

Research Paper Series

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Intergenerational Relationships between Males in Multigenerational Families

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Introduction

I have a personal fascination with the relationships between males from different generations within the family. I was brought up primarily by my grandparents and great grandparents, and rarely spent time with my own father who lived and worked abroad on his own for almost two decades. His decision to live apart was deliberate as he felt unable to cope with his father-in-law and work environment in Singapore. The lack of a role model, interaction and bonding has resulted in what I have to know of as a dysfunctional relationship; there is an absence of communication and understanding. To date, meetings are still awkward, and discussions of perspectives and major life decisions can be difficult.

Over the years, I have grown keen to understand more about the relationship I never had. Especially now that I am a father to two sons, I seek to comprehend the dynamics between males of different generations within the family. This is an attempt to become more aware of the pitfalls and be better prepared for my role as a son, husband and father. The aim of this self-initiated project is two-fold. Firstly, it is for me to gain an insight to what is “typical” between males within a multigenerational family – how they conduct themselves with each other, the needs and expectations of those from different generations. Secondly, the project should assist me in identifying sources of tension and of unity. Findings from a qualitative study can help inform the development of ways in which relationships can be possibly nurtured and strengthened, or even restored.

Summary Notes: The Lee family

Senior, Mr. Charles Lee

Mr. Charles Lee is an 82 years-old widowed Chinese male, who lives independently in a 5-room HDB flat. An ex-corporate senior executive and owner of a small corporate training business, he has continued to live a very active lifestyle after retirement. Relatively free of chronic diseases, Mr. Lee takes care of himself very well; he spends his day exercising, meditating, cooking, cleaning and pursuing his interest in world religions, wellness, photography and digital skills. He believes that one should always be inquisitive and not stop learning. A certified Neuro Linguistic Programming practitioner, Mr. Lee also sings, plays the ukulele and records his sessions to upload onto YouTube. When he is not with his two daughters, son, and their families during their occasional visits, Mr. Lee is out with friends mainly from a younger generation.

Mr. Lee's relationship with his son, Matthew Lee (Matt)

Mr. Lee had a challenging relationship with his son, Matthew, especially when he became a teenager. He could not understand how his son was so disobedient and irresponsible; fooling around and getting into trouble even as a university student. As Mr. Lee travelled extensively for his work, he was very strict with Matt whenever he was at home. His wife never had any “control” over Matt and relied on him to “handle” their defiant son. Mr. Lee often made known his expectations and explained the need for values, discipline and their rationale behind them to Matt. He stressed that while he did whatever necessary to “whip” Matt into shape, he was fair in that he provided as best as he could for his welfare, including sending him to an overseas

university for further studies. Fairness, being upright and responsible were values Mr. Lee aimed to impress upon his children.

Things started changing for the better after Matt got married and settled down. Even more so when he became a father. According to Mr. Lee, Matt is now very involved with parenting and as a son, he is both respectful and helpful. Mr. Lee mentioned that he could not be happier knowing that Matt is a filial child, and one who also teaches his children the importance of caring and loving the older generation. Mr. Lee rates his current relationship with him 10/10. In hindsight, Mr. Lee did all he could as a father and expressed no regret with how he undertook his duties. Passing on values to his children so that they would grow up as responsible individuals was a top priority.

Mr. Lee's relationship with his grand-son, Ethan Lee (Ethan)

A friend to have fun with, is how Mr. Lee describes the relationship with his grandson. Whenever they get together, it is about catching up and sharing of jokes. Mr. Lee makes no demands of Ethan because he believes that the responsibilities are Matt's. Recently, the two family members were involved in an online 3-Generation music performance.

Middle generation: Mr. Matthew Lee (Matt)

Matt, who is 46 years old, is a middle child and Mr. Lee's only son. He has been married for 14 years and is a father to Ethan (14 years) and his sister (9 years). He runs his own business in the events industry and is a fervent Christian who volunteers his time as a Sunday school teacher. Matt is an involved parent and does his best to spend quality time with his children as a friend and coach.

Matt's relationship with his father, Mr. Charles Lee

Matt remembers clearly his father to be very strict with him. Mr. Lee was an absent father and uninvolved parent who dished mainly out instructions, communicated unilaterally and had little tolerance for ill-discipline. Matt admitted that he was a playful and sometimes mischievous teenager, but he felt that punishments meted out towards him were harsh. This was because his mother would exaggerate how disobedient he was during Mr. Lee's absence. Because of the lack of communication, Matt felt that he was often misunderstood and also unable to relate to both his parents. Acceptance was used as a cope with the tension, "I had no choice. What could I have done about it?" Matt had hoped for his father to be less reactionary.

