



## **Studying living arrangements of the elderly: Lessons from a quasi-qualitative case study approach in Thailand**

JOHN KNODEL<sup>1</sup> & CHANPEN SAENGTIENCHAI<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Population Studies Center, University of Michigan, USA;* <sup>2</sup>*(Formerly) College of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand*

**Abstract.** The present study explores aspects of living arrangements of the elderly in Thailand and how they relate to intergenerational support exchanges as revealed by a quasi-qualitative case study approach. The study describes some of the challenges this topic poses for measurement if surveys are used. These include difficulties in appropriately defining a household and identifying its members, treating coresidence as a continuum, taking account of the complex links to non-coresident children and kin, recognizing that similar living arrangements can have different meanings, viewing living arrangements as part of an evolving process, and recognizing the potential sensitivity of the topic to respondents. Careful and informed design of survey questionnaires can increase their ability to accurately reflect the underlying complex reality. However, there are also relevant critical issues for which surveys are not well suited. Although the study is specific to Thailand, many of the same issues are likely to arise in the research on elderly elsewhere as well.

**Keywords:** Thailand, Elderly, Living arrangements, Intergenerational exchanges, Household structure, Informal support

### **Introduction**

The social demographic study of the elderly population in less developed countries is a relatively new field of investigation, spurred by the increasing realization of the virtually unprecedented demographics that are involved (Hermalin 1995). As a result of past high levels of fertility and sharp increases in life expectancy, the absolute numbers of elderly are increasing more rapidly than witnessed by any national populations previously. Moreover, in the many countries where recent fertility decline has been extensive and rapid, population aging is also occurring faster than ever experienced by more developed countries in the past (Jones 1993).

The interest of the researchers involved extend well beyond simply mapping the demographic contours of the situation. Considerable attention is being paid to both formal and informal systems of social and economic support and care of the elderly and their interaction with demographic change (World Bank 1994). In recognition of the crucial role played by

informal, primarily familial, components of these systems, substantial effort is being made to examine inter-generational exchanges defined broadly to include services and resources of both an economic and non-economic nature, and the living arrangements with which they are inextricably entwined (Christenson & Hermalin 1991; DaVanzo & Chan 1993; De Vos & Holden 1988; Hashimoto 1991; Martin 1989; Ogawa & Retherford 1997).

In line with the dominant approach to the study of other topics of demographic interest, the most common methodology being employed for the social demography of aging is the sample survey. Unlike social demographic surveys dealing with the more traditional topics of fertility, mortality, and family planning, however, those directed towards issues of aging have far less accumulated experience upon which to build. We are at an early stage of learning how to best collect data relevant to understanding the social, economic and health conditions of the elderly in less developed countries and the intergenerational familial exchanges that play crucial roles in their determination. Although considerable recent progress has been made with regards to surveys dealing with similar topics in the USA and other developed countries, the extent to which they are applicable for situations in less developed countries is an open question (National Institute on Aging 1996).

Data collection efforts regarding the elderly are more advanced in Thailand than in most other less developed countries in Asia. Several national and quasi-national surveys of the elderly have already taken place with some accumulation of both substantive and methodological knowledge as a result.<sup>1</sup> Analyses of prior surveys revealed weaknesses in topic coverage and questionnaire construction and point to where improvements are needed. Moreover, careful pre-testing of new questionnaires further assist in the process of developing better survey instruments. These efforts, however, are all internal to the survey approach itself and thus are limited in their ability to reveal the bounds of surveys for the study of issues related to aging and the elderly. Considerable room remains for other approaches to help elucidate how surveys can be improved and to illustrate aspects of the topic that are better addressed by alternative methodologies. Understanding the limitations of surveys for the contemporary study of the elderly also has relevance for quantitative historical studies of living arrangements which are typically based on far more limited information such as contained in household listings or censuses (e.g., Elman & Uhlenberg 1995).

The present study explores aspects of living arrangements and how they relate to intergenerational support exchanges involving the elderly as revealed by a quasi-qualitative case study approach. The goal is to point out some of the challenges the investigation of this topic poses for measurement, particularly when it is to be based on surveys. Although the research is specific to

Thailand, it is likely that many of the same issues are relevant for studies of the elderly in other settings, especially but not exclusively in Asia.

### **Data and methods**

Our involvement in the analysis of the first national Thai survey of the elderly conducted in 1986 made salient to us various limitations of the data for exploring living arrangements and support exchanges. As a result, we decided to collect more detailed information than was available in the existing survey data by conducting more open-ended interviews with purposively selected cases in four rural communities. Our approach involved exhaustive listings of all elderly in the four communities and personal interviews with selected cases focusing on living arrangements and support exchanges. As in other studies in Thailand, elderly were defined as those aged 60 or over.

We conducted our field work in 1994 in four purposively selected rural communities: two in a province (Surin) in the Northeast and two in a Central Region province (Kanchanaburi).<sup>2</sup> One Northeast community was selected because it was featured in a 1992 newspaper article on the desertion of the rural elderly resulting from rural out-migration of young adults (Charasdamrong 1992). We wished to determine if the common image of elderly left behind to fend for themselves in rural areas, as portrayed in popular accounts, and sometimes inferred from survey data on living arrangements, held up to closer scrutiny. We chose another community in the general vicinity, but not featured in the newspaper article, to see if the situation of elderly there was similar. We chose the Central province for its moderate distance from Bangkok (100–200 kilometers) and our familiarity with it from prior research projects. In the province we chose one relatively remote community and another more developed one within 30 kilometers of the provincial capital.

We collected basic information in each community for all resident elderly regarding age, sex, marital status, presence of spouse, sex and marital status of any coresident children, and additional details about living arrangements of elderly who were not coresident with a child. As sources, we used household registration forms from the district office, key informants, and brief interviews with some of the elderly themselves. Extensive cross checking between these sources increased the accuracy of information on the actual living arrangements.

We purposively selected cases from the complete listings for further study with special emphasis on elderly who lived alone or with only a spouse in the same household. Altogether, we collected detailed information for 43 elderly individuals in 30 different households.<sup>3</sup> In 13 of the households, there was an

elderly couple. In the remaining 17 households, there was only one elderly individual (including several who had spouses under age 60). In the case of married elderly, information collected typically referred to the couple jointly. Thus for most purposes, the number of cases studied is more appropriately equated to the number of households than the number of individuals.

