

Help from more children can make life worse for elderly mum: Study

Women used to having control over housework could consider the help as intrusion if overdone

Theresa Tan
Senior Social Affairs
Correspondent

More hands to help with housework could ironically make life worse for elderly women, a new study of almost 3,000 seniors has found.

In particular, receiving help with housework from more of their children can be detrimental to the mothers' quality of life, according to the study, titled "Filial piety paradox: Receiving social support from children can be negatively associated with quality of life".

The research was done by Assistant Professor of Sociology Shannon Ang from Nanyang Technological University and Dr Rahul Malhotra, head of research at the Centre for Ageing Research and Education (Care) at the Duke-NUS Medical School.

It was published in the *Social Science and Medicine* journal in June.

Dr Ang explained that helping with household chores may not be the problem – it is how the help is given and how many children are involved in the helping that are of concern.

The study found that having more of their children helping with housework lowers the quality of life of elderly mothers.

This is because many of the women may have spent most of

their lives as housewives, and having more of their children help with housework can feel like an intrusion into a space they are used to having control over.

Their children may also do the chores in their own way and not to their mother's instructions or liking. All these factors make the mother feel less in control, which affects her perceived quality of life.

This is the first study here that examines how children's support can affect their elderly parents' quality of life, as the support given has an impact on the senior's sense of control over their lives.

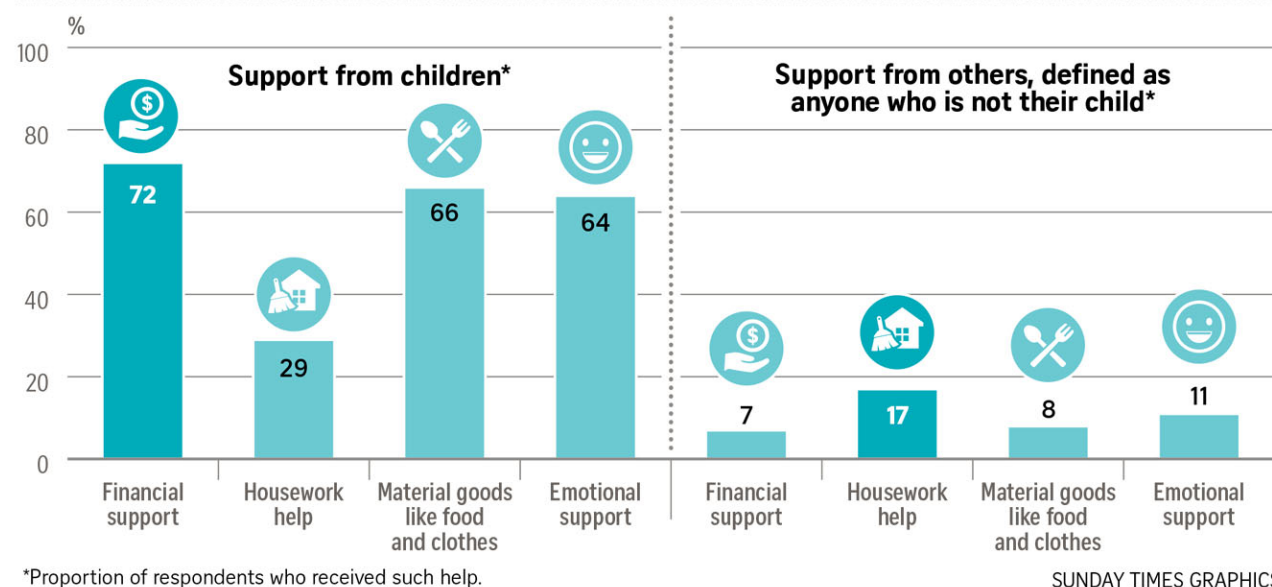
Dr Ang said it is often assumed that help from one's family is a good thing, but the researchers wanted to examine if that assumption is always true. They also wanted to find out if it mattered what form the help takes – such as financial and emotional support – and from whom it comes.

The study analysed the responses from almost 3,000 men and women aged 60 and above, who were part of a larger study that tracked the health, retirement and other issues pertaining to seniors over time. The seniors were interviewed twice between 2016 and 2019.

For this study, the participants answered questions such as the frequency they felt "My life has meaning" and "I can do as I please", to measure the quality of life.

The study found that:

Support given to elderly parents



- Financial aid was the most common form of support received, with 72 per cent of respondents receiving money from at least one child;
- The least common form of support given was housework help, with 29 per cent of respondents receiving such help from at least one child;
- The most common form of support given by anyone other than a child, such as spouses, friends and domestic helpers, was housework help, with 17 per cent of respondents receiving such aid;
- The least common form of help given by this group was financial

support, with only 7 per cent of respondents citing this; and

- The quality of life improves for men who have financial support from more of their children, but there is not enough evidence to conclude the same for women.

The study did not ask the sums the seniors received from their children.

Dr Ang said that for men, receiving financial support from more of their children increases their financial security, which improves their sense of control over their lives.

But this may not be the same for elderly women, as many did not work for years and are already used to depending on their loved

ones financially. So, receiving financial support has a smaller impact on their sense of control in their golden years compared with the men, he said.

Dr Ang said the study highlighted the elderly parents' desire to be independent and one way to respect that desire is for the child to do things with them, instead of doing things for them.

He said: "It seems that for social support to be beneficial, it should seek to respect and promote older adults' sense of self and autonomy."

With housework, children could ask their mothers how they like the chores to be done and follow her wishes, he suggested.

Mr Kelvin Lee, assistant direc-

tor of Touch Active Ageing at Touch Community Services, said that for women who have been housewives their entire lives, the loss of this role, such as when their children help with household chores, can affect their mental well-being.

It is often a big step for parents to take to ask their children for help.

He said: "They see their sense of identity and self-worth slowly slipping away as they increasingly lose control of their physical and cognitive well-being."

Dr Ang said that while it is the norm for children to provide help to their parents in their old age, the elderly parents are concerned about being a burden to their children.

He added that children who support their parents in an "overly intrusive way", such as not respecting what their parents want, treating them like children or doing everything for them, can make the seniors feel helpless.

"Thus, the filial piety paradox: support can be well-meaning and even necessary, but it can negatively affect the way older adults think about themselves and their role in their families or society."

theresat@sph.com.sg