Even so, he rated his the relationship his father then above average. There were moments of fun and laughter during TV time, picnics and outings. Throughout his earlier years, Matt maintained respectful of his father's position and role in the family. As Matt became a husband, and later a father, he began to form a better bond with Mr. Lee. He gradually developed an understanding of fatherhood and an appreciation for what his father was attempting to achieve as a parent. He says that both have "mellowed" over the years and are now able to have a conversation about anything. He feels that his father can be "annoying" as he still has the habit of barking out instructions. Both enjoy each other's company and are thankful for the time spent together at family meals and walks. Matt rates his current relationship with Mr. Lee at 8/10.

Matt's relationship with his son, Ethan Lee

Matt says that his relationship with Ethan has changed significantly since the latter became a teenager. There is less communication because of the demands of schoolwork, as well as, Ethan's social network in the digital space and increasing activity outside of home. Matt noticed

that although they still have conversations, Ethan has been generally quieter and less inclined to share; topics of discussion are no longer as casual and lengthy. There are moments of tension resulting from these changes as Ethan matures, his personal expectations (of how Ethan manages his time, not make the same mistakes, develop his character and to remain in the Christian faith), and also from forgetting how it was once to be young and carefree. Matt misses the time when Ethan was more available and ready to chat about anything, but he understands that his son has entered into a phase where he may look to exert his independence, require more space, and support from a distance.

Matt is generally thankful that the earlier years were spent investing in a close relationship. Being a self-employed person allowed him to spend time with Ethan and bond over shared interests, family activities and sports. He is aware that his bad temper leads to tension between father and son. And because he values the relationship, he is actively taking steps to be a better listener when communicating with Ethan, and to be more patient in considering his son's perspectives and needs.

Younger generation: Ms. Ethan Lee

Ethan is Matt's first-born child. He is a secondary one student who is a keen saxophonist and a competitive rugby player.

Ethan's relationship with his father, Mr. Matthew Lee (Matt)

Ethan rates his relationship with Matt at 8-9/10. This is because Ethan sees his father as a proactive one doing his best to provide for the family, and to understand and support him in many ways. He likes it that Matt can be sought out for advice and help in times of need. Ethan

sees him as a friend because they share many interests such as rugby, fishing, talking about God and discussing scripture and value systems. However, there are occasions when misunderstandings arise from a perception that Ethan does not manage his time well, spends too much time on his digital devices, being too moody and loud when speaking. Ethan feels that his father does not know the stresses that secondary students face these days, and often thinks that his “loud” voice is a sign of disrespect. Ethan maintained that issues would be resolved in a matter of days. His father would usually be the one who would initiate the conversation to talk things through. In the meantime, he would pray to God and then discuss matters with Matt to arrive at an understanding and/or compromise, “Everything gets sorted. No loose ends.”. Ethan does not bear grudges but instead remembers that his father wants him to grow up to be a self-respecting adult who will always do his best. He is keen for their relationship to reach the next level where there is a greater degree of understanding. And Ethan is motivated because he knows his father will not live forever.

Ethan’s relationship with his grandfather, Mr. Charles Lee

Ethan believes that his grandfather is living life to the fullest and has a positive relationship with him. They chit chat and update each other about their lives when they meet. Recently, the two were involved with playing their musical instruments for an online concert. Ethan is also influenced by the relationship his own father, Matt, has with Mr. Lee. He feels good that the two older adults are able to get along so well each other.

Analysis of the Lee family

Sources of cohesion and tension

Leisure time activities bring the Lee males together. Spending time with each other has allowed for bonding to take place. This is more apparent with the middle and younger generation where Matt is not only involved but a father who has a more communicative relationship with his son. In the meantime, tension for the fathers in the Lee family arises out of the unmet expectations of how their sons should behave. Their complaints include the sons not possessing enough discipline, lacking in focus and a sense of responsibility. Academic performance did not surface as a major concern for the two fathers; for the Lees, it was more about character and the level of effort given to accomplishing duties and tasks. Conversely, the sons, expressed that their fathers were not only quick to react negatively towards them, but also seldom understood their circumstances and rationale for their “untoward” behaviour. Limited communication and understanding coupled with a lack of patience seemed to produce friction between the adjacent generations. Sons maintained respect for their fathers throughout episodes of tension. All three individuals are in relatively good health, so there are neither stresses nor challenges experienced as caregivers.

Cohort differences and approach to fathering

The level of participation and approach towards fathering is significantly different for the two fathers of different cohorts. Mr. Lee, a sole breadwinner from the baby-boomer generation, spent most of his time at work, leaving the bulk of the parenting to his wife. He was mostly involved with the prescription of values and enforcement of discipline. Compared to Mr. Lee, Matt the younger father, is viewed by his own son as more approachable, aware (willing to acknowledge his own limitations) and engaged. As a result of the more involved parenting style, Ethan has

experienced a more communicative and meaningful relationship in contrast to the one Matt had , with Mr. Lee as he was maturing.