The case study interviews focused on living arrangements and support exchanges between the elderly and their children. They were guided by three forms listing the detailed information we hoped to obtain. One form covered a variety of background information while the other two consisted of matrices representing all the respondent's children, detailing where they resided, when they separated from the parent's household if non-coresident, and the exchanges of material and non-material support. In this respect, our instruments resembled survey questionnaires. However, unlike in surveys, the interview was conducted in a conversational manner. To the extent possible, issues of interest to us were explored as they arose naturally in conversation rather than in the order on the forms. Most importantly, interviewees were encouraged to explain and elaborate on their answers.<sup>4</sup>

We deliberately did not fill out the forms during the interview but instead tape recorded the conversations. This permitted the conversation to flow more easily and helped maintain a more informal interview situation. After the interview, we completed the form by listening to the tape and transcribed qualifications and elaborations when appropriate. Moreover, we selectively transcribed information other than that directly applying to the items on the forms but which nevertheless shed light on the situation of the interviewees. We also made detailed diagrams to represent the living arrangements with respect to the location of each of the interviewee's children relative to the interviewee's household and noted the location of other individuals who played a part in the interviewee's support network.

For convenience, we refer to our hybrid methodology as a quasi-qualitative case study approach. In common with more elaborate case studies, we attempted to understand the particular features of selected interviewees in a relatively holistic manner rather than to establish relationships of characteristics among the different cases as in survey data analysis (Stake 1995).<sup>5</sup> In common with qualitative interviewing approaches, we posed many questions in an open-ended way and encouraged interviewees to elaborate on their answers (Rubin & Rubin 1995). However, we used structured forms more typical of a survey questionnaire geared towards quantitative data collection to guide our conversations and eventually transferred information to these forms.

*Table 1.* Living arrangements of elderly in four rural communities selected for intensive study and of elderly selected for case studies

	Complete listings			Case studies only
	Total	Excluding Bua Khok	Bua Khok only	
Couple alone	4.4	2.9	8.8	32.6
All alone	2.7	2.4	4.9	11.6
With ever-married child*	52.3	49.9	62.7	32.6
With single child only	31.4	35.9	11.8	16.3
Other arrangement	9.3	8.9	11.8	7.0
Total percent	100	100	100	100
Total N	551	449	102	43

The case studies include 2 pretest cases who are not from the four villages selected for intensive study.

\* Includes some with one or more coresident single children.

## Results

Table 1 summarizes the living arrangements of the total elderly population of the four communities, based on the complete listings described above. Separate results are shown for Bua Khok, the community featured in the newspaper article describing the desertion of rural elderly, the combined total of the three remaining communities, and the elderly whom we chose to study in detail.<sup>6</sup> Typical of current social demographic studies, living arrangements are defined narrowly in terms of residence in the same household.

Consistent with previous research, a large majority of elderly in the four communities live with a child (Cowgill 1972; Foster 1975; Pramualratana 1990; Caffrey 1992a, b; Knodel, Saengtienchai & Sittitrai 1995). The overall figure of 84 percent living with at least one child (either married or single) is on the high side compared to recent national surveys and censuses for rural Thailand as a whole, which range from 70 to slightly under 80 percent (Knodel & Debavalya 1992; Knodel, Chayovan & Saengtienchai 1994; Knodel & Chayovan 1997; Knodel, Amornsirisomboon & Khiewyoo 1997). Only 7 percent of elderly in the four combined communities lived either entirely alone or only with their spouse, although this figure reaches 14 percent in Bua Khok. National surveys in 1994 and 1995 found 13 to 16 percent of rural elderly in this situation (Knodel, Amornsirisomboon & Khiewyoo 1997; Knodel & Chayovan 1997). The cases selected for in-depth interviews are noticeably skewed towards elderly who lived alone or only

with a spouse, in line with our interest in understanding these particular situations.

*Defining a household and its members*

Analyses of the living arrangements of the elderly generally start (and often end) with examining the composition of the immediate household. Defining household and family is critical for the study of support exchanges involving the elderly as well as for understanding family exchange networks more generally (Peterson 1993). In the context of Thailand and other Asian societies, where living with adult children is a central feature of the support system, this is all the more so given that the coresidence is defined by household membership.

*Discrepancies between official and survey definitions.* Our case studies reveal numerous difficulties in arriving at an adequate definition of a household, both conceptually and operationally. One set of difficulties arises from discrepancies between the definition of a household used in survey taking and that used by the government for official administrative purposes. This is likely to be a problem in most countries with legally mandated household registration systems.

In Thailand and elsewhere, surveys typically define a household conceptually as a group of persons who 'live and eat together'. In contrast, for administrative purposes, a household consists of persons registered at a particular address (i.e. house number). For each address there is supposed to be an official household registration form listing all who reside there. This is an important document that is required to be shown in the course of many types of interactions with the government bureaucracy. One copy is held by the household and a second is kept at the district (*amphoe*) office. Everyone in Thailand is required to be registered at some address and thus is officially a member of the household constituted by all persons registered at that address. In a typical situation, separate dwelling units would have separate addresses and hence separate registration forms. However, exceptions are not unusual as our case studies reveal.

Since official definitions of households may influence how households are defined in practice in the survey, discrepancies between the official and survey definitions can subvert the intended survey definition. Most surveys in Thailand, including those directed towards the elderly, draw their samples from official listings of households. Thus the interviewer is likely to approach an address with an expectation that it is equivalent to a household and not start afresh to apply the survey definition when listing members in the questionnaire during an interview.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, interviewers sometimes request to see

the household registration form to assist in the task of listing household members. Even if they do not, a respondent may offer it to the interviewer or refer to it when answering questions. While a well trained interviewer can make cautious use of a household registration form to speed an interview (and improve accuracy of some information for each member, particularly regarding age), other interviewers may accept the form less critically and not pursue the survey definition of who should be included. A respondent's own perception of household membership may also be conditioned by the official listing, even if explicitly asked to follow the survey definition.

One major reason why persons officially registered at an address may not correspond to those qualifying as household members according to the survey definition is that the registration form is often inaccurate. These inaccuracies stem from several sources. Members who move out may not notify the registrar and hence not be deleted from the form. This is common in rural areas when members migrate to urban areas. These same persons are unlikely to register at their new residence, particularly since they will lack the required documentation that they withdrew from the household registration at their previous residence. Thus many rural migrants to urban areas remain registered in their home village. In addition, members who die may not be deleted and those newly born may not be added. In enumerating the elderly in the four communities studied during our fieldwork, we encountered 11 cases in which the registration form still included a deceased elderly person and about 20 cases where the elderly person had moved but was still listed as residing in their former household.

