Axiomatic Approach in Developing the Filial Care Theory

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Abstract

Filial Piety refers to the special obligations that children have towards their ageing parents, and by extension may include obligations of adopted children and grandchildren. This study aims to design a theory that attempts to explain why filial care responsibility exists and evolves over time. The theory was developed using an axiomatic approach where five axioms were deduced into four emergent propositions. It is theorized that filial care responsibility is a socially-driven act, as its fulfillment is a conformity to implied social contracts in order to ascertain one's belongingness to a group, and it also promotes the relationship between family members in a form of reciprocated care. As culture and societies advance, values and perceptions toward older persons progress, thus evolving the form of filial care practices, without affecting its essence.

Keywords: Filial Piety, Filial Responsibility, Older Persons, Care of Older Persons, Axiomatic Theory Development

Introduction

In most cultures, the care between generations of family members exists as a cycle– the parents care for the young children, who shall later become functional adults providing care to their ageing parents. The cycle has been rooted in the history of societies and has maintained the social expectations placed on adult children with ageing parents up to the present day. Regardless of social status, family values and personal philosophies, ageing parents expect some level of care coming their adult children whether it be in the form physical, financial or emotional support (Hsu, 2017; Yang, 2004). Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton (as cited in Fruhauf, Jarrott, & Allen, 2006) asserted that 60% to 80% of the care that older adults receive come from family members.

Such duty placed upon the family members is known as filial piety (also known as filial responsibility or filial obligations) which refers to the "the special obligations that children have towards their parents" (Schinkel, 2012) and by principle, may also include the obligations of adopted children (Verbruggen, 1997) and grandchildren towards their grandparents (Brakman, 1994). Filial piety is a Confucian value that is very common among East Asian societies and among those of Asian descent, which is a key Chinese cultural value that demands children's caregiving obligations to older adults as it is considered as the most significant and holds the highest virtue of all ethical teachings (Canda, 2013; Dong, Zhang, & Simon, 2014; Park & Müller, 2014). The Chinese term for filial piety– "xiao xun" demands the children in the family to be respectful (xiao) and obedient (xun) to their parents and other elderly members related to the family (Kwan, 2000). The traditional Chinese perspective of filial piety emphasizes the importance of respect to the older persons, as such that plainly providing one's ageing parents with food and other necessities is no different from that of the animals, if no respect was shown. Chow (2006) differentiated three levels on how filial piety is practiced basing on Confucian philosophy-- providing parents with the necessary materials for the satisfaction of their physical needs and comforts; paying attention to parents' wishes and obeying their preferences; and behaving in a way that makes parents happy and brings them honor and the respect of the community. Even the death of one's parents still does not excuse one from honoring his parents as filial piety includes practicing ancestral rites for deceased parents (Park & Müller, 2014). The

Confucian-based Chinese filial piety, which considers honoring one's parents as a person's most important responsibility, formed the basis of filial piety in other Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, and Singapore, among others (Traylor, 1988).

Despite being spared from the Chinese influence, the Jewish perspective also played a similar role in shaping the modern-day family values (especially among Christians), as both cultures share some commonalities such as being strongly family-oriented and being highly conscious in preserving and transmitting traditions and values across generation (Yu, 1984). Despite being briefly discussed in the Old Testament, the care for one's parents serves a highly enduring element of the Jewish ethos and is viewed as the most difficult among the biblical commandments as "*honoring thy father and thy* mother" connotes an "infinite responsibility of the task" (Yu, 1984).

Even among the classical Greeks, who viewed ageing as a disappointing and depressing stage because of its accompanying loss of strength, power, usefulness and self-sufficiency, considered the duty to assist one's parents (geostrophic) as a moral and legal obligation, because they view it as a form of reciprocity and indebtedness (Brakman, 1994). Athenians even prioritized their duties to their parents who are deemed to have earned their "honors at par with the gods", where such duties are regarded as part of being a good citizen (Brakman, 1994). For the Greeks, maintenance and obedience to a living parent, and keeping the parents' honor after death are what constitutes filial obligations.

The concept of filial duties has been existing since the ancient civilizations as found in the Akkadian, Aramaic and Hebrew literature which often features a father instructing his son on the proper behavior and attitude one must assume, and those ancient literature involving the affairs and deeds of gods, royalty and powerful people in the society (Brakman, 1994). In ancient civilizations such as those that existed around the regions of Babylonia, Assyria, Syria, and Palestine/Israel have also practiced their versions of filial duties as recorded in Akkadian, Aramaic, Ugaritic, and Hebrew tablets, documents and inscriptions (Verbruggen, 1997). In the present-day societies, filial responsibility is still present and is practiced in varying ways, where its importance is emphasized by adopting terms and concepts that are reflective of the language and culture of the country- ie, *utang na loob* (Indebtedness) in the Philippines, *xiao* in China, *bunkhun* in Thailand (Liu, 2016).