Impact of age and role in the family on IG relationships

Age and one's role in the family seems to impact the relationship between the older adult and his son. A closer bond between Matt and Mr. Lee developed especially after the former becomes a father himself. The new role allowed Matt to gain an understanding and appreciation for what his own father had to journey through. Mr. Lee, who is in a later phase of the life course, is less anxious with regard to his son. He is satisfied knowing that Matt has "matured" over the years, and enjoys the company of his son who he currently deems responsible and faithful. This relationship between the two older adults is witnessed by Ethan, the youngest male in the family, and is said to have left a positive impression on him. Because of Mr. Lee's good health and his ability to be independent, there has been an absence of stress and tension related to caregiving.

Summary Notes: The Khan family

Senior: Mr. Waris Khan

Mr. Waris is an 84 years-old widowed Indian Muslim who lives with his son, daughter-in-law and their three children. He still handles the accounts of the trading business he has been involved in with his cousin since 1955. But because of the COVID-19 restrictions, he spends most of his days at home, working, praying, and on his smartphone and television. Issues with the immigration department in his earlier years saw the family separated. As the only one who had attained permanent residency early on, his wife and firstborn had to shuttle between Bombay and Singapore for a number of years; starting a family under the circumstances was challenging.

Relationship with his son, Feroz Khan (Feroz)

Feroz was born in India and came to Singapore when he was six years old to start school, only to return to India when he was 10. He then re-joined Mr. Waris in Singapore as a teenager. Mr. Waris had multiple roles to play when his wife was unable to stay on long term basis in Singapore. But it helped greatly that Feroz was an independent, highly motivated and very obedient child. Mr. Waris only got to see Feroz after work but he did his best to spend their dinners and weekends together. He also made an effort develop Feroz's interests and religious knowledge. Given his limited contact, he recalls having few issues with Feroz and attributed this to his wife's hand in their son's upbringing. There were times when he would discipline Feroz for mistakes, but in Mr. Waris's opinion, the relationship with his son has been very good and not experienced strain till now. The tables have turned somewhat now that Mr. Waris is older; his son occasionally chides him for his poor habits. Even so, he knows that Feroz, who has always been accepting and respectful of his authority, wants a good relationship with him.

Relationship with his grandsons

Mr. Waris sees his grandchildren as friends to connect with and learn “good” things from. His role is that of an advisor, to impart wisdom and guidance so that they are enabled to grow up as good citizens and devout Muslims. Mr. Waris believes that he should not interfere with the parenting as it is the parents’ responsibility.

Middle generation: Mr. Feroz Khan (Feroz)

Feroz, who is 55 years old, is Mr. Waris’s firstborn. Feroz works as a corporate trainer and is married with three children (two sons and a daughter). He invited Mr. Waris to live with them after the passing of his mother so that he would be close to family support and not be isolated. Feroz’s approach to parenting is more proactive and inclusive.

Feroz’s relationship with his father, Mr. Waris Khan

Feroz recalls his earlier relationship with Mr. Waris to be fair. He had his father’s trust and was allowed to explore, be independent and handy around the house. As a youth, he was expected to do well in school, be well-mannered and abide by the Islamic faith. Although busy at work, his father managed to be available for him. While the limited leisure activities were not necessarily for bonding, they were still able to spend time together eating, visiting friends and family, going to the beach and riding on a motorbike. Feroz found it easy to share with Mr. Waris about everything, although he had hoped for him to be more involved as a father; a closer relationship which could have resulted in better guidance at beginning of his career, and “space” as he matured. Over the years, the source of tension between Feroz and Mr. Waris arise primarily from the former being nagged at, as well as, Mr. Waris’s biasness towards his daughter. But other than

a need to bear up with his habit of comparing the present with the past, Feroz rates the relationship with his father to be very good. With Mr. Waris requiring more medical attention in recent years, Feroz's caregiving responsibilities have also increased. He says that it is an area that he still needs practice and more patience.

Feroz's relationship with his sons

Feroz treats his children like friends and does his best to promote a culture of openness which encourages communication between family members. He enjoys their company, engages in chit-chat, listens to them and often offers advice that is not limited to the pursuit of academic excellence; "soft skills and social ones" are as important as core values of trust, honesty, diligence and respect for parents. Feroz has an excellent relationship with his sons (8-9/10) because of accumulated life experiences, exposure and usage of a more communicative parenting style. But in certain instances, it can get tense when especially when they fail to observe rules that have been laid down, or when their behaviour is found to be lacking. But otherwise, they are a fairly close-knit family who are also brought closer by their faith in Islam.