Even if the household registration form is completely accurate, the persons listed as living at an address may not correspond to a household as defined by the survey taker because they do not eat together. A common source of this situation is when several separate dwelling units within a family compound share the same address.<sup>8</sup> This situation typically arises when a married child moves to a new dwelling unit near the parents on the parents' property but does not request a new address. Among the 30 households we selected for detailed interviews, we encountered two such cases. We also encountered two cases in which different parts of the same dwelling unit were assigned different addresses and hence had separate household registration forms. In both, the house had been partitioned so married children could live separately. In these cases, although the official registration would deviate from the legal specification that a single private dwelling unit should have a single address, it would actually conform to the survey definition of a household since the parties in the different parts of the partitioned houses ate separately.<sup>9</sup> It is probably exceptional that partitioned houses have separate house numbers for the separate parts. In fact, as detailed below, another partitioned house

had a single house number even though three families lived in separate parts and usually ate separately.

In most cases we studied where the elderly respondent lived adjacent to married children, the separate dwelling units did have different addresses (i.e., official household registration forms), even when the two houses were on a plot of land owned by the respondent and formed a family compound. For many practical purposes, it is useful to establish a separate address (i.e., household registration form) for a new dwelling unit. For example, only this way can a separate electrical or public water supply be obtained. This is likely the reason why we encountered some partitioned houses having two addresses. Apparently, in cases when married children build and move into a new dwelling in a family compound, it is at their discretion if and when to apply for a separate house number. Thus whether a new address has been established is a matter of timing between when occupancy starts and when the occupants feel it is useful to register separately. This introduces an arbitrary element as to whether separate dwellings in a family compound are found to be registered as a single household or as separate ones.

*Ambiguities in the survey definition.* Probably a more serious problem than the potential distorting influence of the household registration system is the difficulty in meaningfully operationalizing the survey definition of a household as a group of people who live and eat together, particularly in the case of households with elderly members. Although the image of a household implied by the survey definition readily fit the observed situation in most of our case studies, we encountered numerous examples where it did not. This was so even though we did not select the cases for intensive investigation with this in mind. Ambiguities occurred in a number of respects:

- Three of the 30 case study households involved situations where the elderly person or couple lived in a separate dwelling (usually with a separate household registration) but ate regularly with a married child's family who lived in an adjacent residence.
- In two cases, an adult child lived intermittently with the elderly parent. In one of these cases, the son went back and forth to Bangkok (several hundred kilometers away). The spells in Bangkok and back in the village often lasted a matter of months each. In the other case, a married adopted daughter was experiencing problems with her husband and went back and forth several times a month with her child between her mother's house in the village and her husband's house in the nearby provincial town.
- One elderly widow lived with her single adult daughter in one part of a dwelling; a married daughter and her family lived in another part,



without a separating wall; and another married daughter and her family lived in an extension built onto the back of the house with a wall separating it from the house. All three parties shared a kitchen but ate separately. The house had a single house number and registration form.

- One never married elderly woman lived alone in a shack attached to the back of a shop house in which her adopted son worked and slept. Both she and her son ate with the shop owner's family who were unrelated to them.
- One elderly man slept in a detached hut in one part of a family compound while his wife and married child and family lived in the main house.<sup>10</sup>

These cases illustrate problems that are not unusual: seasonal or intermittent household membership; living in separate and adjacent dwellings but eating together; living in the same dwelling but not eating together; living under the same roof but in separate sections of the dwelling which may or may not have separate entrances or be walled off. The last two cases, while deviating a bit from the normal image of a household consisting of a single dwelling, are less problematic than the others since the separate shacks can be considered as simply bedrooms of the main house even if not directly part of the same structure (Cowgill 1968). The others, however, require more difficult judgment calls.

#### *Coresidence as a continuum*

Survey analyses dealing with living arrangements, virtually always treat coresidence between elderly and their children as a dichotomous variable. Our case studies suggest that much more of a continuum exists than is implied by such a dichotomy. As the examples cited above indicate, we encountered numerous cases situated between one in which an elderly parent and a child lived in the same dwelling, shared meals and jointly participated in household activities, and one in which the elderly parents resided separately and carried on daily lives largely independent from non-coresident children. Several variations can be identified:

- *Disengaged coresidence* – In two cases, elderly widows resided with a non-married adult son in the same dwelling whom they described as being 'undependable'. The sons lived relatively independent lives, often eating (and drinking) with friends away from home, staying away all night, and sleeping elsewhere. One of the widows lived adjacent to two married daughters who assisted her. The other widow lived next door to her unmarried sister with whom she socialized daily. Key informants told us of several other situations in which the coresident child was clearly irresponsible, leaving the elderly parents to beg food from other villagers.

- *Part-time coresidence* – in two cases described above, a child switches between living with an elderly parent and living elsewhere. In one case the pattern was seasonal; in the other, more intermittent.
- *Daytime coresidence* – In several of our selected cases, the elderly parents and adult children slept in separate dwellings but during the non-sleeping hours their lives were closely intermingled with those of adult children living adjacent or nearby. This included eating meals together, sharing child care, and minding the houses. Even when a another child lives in the same dwelling as the elderly, the household may still be integrated with an adjacent one.
- *Daytime partial integration* – A more frequent variation involved elderly who lived next to our nearby married children with whom they have extensive daily interaction but in which the households were less than fully integrated. These situations ranged from regular sharing of food but eating separately to daily socializing but little food sharing. Such situations were found both for cases in which there was a coresident child in the same dwelling as the elderly and in which there was not one.
- *Nighttime coresidence (of grand children)* – In 3 of our 30 cases, one or more minor aged grandchildren whose parents lived nearby slept in the elderly person's dwelling on a regular basis. Again these cases included situations in which the elderly did and did not have an adult child residing in their dwelling. Since the grand children ate with parents and were registered at their parents dwelling, they would not normally be reported as members in the elderly person's household.

#### *Beyond household composition*

*The importance of non-coresident children and kin.* Living arrangement categories based solely on household composition provide only part of a more complex picture of the extent to which living arrangements and support systems are intertwined. Although coresident children or kin are likely to play a disproportionate role in the care and support system for an elderly person, the configuration of living arrangements with respect to non-coresident children and kin also has important implications for the social and economic exchanges that constitute an elderly person's support system (Peterson 1993).

For practical purposes, when surveys collect information on the location of non-coresident children or kin relative to an elderly respondent, pre-coded categories are typically provided in terms of geographically defined administrative areas such as villages, districts, etc. Changes that occur in the official boundaries of such units thus introduce an arbitrary element into the picture. Whether a child lives in the same hamlet, township or even province as the elderly can change over time simply through administrative redefinition of

boundaries. In several of the study communities, formerly single hamlets had recently been sub-divided into two separate ones, presumably because of population growth. Thus by administrative fiat, several children of the elderly selected for case study who had formerly been living in the same hamlet as their parents were not defined as living outside the hamlet, even though neither party moved.