Multiple studies explored the extent and the manner filial care should be practiced (Schinkel, 2012; Stuifbergen & van Delden, 2011), the gendered nature of these care practices (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003), and the nature of filial piety as a duty to care *about* or care *for* one's parents (Stuifbergen & van Delden, 2011). Due to its importance to Asian families, societies and well-being of the older persons, filial responsibility is a long withstanding tradition and value that is preserved by so many generations. It is therefore the aim of this study to design a theory that attempts to explain why filial care responsibility exists and evolves over time.

Theory Generation

Thompson (2006) noted that hypothetico-deductive approach to theory development is problematic, since the theory derived from the hypotheses are no more reliable than its hypotheses, and if it is not derived from axioms and basic assumptions. Hence, instead of developing a theory based on hypothesis and conjectures, axiom and truistic general statements are used to develop a theory that would explain the existence and evolution of filial caring responsibility. Although Axiomatic approach is not common in the social and behavioral sciences, as it is in the fields of physics and mathematics, it provides basis for predicting outcomes under differing conditions

(Thompson, 2006). Furthermore, axiomatic approach allows the proponent to explore and predict a phenomenon without having to go through the procedure of gathering field data.

Secondary analysis was used to process data which was collected from available studies and literature. Pertinent concepts were identified and discovered in order to create a propositional structure that could explain the topic under study. As part of the deductive process, axioms (or truistic statements) were created based on observations, facts and literature review. These axioms were deduced and serve as the basis in developing the propositions and producing the theoretical assumptions.

Derivation of Axioms

Maslow's A Theory of Human Motivation (1943) claimed that one of the needs that is common among all people is the social need for belongingness, which refers to the desire for closeness with one's family and friends (Taormina & Ho, 2012). Such need for social attachment is aimed at mankind's survival, where people establish unconscious closeness with other individuals for the purpose of providing mutual security (Niţulescu, 2016). The attachment established often leads to closeness with preferred persons, thus building an emotional link and personal sense of security (Niţulescu, 2016). For such attachment to persist and be satisfying, one must abide by the values shared within the relationship and conform to the ideals shared by the group. Such conformity ascertains one's positive feelings on social belongingness and the need to fit in while affording one the benefit of relying on others for help in a particular situation (Ding, 2005).

Since human being's biological make-up enables us to discern our actions, acting according to moral reasoning is an inherent human nature. Moral reasoning is the process in which an individual tries to determine what is right or wrong, and what people ought to do in a particular situation by applying logic and critical analysis whenever faced by a particular situation (Ethics Unwrapped, McCombs School of Business, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.). It is guided by a set of moral codes, as our biological makeup provides us the three requisites for ethical behavior: (i) the ability to anticipate the consequences of our own actions; (ii) the ability to make value judgments; and (iii) the ability to choose between alternative courses of action (Ayala, 2010).

Despite being guided mostly by logic and moral codes (such as deontology and utilitarianism) in specific situations, human beings are susceptible to reaching strong moral conclusions that cannot be logically defended, as a person's moral decisions are often influenced by their emotion, internal biases (ie, self-serving bias), and outside pressures (ie, desire to conform) (Ethics Unwrapped, McCombs School of Business, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.). Thus, despite being perceived as stable and resistant to change, morality can be influenced by the society which shape people's judgment, cognition, behaviors, perceptions and feelings (Bettache, 2015), such that moral rules and the violation for its sanctions are agreed upon by individuals living together in social communities (Ellemers, van der Toorn, Paunov, & van Leeuwen, 2019). Thus, **axiom 1** is stated as **"Human actions are socially driven"**.

At one point in our lifetime, we all have been completely dependent on our environment and on other people. Immediately after birth, newborns are helpless and are incapable of meeting their own survival needs (such as achieving a clear airway, maintaining a body temperature, and getting nourishment). The survival and evolutionary function of caring made mammals (like human beings) develop the group feature of nurturing the young to ensure that the vulnerable offspring survives by maintaining closeness to the mother for food dependency (Eisler & Levine, 2002; Singh, 2015). Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man* (Darwin, 1896) and grand concept of evolution by

natural selection argued that human level factors enabled human beings to evolve and avoid extinction, other than the survival of the fittest (Eisler & Levine, 2002). Evolutionary scholars extended the Darwinian paradigms by arguing that other than pure self-interest, cooperative behaviors such as love, empathy and caring set human beings at an advantage over other groups of evolved species (Eisler & Levine, 2002). Having reached this level of evolution is therefore a proof that the cycle of providing and receiving care between generations have been successful. Thus, **axiom 2** is stated as **"Human caring is vital for human survival"**.