Younger generation: Ms. Rafiq Khan

Rafiq, 18, is Feroz's youngest. He is the younger of two boys and is currently serving his national service. Rafiq, who is the "quieter" brother has a passion for soccer and aims to qualify for a scholarship to further his studies in economics after enlistment.

Rafiq's relationship with his father, Mr. Feyoz Khan (Feyoz)

Rafiq has always looked up to his Feroz who is seen as a very capable individual and an involved father. He has always sought his advice for schoolwork and presentations because of how

creative and useful the feedback could be. Rafiq remembers his father to be supportive of his children, accompanying them to school activities, sporting and a variety of other activities. Rafiq recognises that his father is concerned for their welfare, means well and has valuable perspectives. But his high level of drive and expectations for discipline and effort can at times be a source of tension. Nevertheless, Rafiq is still confident that he can discuss important matters with his father as he is a good coach who listens and also support his decisions. Rafiq opines that Feroz is a parent of gold standard and cannot ask for more; rating his relationship with him at 8.5/10.

Rafiq's relationship with his grandfather, Mr. Waris Khan

While Mr. Waris is also concerned for his well-being and welfare, Rafiq's relationship with his grandfather is slightly different. They are able to share about their lives, and discuss values and culture. Rafiq values his grandfather's sharing which are rich in history and wisdom. But because of the generation gap, he gravitates more towards his own father who is more liberal in perspective. Rafiq gets along well with his grandfather even though he has a habit of chiding and being particular with little things around the house. Rafiq gives their relationship an 8.5/10.

Analysis of the Khan family

Sources of cohesion and tension

The Khan family's males (excluding Feroz's elder son who was not interviewed) generally have a good relationship with each other. There is a good amount of support exchanged between the generations even though there were challenges for Mr. Waris in the earlier years. Sons appreciated the time their fathers spent with them on leisure activities and when they were

trusted to be independent. Tensions typically arose when the sons failed to observe discipline and rules, and when the fathers became overbearing.

Cohort differences and approach to fathering

Mr. Waris's circumstances as a young father were challenging, but it may have caused him to be more involved with bringing up his son. His parenting style is considered "traditional" with a bigger emphasis on conscientiousness and the teaching of values. Feroz, the younger father, being better educated and more exposed, approached fathering with greater intention and flexibility. Instead of focusing on just academic performance, he was keen to help his children develop their social skills. And also, to show his support by being there for their needs and accomplishments. Both fathers impressed on the sons the importance of values, culture, and adherence to the Islamic faith. Although the relationships are rated highly, it seems to be more favourable with the middle and younger generation.

Impact of age and role in the family on IG relationships

The quality of relationship between Feroz and his father has improved over time. This is partly due to his role as a caregiver, and the adjustments he makes to accommodate Mr. Waris, an individual whose thoughts and actions he "cannot control". In the meantime, Mr. Waris does not want to impose on Feroz and his family; he is aware that there are boundaries and would prefer not to interfere so that a good relationship can be maintained.

Observations

It is evident that tensions between males in the family begin when the younger generation enters into adolescence. The sources of stress can be attributed to the fathers' expectations of how their

sons are preparing to secure their future welfare. Discipline, conscientiousness and a sense of urgency, the “requisites for success” in later life are on occasion perceived to be lower than hoped for. Tensions are then compounded by the notion that the fathers lack patience in understanding their sons’ perspectives and needs. The older generation mean well, but their intent may have been lost in translation. After all, the generation gap – differences in social structures, value systems and the individual’s experience over the life course in a certain period of history, can explain why members of different age cohorts contend with each other.

From the perspective of the sons, fathers (from the earlier cohort) seem authoritarian and generally reactionary. In spite of the friction, the sons still maintain their respect for their fathers’ authority. And in the case of the two families interviewed, the relationship between the older and middle generation improved over time; particularly when the sons become fathers. During this time, the older adults are less anxious and do not expect as much from their sons as before. Perhaps, it is the knowledge that their efforts have paid off and all is well that has put them at ease. For the younger fathers, the new-found responsibility to prepare their sons for the life ahead may have led them to a better understanding of why their own fathers may have seemed so severe in their earlier years. What is not observed in this case-study is the tension that arises out of caregiving. None of the males, especially the seniors, have experienced a major health crisis that would precipitate the need for a high level of care from their family members.

Limitations of this case study include, firstly, the extremely small sample size; just two families were interviewed. There were contrasts in culture and circumstances, but the families were also similar in a number of aspects – their members’ health status, quantity and quality of interaction, SES, values and approaches to fathering. Secondly, one of the males in the Khan

family was left out of the study. The inclusion of Rafiq's older brother would have provided details how a sibling can add another dimension to the dynamic of both the vertical and horizontal relationships. And thirdly, members of the both families were not asked to describe their personalities. An investigation here could have shed light on whether or not one's disposition has an effect on how the relationships are viewed and handled.

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