With respect to activities of daily living, attention needs to be focused on who lives in adjacent or nearby dwellings. As several forgoing examples indicated, nearby children or relatives, particularly if living next door, can serve many of the same functions as those who coreside in the same house. In occasional cases, they may even be more important than the coresident child. The need to take account of nearby children has particular relevance for interpreting cases in which the elderly person or couple resides alone. In some cases that we encountered of this type, the elderly persons involved were indeed left without extensive daily interaction and assistance. However in over half, they were intricately enmeshed in social contacts with neighboring dwellings of children or kin.

Based on our complete listing of the 551 elderly in the four communities, only 15 lived in one person households. Although only five of these cases were included among our case studies, we were able to determine additional information about the remainder from key informants. Among all 15 cases, seven lived next to at least one married child and thus for most practical purposes had opportunities to participate in support exchanges with children similar to elderly who were literally coresident with a child. In three other cases, the elderly lived next to relatives and thus were not isolated from the family network of social interactions and exchanges of assistance. Among the remaining five, two were visited at least occasionally by children who lived elsewhere while the others appeared to be truly deserted and survived from begging or offerings from their neighbors. Two of these cases were in Bua Khok, the community described in the newspaper article on the deserted elderly, and one of the two had been featured in the article.

In addition to those who lived alone, 24 of the 551 elderly lived only with their spouse. They made up a total of 13 different households (11 elderly couples and two with spouses below age 60). We included about half of these in our case studies and obtained supplementary information for the others from key informants. Again, five of the 13 households were next to married children and in another case a married child lived just a few houses away. Another case involved a man with a government pension who moved back from Bangkok with his wife to their rural area of origin. Although his children remained in Bangkok, the pension supported their modest lifestyle and they enjoyed frequent social interaction with neighboring relatives. They

expressed satisfaction with their situation and did not perceive themselves as deserted by their children. In the remaining six households of elderly living only with a spouse, contact with children was at best only occasional and support modest or absent.

Although nearby children are most relevant for helping elderly with daily activities, more distant children often play important roles in the full support exchange configuration, particularly in terms of provision of material support in the form of remittances and gifts. Thus determining details about the location of more distant children and the nature of exchanges between them and their parents is crucial. In some cases, such as when the elderly parents are caring for the grandchildren, household composition of the elderly directly influences the frequency and nature of the interactions with their more distant children.

For rural elderly, adult children working elsewhere in the modern sector of the economy, particularly in urban areas, can add substantially to their monetary income. Thus even when an elder has no coresident or nearby children, their needs may be largely met by children who provide material assistance from afar. One elderly woman among our cases had been left by her husband when her only child, a son, was one month old. She lives alone in a small dwelling while her son lives in Bangkok with his wife and child. However, she lives off the regular remittances he sends and socializes daily with a niece who lives adjacent to her and who looks after her in general.

*Some complex examples.* Our case studies revealed a variety of situations with regards to who lives next door or nearby to the elderly. These range from very simple situations in which no other children or close kin are nearby to multiple sets of related households in the same sprawling compound. The complexity of some of the cases we encountered would be difficult to capture in the usual survey questionnaire. Figures 1 and 2 provide examples.

Figure 1 represents the case of the Ms Tom (age 64) and Mr Lai (age 84), a married couple who reside in a separate dwelling with two minor grand children. Both are remarried and each has five adult children of their own. The grand children's parents are the daughter and son-in-law of Ms Tom and live and work in a suburb of Bangkok about 180 kilometers away. A son of Mr Lai married a daughter of Ms Tom and, together with their children, live adjacent to their parents. Ms Tom and Mr Lai built their current house about six years earlier and moved from Mr Lai's previous house which is located about 40 meters away with a small orchard in between. Although Mr Lai is registered in the current house, Ms Tom is still registered in the house she lived in before she married Mr Lai 14 years earlier and which has since been demolished.

