to have children are more consistently related to age. Younger cohorts clearly have lower expectations than older cohorts especially as a main source of support.

Personal care. As noted above, long term personal care requires geographical proximity and thus is intimately linked to living arrangements and migration. The NSO adult surveys asked respondents if they had ever thought about with whom they would live and who would take care of them in old age and if they had done anything to prepare for these matters. Among respondents aged 50-59, all but 19% in 2011 had at least thought about who would be their caregiver and all but 18% about their future living arrangements. In addition, 44% had done something to prepare for each of these matters. As results above revealed, most respondents agreed that children should take main responsibility for caring for older persons. Thus expectations of filial personal care are apparently reasonably high. This is also the impression that FFS project results convey although with a number of qualifications.

Adult children's perspective. Virtually all of the adult children interviewed in the FFS project plan to provide personal care when their aging parents are no longer able to care for themselves even if they needed to return home to fulfill this filial

obligation. At the same time, several mentioned that earning a livelihood in their parental locality would be problematic. Thus a few are considering bringing their parents to live with them rather than returning to where the parents currently live.

“If they (parents) are ill we’ll have to return home. We have to leave our job here and go to live with them since they have no one. We are their children, we have to do so. We may have to find another job in the hometown to be near them; we wouldn’t desert them to be alone... In case we cannot go back or we cannot leave our job here, we’ll have to bring them here to live with us so that we wouldn’t have to worry about ourselves and our parents.” [Migrant daughter, 33, South]

Given that the need for personal care is far in the future for the adult children, few likely had given serious consideration to this issue. Nevertheless for those who could respond, the reaction was more mixed compared to statements about their obligation to their own parents.

“I’m not sure I can raise my child in the way I want. If my child wants to take care of me, let the child do it. If not, it’s okay.” [Migrant daughter, 25, Bangkok]

Near elderly parents’ perspective. Most near elderly parents interviewed hoped that a child would care for them in old age although actual expectations were more mixed. Some parents were confident of filial care and several had already discussed the matter with their children. Several others expressed ambivalence and were considering alternative arrangements to rely on relatives, to hire a paid care giver, or even to go to an old age home. Their reason for considering alternatives was either to avoid burdening their children or a lack of confidence that filial care would be forthcoming.

“Deep in my heart, I expect my children to take care of me. I have talked to them. Once I pointed to an old woman who walked alone to the market and said don’t let me be like that when I’m old. My child said, no way I’ll let you be like that. I’ll take good care of you at home.” [Near elderly parent, Northeast]

“Our child will have her own family ... and she won’t have time to give us care. At least, if we have a lump sum of money we’ll be able to find someone to help take care of us.” [Near elderly parent, Central]

Reactions of near elderly parents to the idea of going to join their children when care is needed were mixed. A few expressed willingness to do so but others clearly considered the idea an unattractive or even unacceptable solution.

“If I can choose I’d better go to live with them. Children are better than paid care givers. Children give better care and no one can beat children.” [Near elderly parent, South]

“We wouldn’t go to live with children because we are not familiar with a new surrounding. We are used to our countryside where the air is fresh and clean. To go to live with them in a square room or in a sub - division, I definitely don’t want it. It’s congested. No matter what will happen, I wouldn’t go to live with them.” [Near elderly parent, North]

Discussion and conclusions

Care and support of older persons in Thailand have traditionally rested with the family through a system defined mainly in terms of filial obligations of adult children and typically involving coresidence. Future cohorts entering the old age span will have fewer and more dispersed children to depend on while likely surviving to increasingly advanced ages. In addition, coresidence with children has declined and will continue to do so given that the forces behind the decline remain very much in place. These trends pose important challenges to family, community and state if the well-being of older persons is to be sustained and improved.

Despite the decline in coresidence, the NSO adult surveys and the FFS project both show strong support for having children live with or nearby aging parents as well as a widespread preference for children as main care providers when a parent is frail and needs functional assistance. Given the necessity of physical presence in order to provide personal care, there appear to be a disjuncture between the changing reality and normative preferences. This disjuncture is likely possible because the true dilemma will arise only when older age parents are unable to care for themselves. Neither the near elderly parents nor the parents of the adult children that were subjects in the FFS project currently faced this situation. Thus their thinking may be guided more by normative preferences than the actual circumstances that will surround decision making and actions when the need for personal care arises.

