CENTRAL POLICY UNIT
THE GOVERNMENT OF THE HONG KONG SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REGION

EXPLORATORY STUDY OF NEGLECT AMONG ELDERLY IN HONG KONG:
A FAMILY PERSPECTIVE

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MARCH 2011
Executive Summary

Background
Elder abuse has attracted considerable attention in recent years because of its increasing trend and happenings within the family that clashes head-on with the traditional Chinese values of respecting and caring for the older persons. Elder neglect is common yet seen as a lesser fair of elder abuse. Part of the reason is that neglect is not readily distinguishable from abuse. Yet, the situation often worsens to finally become abusive in nature if preventive actions are not taken. Therefore, the study approached ‘neglect’ as the midway processes between loving relationship and a worsening care to the extreme of abusive behaviors. Such perspective allows subsequent implementation of intervening procedures to help improve the relationship between the older victims and the perpetuators and to rectify problems at early stages.

Aims
Elder neglect, instead of abuse, forms an obvious focus in studying changes before irreversible damages are made to the families over time to examine the family cohesion factors as well as to identify interpersonal or helping relationships among elder parents and adult children, in particular during the time of sickness when an older person requires intensive care. Such occasions reveal the impacts of family dynamic on the vulnerability of elder neglect. It is under this background, Family Council and Central Policy Unit, commissioned the Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies of Lingnan University to undertake the study, in April 2010, with the following aims:

a. To provide literature review on family neglect in Asian countries, including Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and India;

b. To identify critical points of elder neglect in Hong Kong and its explanation(s);

and

c. To propose possible interventions.

Methodology
The explanatory model for family life pathway proposed in the study is an eco-system analysis resembling organic functionism (i.e. organic system theory) where individuals are taken as units within a system (e.g. family) where they are trying to adapt to the demand by adjusting themselves to fit in with the roles and functions
expected of them. Successful adaptation means ever better survival for not just the individual units but the whole system as well (i.e. a state of equilibrium). On the other hand, ill adaptation can mean total failure of the individuals and its system (i.e. family) falling apart, with problems and malfunctions needing assistance and rectifications from the outside. This pathway provides the structure of our explanation.

The study adopted a qualitative in-depth interview approach design. The first part involved using ‘structured questionnaire’ to obtain individual socio-economic data, risk or protective factors, characteristics of significant others and the Chinese cultural elements of care and love or neglect; while the second part focused on significant life events recall with the help of a guideline. The detailed accounts of the experiences from different perspectives (i.e. elders and perpetuators) were audio-taped and summarized in accordance to the developmental stages indicated in the explanatory model of family life pathway. The interviews were processed and broken down into events and behaviors for coding, with reference to different developmental stages of family life stages (e.g. courtship and marriage, extension or subtraction of family in reaction to life circumstances). The codes were compared to find consistencies and differences, to reveal different categories. The categories became saturated and the central focus emerged. Such categories were used to reconstruct the family life pathway leading to elder mistreatment, highlighting the critical points at different family developmental stages that require adaptations.

Sampling
The study adopted purposive sampling to identify potential targets (i.e. elders aged 60 years old or above, who live alone or with the family members (i.e. sons or/and daughters or/and in-laws) and his/her family members from ‘caring family’ and ‘neglected family’), being referred by Social Welfare Department, social welfare organizations. A total of 40 neglected families (40 elders plus 22 perpetuators) and 43 caring families (43 happy elders plus 40 caregivers) were included in the study.

Characteristics
The elders from neglected and caring families in the sample share similar demographic socio-economic characteristics whereas their financial conditions and family care are found to be different. Elders from the caring families are comparatively well-off, as compared to elders from the neglect families. Family support to older persons in caring family is nurtured by love and care, i.e. most elders are living with the family with their children’s support. On the contrary, half of the
elders from neglected family are living alone and relying on government’s provisions for living. Health problems are not necessarily a risk factor in themselves, as it depends on how members react to them. Health issues could worsen the mistreatment of the elderly because extra burden was put onto the perpetuators, but it could also prompt members to provide more care and concerns, thus drawing the relationship closer. Perpetuators and caregivers are mostly adult children or spouses. Caregivers are generally female, single (separated or divorced) and of higher education attainment. Some are still working and living on the salary earned while some are retired with financial support from their own children; whereas perpetrators are found to be mostly male, working, married, living with two to three persons in a flat of modest size, and earning a salary that provides a source for most family expenses.