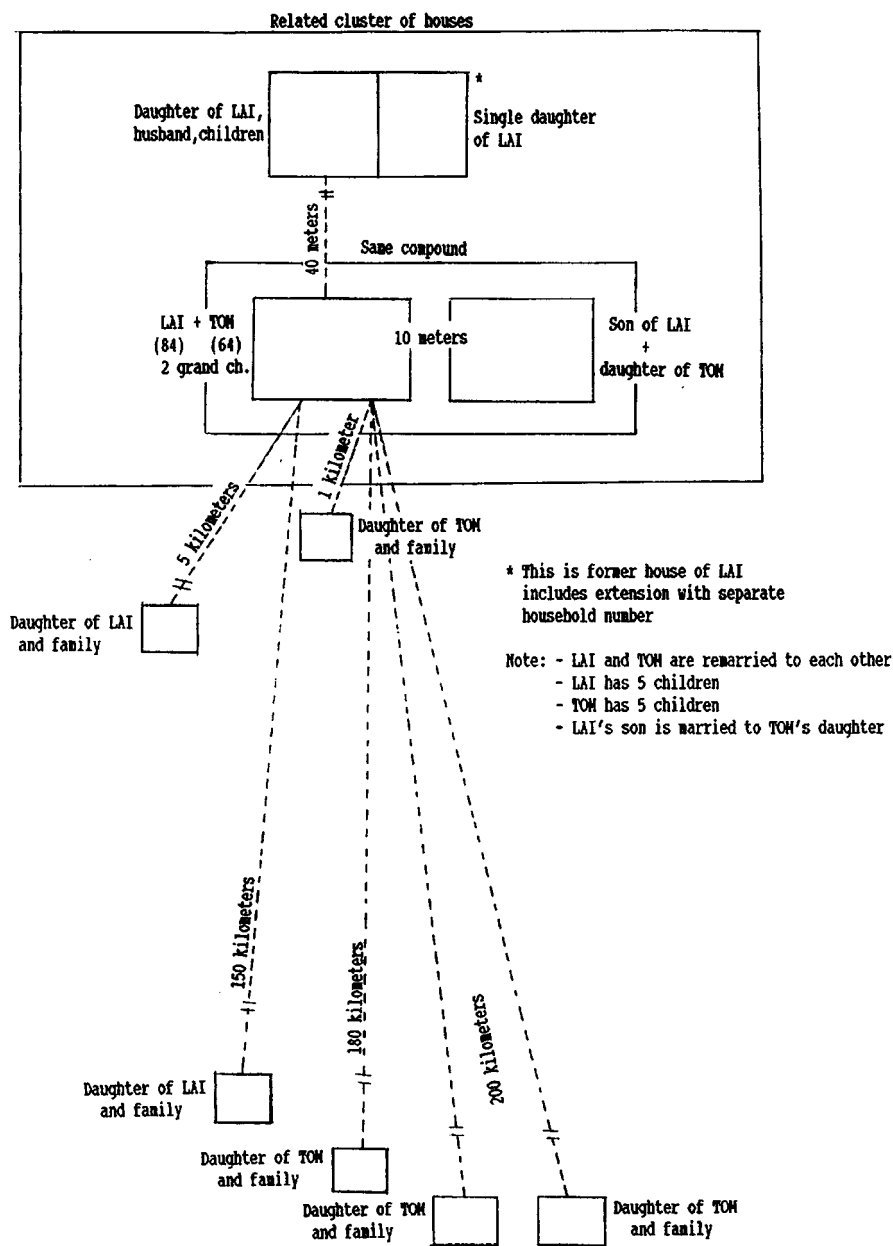


Figure 1. Case study of the elderly: Mr Lai and Ms Tom.

The former house of Mr Lai had an extension added and is now partitioned into two parts. Although no wall separates the division, each part has its own household registration. A spinster daughter of Mr Lai lives in one part and a married daughter with her family in the other. For most practical purposes the household of Ms Tom and Mr Lai and that of the adjacent household of the two children who married each other are closely integrated and function as a single household for the purpose of preparing food, eating together, and sharing a common budget. The elderly couple also has daily contact with Mr Lai's daughters in his former house including frequent exchanges of food.

The other children of Ms Tom and Mr Lai live in locations as close as one kilometer away and as far as 200 kilometers away. Contact varies to some extent with distance. The ones living within the same community are seen several times a month. In only one case among those further away is contact truly infrequent. In the other cases, visits in one direction or the other occur at least every few months and more frequently in the case of Ms Tom's daughter whose two children stay with the elderly couple.

Figure 2 actually represents two case study households that were in the same large compound. One is that of Ms Keow, an 80 year old widow who lives and eats together with a single daughter in part of a partitioned house. As already related above, married daughters and their families lived in the other two parts, one which was separated by a wall and the other not. These two married daughters eat separately with their own families. She has three other children all living some distance away. She has sporadic contact with one who lives in the same province and quite infrequent contact with the other two who are further away.

The other case is a couple, Ms Durian (age 70 plus) and Mr Prayat (age 77). They own the land of the compound. Ms Durian is Ms Keow's younger sister. The couple share their dwelling with four grand children ranging from primary school age to vocational college age. One grand child is from a son who died and the other three are the children of a son who, with his wife, is squatting on land in a remote forested area about 50 kilometers away. The elderly couple also has a married daughter who lives in a more settled area of the same part of the province as the son. Ms Durian and Mr Prayat frequently see the son whose children stay with them but have little contact with the daughter who lives away. The other three children of the elderly couple, live with their spouses and children in the same compound with the parents. At present, the two sons' households in the compound function relatively independent of their parents' although previously, when the children of the sons were young, the grandparents minded them frequently. The daughter, however, frequently shares food she prepares with her parents but they do not eat together regularly. A variety of other kin also live in separate dwellings in

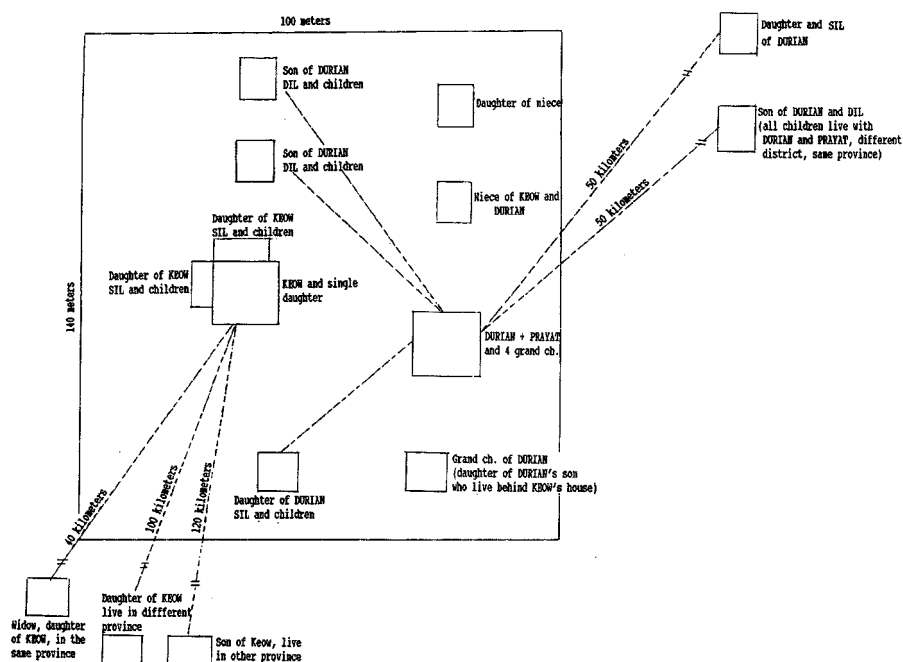


Figure 2. Case study of the elderly: Ms Keow, Ms Durian and Mr Prayat.

the compound. These kin are married and live with their own nuclear families in the dwellings.

Of the three case studies represented in Figures 1 and 2, neither of the two elderly couples would be classified, according to their household composition, as coresiding with an adult child. Yet knowing about the location of nearby children and their interactions with them indicates that in one case (Ms Tom and Mr Lai), many household activities were shared with a married child of each who lived adjacent and in the other case (Ms Durian and Mr Prayat) the couple is surrounded by married children in nearby houses even if the household activities are not closely integrated. The third case of Ms Keow might appear from a household listing to be laterally extended to include the families of two married children. In fact, however, those families function largely as separate households. While these cases are more complicated than most, they illustrate the difficulty of capturing the variations that exist through a stylized survey questionnaire format unless provision is made for greater detail than is probably practical for a reasonable length interview that includes other topics (as surveys of elderly usually do).

*Similar forms but different meanings*

Similar living arrangement configurations can have quite different meanings for the well being of the elderly. Not only can the same household composition be associated with very different support and care arrangements, but so can similar wider configurations that take into account children and kin outside the immediate household.