The definition of family changes across time and across culture (Muraco, 2019). Regardless of these changes, family members play an important role towards one another. The family, as an individual unit, is often a fundamental source of social support, socialization, and interaction among its members (Archuleta, 2010). In fact, the society always depended on families to provide emotional support, and to assist family members when they can no longer function independently (Committee on Family Caregiving for Older Adults, Board on Health Care Services, Health and Medicine Division, & National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). In Bowen's Family System Theory (1978) as cited in Muraco (2019), each person has an inherent role to play in the family, which is dictated by specific rules and expectations that are aimed at family stability. In a family, the role of one member is relative to the other members, such that any change on the role of one family member changes the rules and expectations attached to that role, thus causing a ripple of role change and expectations on the other family members, to compensate for the change (Muraco, 2019). Thus, **axiom 3** is stated as **"Family is the primary source of human care and support"**.

Social behaviors and expectations toward older people are influenced by religion, culture, ideology (Johnson, 2005) and by society's perceptions on ageing, which are of shared cultural representations that constitute ideas, values, and customs related to ageing, and were accepted by the members of the society as an established reality (Löckenhoff et al., 2009; Pasupathi & Löckenhoff, 2002). Such perceptions on ageing include both positive and negative characteristics, and may even be a combination of accurate depictions of old age and distorted views on older persons (Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005). Negative perceptions towards older people and ageing tend to prevail in modern societies as older persons are perceived as having poor physical and mental health, unattractive, forgettable, sexually inactive, lonely and excluded from society (Bai, 2014). Despite that, some societies still believe that being a grandparent may be a marker of social ageing and plays a significant role for those from different cultural backgrounds (Armstrong, 2003). Moreover, in some Asian societies and certain cultures that places high regard to tradition, the value of the older people is still preserved. For instance, in the Chinese culture, old age is still viewed as having an increased value, position and status within the family (Mjelde-Mossey, 2007). Thus, **axiom 4** is stated as **"Culture influences how older persons are socially perceived and valued"**.

Human cultural traits, ideas, behaviors, and technologies can be learned from one another as a result of social exchange. The pattern of such transmission is reminiscent of Darwin's principle of descent with modification through natural selection (Creanza, Kolodny, & Feldman, 2017) wherein only the traits that are beneficial for the survival are preserved and developed, while those traits that are not beneficial for survival become extinct over time. Passing on of cultural traits can be analogous to genetic processes of mutation, drifting and selection where certain parental traits can be inherited, preserved and passed on to the next generation, thus the impacts of those traits/values will persist through time (Creanza et al., 2017). However, unlike in genetic processes where traits are automatically inherited, children may reject a cultural trait that both of parents possess, thus the frequency of that trait in the population may oscillate between generations (Creanza et al., 2017). Furthermore, if two biological

parents have different cultural traits, their child may not acquire either mother's or father's full cultural trait, but may only selectively acquire some cultural traits from its parents (vertical transmission), non-parental adults (oblique) and peers (horizontal) (Creanza et al., 2017). As environment change, with newer ideas and modern technology developed, cultural traits needed for survival and human development also evolve and scatter through social exchange. Thus, **axiom 5** is stated as **"Cultures and societies evolve".**
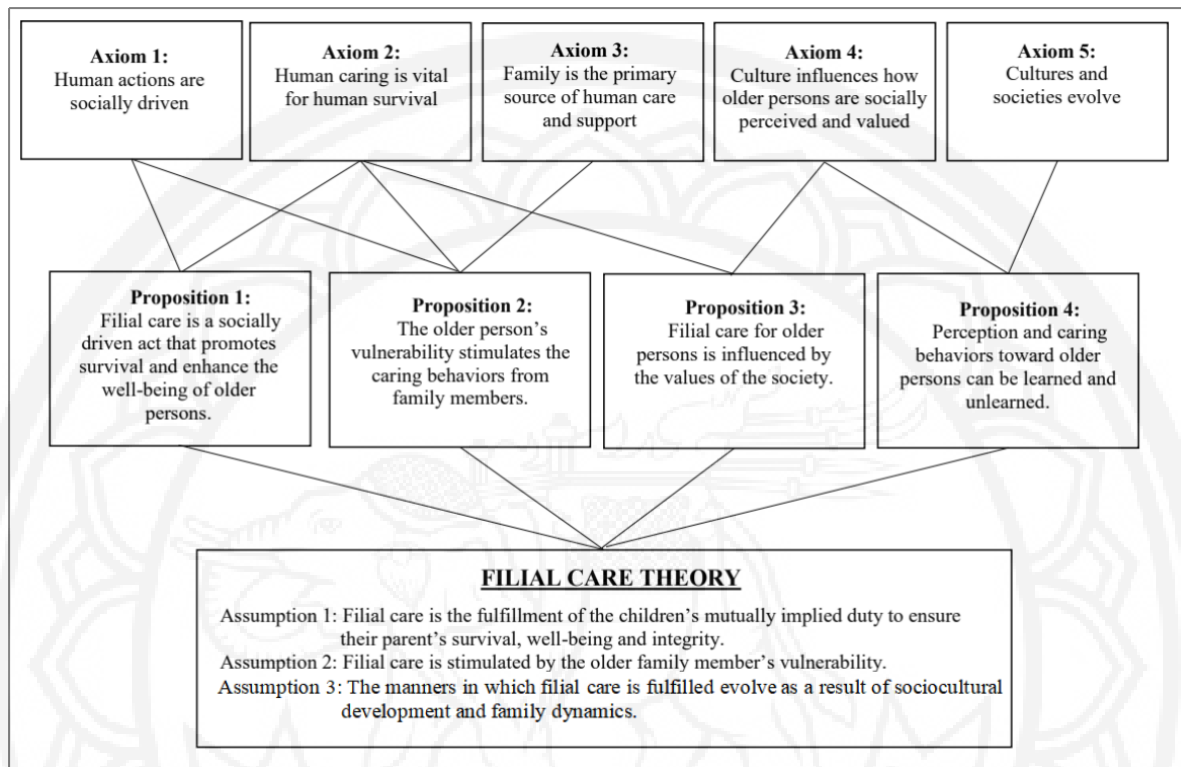