Findings
The stories shared have reflected a pattern of cultural and individual factors that leads to similar life events that coincide with developmental stages in the family life pathway. Two types of family life pathways formed the focus of the study: (1) ordinary marriage between mainlanders, who come to Hong Kong as immigrants or refugees in 1940s to 1970s, or between Hong Kongers; and (2) cross-border marriage, as a product of the 1980s and the 1990s, with Hong Kong male residents marrying mainland female residents, and a few of such marriages involve significant age differences. The findings serve to construct the common family life pathway for the two types of family, pinpointing the critical points gradually leading to elder mistreatment.

The elder mistreatment cases in cross-border marriages in the study shared similar characteristics and patterns in resulting shattered family. The time for courtship was relatively short, their union was found being accelerated by popular myths of Hong Kong men (richer, more educated, more sophisticated, etc) as well as that of mainland women (submissive, obedient, gentle, etc). The basis of the marriage was largely functional and material, instead of mutual understanding and affection. The couples were often separated by the border in the first few years of marriage, with the husband from Hong Kong visiting his wife in mainland China during weekends and holidays. The relationships between the two persons were generally amiable at the beginning, as accompanied by the birth of children (usually within one year after marriage). The first common critical point was then revealed at the reunion of family in Hong Kong, when the mainland wife and mainland-born children joined the husband in Hong Kong. It was often found that the expectations that the wives or
the husbands were different when they were separated. The relationship was discounted and instead became filled with blame and suspicion. The wives continued to stay with the husbands as they were the only persons that the wives could rely on in every way especially during their first few years of stay in Hong Kong. The second critical point came when the wives became more established in terms of familiarity with the support system, job market and education opportunities, etc, while the husbands’ capability went downhill. Often the husbands aged, and brought home less or even no money, which led to the foundation of their marriage being challenged again. Life circumstances (such as illnesses, sudden and huge loss of money, etc) were usually found to be the trigger factors of mistreatment and finally resulted in shattered families.

The elder mistreatment cases in among marriages of the husband and wife both coming from mainland China also shared some common traits and patterns that resulted the worsening care to older persons in the family. The couples got married rather in a rush (i.e. little or even nil time for courtship) as well as late in life, as compared to their counterparts at that time (i.e. in their early 30s) for all sort of purposes such as parents’ wills, peer pressure, an escape from poverty and hardship, etc, instead of mutual affection. The separation time for couples between mainland China and Hong Kong was quite long, due to the unstable political and social conditions at that time. This put the family relationship to a critical test, and the relationships between husband and wife and father and children were quite alienated and distant because of the separation. The situation did not seem to improve even the families finally reunited in Hong Kong. However, the wives, though having to live in such an oppressive situation, stayed with the husbands regardless of the situation, observing the Chinese wives’ tradition of absolute obedience to their husbands. Mistreatment between husbands and wives might happen, but the wives often sucked it up. It turned out to affect the children who had to grow up in such an environment. The death of husband was found to be a critical point, where the older mother lost her anchor and needed to move into her married son’s household. As an extension of functional spousal relationship between the mother and the father, the relationship between mother and son was no better, as it was also based on calculation and functions. Life circumstances, in particular the deterioration of health, brought extra burden to the family, as rated against the declining level of contribution and depreciating value to the family of the older person as he or she ages. Mistreatments and conflicts within family came along.