As implied above, living alone or only with a spouse can include situations ranging from total desertion by children and kin to virtually complete integration with adjacent households of married children (see also Siriboon & Knodel 1994). Likewise, coresiding with an adult child can be associated with levels of support and assistance ranging from disengagement to ideal filial relations. Moreover, in compiling the full listing of elderly, examples arose in which coresident adult children primarily depend on their elderly parents rather than the reverse. Key informants specifically mentioned 5 cases in which a handicapped, retarded or blind coresident child was cared for by the elderly parent.

Links between elderly parents and children who live in adjacent or nearby dwellings range from the virtual equivalent of coresidence to almost complete alienation. Nearby children are likely to be most important when to other child coresides in the elderly person's household. Cases presented in Figures 1 and 2 serve as examples of close integration (Ms Tom and Mr Lai) and less integration but frequent social interaction (Ms Durian and Mr Prayat). In other selected study cases far less favorable relationships prevailed. One elderly couple who resided by themselves lived nearby two married children but had minimal contact with them because they did not get along with the children's spouses. In another case, a frail elderly widow lived adjacent to a daughter but received no assistance from her because the daughter was a bed ridden chronic alcoholic. Another very elderly widow among our cases had an only living son who resided in the same village but had no contact with him. Instead she lived with her adult grand daughter from a deceased son because, according to the grand daughter, the son had 'taken' his mother's land and now ill will prevailed.

Whether having children who live further away is good or bad for the elderly parent depends on their ties and the children's financial situation. Under favorable circumstances, children far away can help diversify the resources upon which the elderly couple can draw. For example, children in urban areas are likely to earn better incomes and be familiar with the more sophisticated health facilities to which they can bring their parents in case complicated health problems arise. In other cases, such dispersion can lead to loss of contact. This is particularly true when children of very poor elderly go in search of land to distant rural areas from where transportation to the



parental home is difficult. Our cases studies provided examples of each of these situation.

A related general point is that living arrangements need to be viewed in terms of intergenerational exchanges rather than solely as a mechanism benefiting the elderly. In part, the exchange involves a temporal sequencing whereby assistance from adult children is viewed by both parties as repayment to the parents for their earlier sacrifices (Asis et al. 1995; Sankar 1989; Knodel, Chamrathirong & Debavalya 1987). In other respects, however, contemporaneous exchanges of both material and non-material nature characterize parent-child relations throughout much of the family life cycle including when the parents reach old age. Many examples of material and non-material contributions from parents to their adult children were mentioned in our interviews. Cain (1991) even suggests that the Western concept of one-sided 'dependency' is largely foreign in such contexts where interdependence continues to prevail. Thus interpretation of living arrangements requires detailed information on these exchanges including their directions. Very different directional balances can be associated with the same configuration of living arrangements.

#### *Living arrangements as process*

Living arrangements of the elderly are dynamic and change frequently over time. They may evolve in a relatively predictable and orderly manner, consistent with prevailing normative expectations or they may fluctuate with exigencies of the lives of the various actors involved. Our case studies reveal many different routes can lead to any particular configuration at a given time. Designing a form for use in a survey that can substitute for a narrative accounting and still adequately portray the course of change in living arrangements poses a real challenge.

Consistent with survey evidence, we found that most elderly or their spouse owned the houses in which they lived (Chayovan & Knodel 1997). In numerous cases, these homes are where they lived since starting their families. In these cases, the process through which current living arrangements with children emerged can be captured by questions on when non-coresident children left and if any of the present coresident children had left previously and returned. However, in two of our 30 case studies, the elder moved to a new dwelling leaving children behind (Ms Tom and Mr Lai in Figure 1 and the retired couple who moved back from Bangkok to live in the village referred to above) and in three the parent moved into a house of a child or relative. In these cases, simply recording the movements of children would be inadequate. Remarriages in which one or both elderly had prior children

of their own further complicate tracking the emergence of the current living arrangements.

Gathering relevant information that goes beyond a mere accounting of movements in and out of the household or the vicinity in which the elderly lived is likely to prove even more difficult through a survey approach. Given that the predominant family structure involving the elderly in Thailand is a stem family with one coresident adult married child, we were interested how that particular child is designated (Foster 1975). However, in the several cases where we tried to explore this issue with our study cases, we found that the interviewees usually had difficulty explaining.

One likely reason why some respondents seemed unable to articulate the decision making process or underlying strategy that we presumed existed was that some situations were undoubtedly unplanned, arising in varying degrees from unanticipated circumstances. For example, in several of our cases marital disruption led a child to return to the parental home. Indeed survey data indicate that separated and divorced children are far more likely than married or widowed children to live with parents.<sup>11</sup> Other problems such as loss of employment can also lead a child to an unplanned return home. Likewise unanticipated events can lead an elderly parent to move in with a child. In one case, an elderly widower, who was living alone by choice, suffered a permanent leg injury when hit by a motorcycle. Since he was unable to walk on his own, he moved in with his married step-daughter several kilometers away and put his own house up for sale. He had planned to do neither prior to the accident.

Another likely reason why respondents had difficulties explaining how one child comes to be coresident rather than another is that it may arise more by chance than through a conscious and coordinated series of decisions. Children move out of the parental household one by one, as they marry or seek work elsewhere. The one who is left may be consigned the role of staying with the parents largely by default (Knodel, Saengtienchai & Sittitrai 1995). It is possible, however, that even in such cases implicit but unstated understandings are involved. This adds further to the difficulties of collecting systematic data on the process, especially through surveys.

#### *Living arrangements as a sensitive topic*

At first thought, documenting living arrangements might be seen as a relatively straight forward, matter of fact topic for investigation. Our case study interviews, however, revealed that in a surprising number of instances the topic involved emotionally laden and hence sensitive issues, especially when accompanying questions deal with the support exchanges that are intricately linked with living arrangements. Such inquiries can easily touch on matters

with emotional content when strained interpersonal relations exist. Moreover, questions about support received readily relate to a variety of unfortunate or unpleasant circumstances of some respondents' lives, such as desperate poverty or the recent loss of a spouse or child.

Given the strong normative expectation that children should provide material and non-material assistance to elderly parents in Thailand, interviews with elders for whom this expectation is not being met can be stressful for them. Lack of support from children can arise from the poverty stricken circumstances of the children, strained interpersonal relations, or both. Discussions about living arrangements with the two couples among our case studies who appeared to be deserted, and who were also extremely poor, were obviously painful for them. One couple mentioned that two children had left the village but never contacted them again and that they did not even know if the children were alive or dead. Another couple related that of their six children, only one daughter ever visits and that even she is reluctant to tell them where she lives for fear the parents may come and ask her for money.