At the same time it is important not to overestimate this disjuncture and to recognize that such care is usually only truly needed for a rather limited time towards the end of life. Even among persons aged 60 and older, whether or not living with children, the vast majority do not require such care (Knodel, Chayovan & Prachuabmoh, forthcoming). Our qualitative data show that adult children often state intentions to either return to their parental home or bring parents to live with them if and when parents need but lack personal care. Such migratory moves are one way families can adapt to the need for care of elderly members. Still when the actual need arises the extent such moves will take place remains unclear. Some parents will be very reluctant to leave their home communities to join children, especially parents in rural areas who are asked to move to a city. In addition, the lack of livelihood opportunities and obligations to their own conjugal family may prove to be a bigger barrier for adult children to return to parents' locality when the time comes than they now recognize.

Relying on paid caregivers is a potential solution if affordable and acceptable to the parties involved. So far, national surveys find that paid caregivers for elderly persons are quite rare (Knodel & Chayovan 2012; Knodel, Chayovan & Prachuabmoh, forthcoming). If income continues to improve for older persons and their children, affordability may increase. However, concerns about a stranger fulfilling such an intimate role may limit its acceptability. According to our qualitative data, relatives are often favored over caregivers hired from the outside as alternatives to children as carers. Thus, paying a local relative or a trusted neighbor to take the role of caregiver may become a more common arrangement. A fair number of near elderly parents also expressed concerns about becoming a burden to their children and wish to maintain their independence as long as possible. For those who are married, spouses may thus more commonly care for each other.

The Thai government takes the challenges of population aging seriously and may well play a larger role in the future in care provision for the elderly. It seems unlikely that volunteer programs can realistically meet the need for functional care on a sustained full time basis (Chen & Thompson, 2010). However, volunteers might be able to at least postpone when family care is required by assisting when only occasional help is needed. Also government-sponsored institutional homes for the elderly are very limited in number and unlikely to make much of a dent in unmet need for family care. While private nursing homes may expand, negative attitudes among adult children and their parents towards institutionalization as a solution as well as affordability will likely limit this as a major solution for the foreseeable future.

The greater dispersion of children will reduce face-to-face interaction but not prevent contact in other forms. Phone calls with children at a distance have become easy and common with the spread of cell phones. Future advances in communication technology and the spread of home computers will likely increase the ability to keep in contact with children who live elsewhere. Improved transportation will also facilitate travel and make visits between elderly parents and their absent children easier.

Financial support does not require physical proximity and thus greater dispersion of children does not necessarily threaten filial material support. According to the NSO adult surveys, large majorities expect to receive income in old age from their children and substantial minorities still expect children to be their main income source. Despite the smaller family sizes of future elderly, higher education and changing employment patterns are likely to increase children's earnings and ability to provide financial support. In addition, the expanded elderly welfare allowance program and expanding retirement coverage for working age persons through the social security program could reduce the need for older persons to depend on children and be important for the growing proportion who are childless and thus for whom filial support is clearly unavailable.

Increased economic activity among older persons could also reduce the period when filial material support is needed. Many older persons view favorably the ability to remaining self-reliant as long as possible. Raising or eliminating the mandatory retirement age of 60 for government employees could be a useful first step in helping establishing a new general norm about the appropriate age to retire both in the public and private sectors. The extent to which older persons actually want to continue to work, however, is unclear.

In conclusion, assessing the future of family support for older persons in Thailand (and elsewhere) involves numerous sources of uncertainty. The economic, social, political and technological environments in which Thais live out their lives are constantly changing, often in substantial ways. In addition, future elderly will differ from those of today not only in the number and location of their children but in other important respects as well (Knodel, Chayovan & Prachuabmoh, 2011). They will be better educated, likely be in better health, and have different employment histories involving wider entitlement to formal retirement benefits. At the same time, a growing proportion of future elderly will be childless and unmarried. Perhaps most importantly, as Thais approach old age they and their

family members will exercise their human agency to find their own ways to adapt that minimize negative impacts and maximize potential benefits. Only continuing monitoring will reveal the outcomes.

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