Conclusion
The study has identified two patterns of marriage, namely ‘ordinary marriage’ and ‘cross-border marriage’. The reasons behind the union of man and woman in question varied, according to the different social, economic and political backdrop when the marriage took place. The critical points leading to elder mistreatment were similar in both ordinary and cross-border marriage, for example the addition or subtraction of family member and life circumstances such as loss of job, loss of money, health problem, weakened earning ability because of old age or health problem, etc. These require families to adjust balance and adapt, and the capability and underlying forces for positive adjustment, balance and adaptation of individual or family were found to be different in the two identified patterns of marriage. ‘Ordinary marriage’ involved the middle-old and old-old generations now, normally took place between 1940s and 1970s. The marriages were generally stricken by poverty and hardship at the time when traditional thoughts strongly prevailed; their unions, mostly, were out of family pressure and social expectations, with little emphasis on love and mutual understanding. The relationship between husband and wife, parents and children was rather distant, bestowing little threshold and resilience on the family to withstand and overcome life circumstances. ‘Cross-border marriage’ involved mostly the young-old and took place between 1980s and 1990s, a time characterized by economic affluence, increased contact between Hong Kong and mainland China and a more open attitude toward love and marriage due to western influence. As reflected in the cases, the unions were largely out of functions and materials. Having grown up in different social and cultural context of cross-border couples, the reunion of family, implying day-in day-out living together under the same roof, caused challenges. The unfulfilled wants and wrongful expectations accelerated the change of the relationship. The age difference induced a shift of power in the later family life, when husbands retired and lost its earning power while the wives in their prime age, striving for a better future, became the breadwinner of the family. The basis (i.e. functions and materials) of the marriage changes, the relationship between husband and wife would become troubled and alienated, and gradually worsened to become a severely damaged or even an abusive relationship.

In conclusion, elder neglect in normal marriage was due to the lack of love and care from the onset of the man-woman relationship (i.e. courtship and marriage stage) and leading to an alienated family relationship among members of family; whereas the happening of elder neglect in cross-border marriage was due to its functional and materialistic nature of love and care, which infected other members in the family, the shift of power in relation to functions put the weakest link at risk.
Limitations
There are limitations that need to be acknowledged and addressed in the present study. The first limitation has to do with the extent to which the findings can be generalized beyond the cases studied. The number of cases is too limited as well as too homogeneous for broad generalizations. Further empirical studies, however, are needed to replicate the findings in different contexts and surroundings, so to enhance our understanding of elder neglect among different groups of elders for more well defined indicators of the mistreatment. The second limitation is the definition of elder neglect. It is well predicted that the consultant team approached elder neglect as a midway process to elder abuse shall arouse social debates as the approach connotes different beliefs and perspectives behind. This, however, will be taken as the beginning of a long process on the elimination of elder mistreatment in Hong Kong.

Policy Recommendations
Family is an organic system, like the human body. It senses heat and cold, when the stimulus exceeds a certain threshold, the body transmits signals that the brain interprets as pain. The ‘pain’ is the critical point in the family life pathway. If one ignores the pain, the pain will worsen and become chronic or even incurable if it is not being taken good care of at its onset. Precisely, small problems happened along the pathway, and gradually transform into big troubles that shatter the family and might cause regrets for life. Therefore, the policy recommendations have taken on a public health approach to the developmental pathways of family life, to encourage successful adaptations and to increase the threshold of family to come head-on to overcome the challenges along the pathways. They are divided into three levels (1) Primary, focusing on early prevention; (2) Secondary, focusing on timely intervention and; (3) Tertiary, focusing on rehabilitation. Suggested key actions are indicated below.

1. Primary level: Focusing on early prevention
   - To review existing policies working against family cohesion or reducing family responsibility to care;
   - To strengthen family life and community education for filial care;
   - To promote a positive image and instill respect and care for the older persons among the public; and
   - To introduce dating and marriage life education and filial care education in formal curriculum at an early age.
2. Secondary level: Focusing on timely intervention
   - To commission further studies to develop instruments for early detection of elder neglect;
   - To encourage family members to have frequent interactions and show love and concerns;
   - To help build neighborhood and friendship networks for older persons; and
   - To encourage intergenerational interactions.

3. Tertiary level: Focusing on rehabilitation upon intervention
   - To support training of mediators or counselors for neglectful/unhappy marriage relationships;
   - To make affordable marriage/family counseling/mediating services available in accessible locations to elders such as social centers for the elderly; and
   - To promote help-seeking mentalities of elders for marriage counseling services among unhappy couples.