Numerous other examples of strained relationships or otherwise sensitive circumstances were described above: friction with children-in-law that minimized contact between an elderly couple and their nearby children; an elderly widow who moved out from her son's house over a dispute concerning land that he had 'taken' from her; coresident sons who were 'undependable'; an alcoholic daughter who is incapable of assisting her frail elderly mother next door; and children whose coresidence is prompted by marital problems. In another case, an elderly man related how his otherwise inattentive son was trying to pry money from him after learning that he had sold his house. In yet another instance, an elderly man's marital history was sensitive to discuss since he had strained relations with several children from his first wife whom he left to marry his current wife. The children rarely visited their father despite living only two kilometers away.

Questions on living arrangements and support exchanges can touch on sensitive matters for several reasons. Strains in relations often play an important role in determining or conditioning living arrangements and related support as our interviews clearly revealed. Such matters, however, are not easily asked about through the highly structured questions and the relatively formal nature of survey interviews. Much of what we learned from our conversational open-ended style of interviewing would not have come out had we simply administered a structured questionnaire. Moreover, if it had, the content and emotional nature of such information would be difficult to capture adequately using the typical questionnaire format for recording responses.

More generally, strains in familial relations or other types of sensitive issues that can be entwined with living arrangements and support exchanges

may adversely affect the ability of an interviewer to get accurate or complete responses to even simple 'factual' questions about these matters. This is especially likely to be so in a short closed ended survey interview although it can also pose problems in more extensive open-ended interviews. The respondent may simply consider some information too sensitive to reveal. Even when interviewees intend to be forthcoming, matters with emotional content are naturally presented from their own perspective and could differ considerably from how others might describe the 'facts'. In several cases we selected for study, third parties provided important information that the respondents themselves had either not mentioned or had portrayed differently. In some cases, reconciliation of contradictory accountings may be difficult but at least they alert the researcher to the problem. Attempts at such triangulation would clearly be impractical in a large field survey.

### **Conclusion**

Large scale representative surveys are an essential component of any attempt to study the social demography of the elderly population in Asia or elsewhere. Nevertheless there remains much to learn about how best to design questionnaires for such surveys to maximize their ability to accurately reflect the complex reality they are attempting to portray. Moreover, there are issues involved, as our examples of living arrangements illustrate, for which surveys are unlikely to be the research approach of choice.

Our efforts to fully enumerate the elderly in four rural communities in Thailand and to interview a purposive selection of 30 households revealed remarkable diversity in the details of their living arrangements. For obvious practical reasons, description and analysis of living arrangements based on large scale surveys requires categorization of cases. It would be futile for analysts to attempt to develop classifications that explicitly incorporate every peculiarity of an individual case that can arise. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the range of situations that are encompassed and hence masked by the categorizations typically used and to consider under what circumstances placing them in a single grouping undermines the interpretations being made.

Our case studies also reveal that dichotomizing the concept of coresidence can mask what in some sense is a continuum. It is not easy find a single operational definition of household boundaries that encompasses the same distinct social and economic meaning in all cases. This problem has been pointed out in numerous settings (Peterson 1993). It is fair to say that there is no easy solution to it other than to recognize that any particular definition involves ambiguities and that these will vary with the particular topic and settings being studied.

It is also important to recognize that surveys are not well suited for soliciting information on a number of issues that are relevant for a fuller understanding of familial support systems for elderly. Survey methodology is unlikely to adequately capture a variety of interpersonal dynamics that shape how the system operates in particular cases. For example our case studies revealed numerous situations in which strained relations between parents and children strongly influenced their living arrangements and support exchanges. Likewise, developing appropriate standardized questions and recording forms to adequately trace how living arrangements and support exchanges evolve may prove more than is feasible for a survey questionnaire (e.g., Peterson 1993). Instead, a narrative style approach may be required, especially if the accounting attempts to determine how conscious strategies guide the process.

Although the research reported above is based on Thailand, it is likely that many of the same issues are relevant for studies of the elderly in other settings, not only in Asia and other developing areas, but even in Western contexts. It is interesting that research using the case study approach in the US has identified many similar aspects of living arrangements to those described in our study of elderly in Thailand. For example, Groger (1992) in studying informal support exchanges between black elders and their children and kin in rural North Carolina, details the links to a range of living arrangements than include situations as complex as the two examples provided in Figures 1 and 2 above. Likewise Rowles (1983) discusses the complex links between the living arrangements of elderly Appalachian parents and their children who live at a distance. Both of these US studies provide striking parallels to situations represented in our Thai case studies and likewise help elucidate the challenges faced by social demography as it expands its scope to more broadly address issues involving the living arrangements and support systems of the elderly around the world.

### **Acknowledgments**

This study was undertaken as part of the project 'Rapid Demographic Change and the Welfare of the Elderly' funded by an award to the University of Michigan from the US National Institute on Aging (Grant No. AGO7637). Analysis was facilitated by a Research Fellowship from the Center for Advanced Studies in Social Science, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia. Helpful comments were provided by Albert Hermalin.

## Notes

1. These include surveys in 1986, 1990, 1994 and 1995 (Chayovan, Wongsith & Saengtienchai 1988; National Statistical Office 1994; Andrews, undated; Chayovan & Knodel 1997). There has also been considerable qualitative research undertaken using ethnographic methods, case studies, and focus groups (Pramualratana 1990; Caffrey 1992 a, b; Knodel, Saengtienchai & Sittitrai 1995).
2. We pretested our approach in a province other than the two in which the four study communities were located. We use the term community to refer to clusters of adjacent, administratively defined villages or hamlets (*muban*) that share facilities such as a temple.
3. This includes the two in our pretest.
4. The interviews were usually directed to the elderly themselves. Often other family members or neighbors were present and offered information. In a few cases, hearing impairment or mental confusion made a direct interview impractical, information came from informants. We deliberately kept these cases in our study since they typically involved situations where the elder was particularly in need of daily assistance from others. For convenience, we refer to such cases in the text as interviewees even though they did not provide the information themselves.
5. Case study research is diverse and its nature varies with the type of unit the case is (an individual, a family, an organization or a community). For some purposes, a single case may be of interest while for others multiple and diverse cases are studied (Stake 1995). We collected information for multiple cases on relatively restricted aspects of their lives. We typically spent from 2 to 5 hours talking with each case.
6. Bua Khok is the name of an entire sub-district (*tambol*). Our research, and the newspaper article, was limited to two adjacent villages or hamlets (*muban*) which formed one of several communities within the *tambol*.
7. The fact that the list of addresses from which the sample is finally drawn may be updated in the field to eliminate destroyed or deserted dwelling units and add new ones, has little bearing on this.
8. We use the term family compound to refer to two or more adjacent dwelling units on a plot of land owned by one or more members of the same extended family and typically occupied by related family units. Probably the most common family compound consists of separate dwellings for at least some married children and their parents (who may coreside in one dwelling with one or more children). The compound may or may not have clearly visible demarcated boundaries such as fencing.
9. There is provision for multiple dwelling units in cases of apartments and condominiums. There is also a category for collective households. The situations we are describing, however, are private houses that would normally be considered as single dwelling units.
10. This example is not from our case studies but was described to us by a key informant.
11. According to the nationally representative 1995 Survey of Welfare of the Elderly in Thailand, among the children of persons aged 60 and over, 40% who were separated and divorced children lived with their elderly parent compared to 22% of those who were widowed and 12% of those currently married (original tabulation).

## References

- Andrews, G. ed. (n.d.). *Ageing in South East Asia: A five country study*. The Centre for Ageing Studies, The Flinders University of South Australia.
- Asis, M. M. B., Domingo, L., Knodel, J. & Mehtha, K. (1995). Living arrangements in four Asian Countries: A comparative perspective, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 10: 145–162.
- Caffrey, R. A. (1992a). Family care of the elderly in Northeast Thailand: Changing patterns, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 7: 105–116.
- Caffrey, R. A. (1992b). Caregiving to the elderly in Northeast Thailand: Changing patterns, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 7: 117–134.
- Cain, M. T. (1991). The activities of the elderly in rural Bangladesh, *Population Studies* 45: 189–202.
- Charasdamrong, P. (1992). The misery of those left behind, *Bangkok Post*, 10 May 1992.
- Chayovan, N., Wongsith, M. & Saengtienchai, C. (1988). *Socio-economic consequences of the ageing of the population in Thailand: Survey findings*. Bangkok: Institute of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University.
- Chayovan, N. & Knodel, J. (1997). *A report on the survey of the welfare of the elderly in Thailand*. Bangkok: Institute of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University.
- Christenson, B. A. & Hermalin, A. I. (1991). A demographic decomposition of elderly living arrangements with a Mexican example, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 6: 331–348.
- Cowgill, D. O. (1968). The social life of the aged in Thailand, *The Gerontologist* 8(3): 159–163.
- Cowgill, D. O. (1972). The role and status of the aged in Thailand. In D. O. Cowgill & L. D. Holmes (eds.), *Ageing and modernization* (pp. 91–101). New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- DaVanzo, J. & Chan, A. (1994). Living arrangements of older Malaysians: Who coresides with their adult children?, *Demography* 31: 95–113.
- De Vos, S. & Holden, K. (1988). Measures comparing living arrangements of the Elderly: An assessment, *Population and Development Review* 14: 688–704.
- Elman, C. & Uhlenberg, P. (1995). Co-residence in the early Twentieth Century: Elderly women in the United States and their children, *Population Studies* 49: 501–517.
- Foster, B. (1975). Continuity and change in rural Thai family structure, *Journal of Anthropological Research* 31: 34–50.
- Groger, L. (1992) Tied to each other through ties to the land: Informal support of black elders in a southern US community, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 7: 205–220.
- Hashimoto, A. (1991). Living arrangements of the aged in seven developing countries: A preliminary analysis, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 6: 359–381.
- Hermalin, A. I. (1995). *Ageing in Asia: Setting the research foundation*. Asia-Pacific Research Reports No. 4, East-West Center, Program on Population.
- Jones, G. W. (1993). Consequences of rapid fertility decline for old age security in Asia. In R. Leete & I. Alam (eds.), *Revolution in Asian fertility: Dimensions, causes and implications* (Chapter 14). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Knodel, J. & Chayovan, N. (1997). Family support and living arrangements of Thai elderly, *Asia Pacific Population Journal* 12: 51–68.
- Knodel, J., Chayovan, N. & Saengtienchai, C. (1994). Are Thais deserting their elderly parents?, *BOLD* 4(3): 7–12.

- Knodel, J., Chamrathirithong, A. & Debavalya, N. (1987). *Thailand's reproductive revolution: Rapid fertility decline in a Third world setting*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Knodel, J. & Debavalya, N. (1992). Social and economic support systems for the elderly in Asia: An introduction, *Asia-Pacific Population Journal* 7: 5–12.
- Knodel, J., Saengtienchai, C. & Sittitrai, W. (1995). The living arrangements of elderly in Thailand: Views of the populace, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 10: 79–111.
- Knodel, J., Amornsirisomboon, P. & Khiewyoo, J. (1997). *Living arrangements, family support and the welfare of the elderly: Implications of the 1994 Survey of Elderly in Thailand*. Comparative Study of the Elderly in Asia, Research Report No. 97–43, Population Studies Center, University of Michigan.
- Martin, L. G. (1989). Living arrangements of the elderly in Fiji, Korea, Malaysia, and the Philippines, *Demography* 26: 627–643.
- National Institute on Aging (1996). Two studies provide a new look at health and retirement issues, *Aging Today*, Issue No. 4.
- National Statistical Office (1994). *Population aging in Thailand 1990 population and housing census*. Subject Report No. 2. Bangkok: National Statistical Office.
- Ogawa, N. & Retherford, R. D. (1997). Shifting costs of caring for the elderly back to families in Japan: Will it work?, *Population and Development Review* 23: 59–94.
- Peterson, J. T. (1993). Generalized extended family exchange: A case from the Philippines, *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55: 570–584.
- Pramualratana, A. (1990). *Support systems of the old in a rural community in Thailand*. Ph.D. Thesis. Australian University, Canberra, Australia.
- Rowles, G. D. (1983). Between worlds: A relocation dilemma for the Appalachian elderly, *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 17: 301–314.
- Rubin, H. J. & Rubin, I. S. (1995). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Sankar, A. (1989). Gerontological research in China: The role of anthropological inquiry, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 4: 199–224.
- Siriboon, S. & Knodel, J. (1994). Thai elderly who do not coreside with their children, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 9: 21–38.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- World Bank (1994). *Averting the old age crisis*. New York: Oxford University Press.

*Address for correspondence:* John Knodel, Population Studies Center, P.O. Box 1248, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248, USA  
Phone: (734) 998-6276; Fax: (734) 998-7415; E-mail: jknodel@umich.edu