Figure 1 The Axiomatic Approach in Developing the Filial Care Theory

Development of Propositions

Emergent from the identified axioms are the different propositions developed by merging two or more axioms. Hence the propositions are presented as follows.

Proposition 1: Filial care is a socially driven act that promotes survival and enhance the well-being of older persons.

While compassion is a human emotional experience driven by concern towards the suffering of others, caring is the physical expression of such concern towards others. Caring is the universal expression of compassion that is not only observed among humans, but also among most animals toward their young. It is a form of intimate human act that is socially well-accepted, and promotes the social and emotional connection of two human beings (axiom 1). It is necessary to ensure that human needs are met, especially among those who cannot meet their own individual needs (ie., people who are too young, too old or too sick) (axiom 2).

Proposition 2: The older person's vulnerability stimulates the caring behaviors from family members.

The ability to rely on others for help in certain situations is one of the most valuable benefits of belonging to a group, a family or a society. Vulnerable persons (such as children, pregnant women, older persons, and

undernourished or sick individuals) warrants an extra care to maintain their well-being (axiom 2), as they are less able to anticipate, cope with, resist and/or recover from emergencies or impacts of disasters and diseases. Bearing such risks, they are mostly dependent on people within their immediate surroundings (such as family members) to provide their needs and ensure their well-being (axiom 3). This dependence triggers the implied social contract between family members that assures mutual support, security and care in times of needs (Axiom 1).

Proposition 3: Filial care for older persons is influenced by the values of the society.

It is human nature to care for those that they value, whether it be a material possession, an animal (pet), or another person that they want to keep. People assign meanings to experiences and attach values to objects and persons they interact with. While caring is a physical act of preserving the well-being or keeping another person alive (axiom 2), its expression is affected by how such person is valued and how his/her roles are perceived. Culture plays an important function in influencing social beliefs and how certain groups are to be regarded (axiom 4). Thus, culture dictates how older persons are perceived, respected, valued and cared for. For instance, had filial duty been perceived as detrimental to the individual growth of a more-valued younger family member than the well-being of the less-valued older family members, then filial care could have long been obsolete and replaced by more practical alternatives.

Proposition 4: Perception and caring behaviors toward older persons can be learned and unlearned.

Scientific development and social interaction paved the way for newer ideas and knowledge to debunk traditionally accepted beliefs that do not have logical or scientific basis. Research findings initiate paradigm shift on how older persons are to be perceived, valued and cared for. For instance, there is a growing social revolution that shifts the negative connotation among the elderly as being meek, sick, and weak into being positively regarded older persons who are uniquely-abled and empowered. By collectively adopting newer perspectives, societies and cultures advance (axiom 5), and assume new traits that contribute to the betterment of their people, while replacing the older customs. These cultural advancements then lead to a better value system, and better care practices for the older persons (axiom 4).

Filial Care Theory

The survival of a person is a proof that he/she has received care at any point of his/her life, most especially during infancy where care is typically provided for by another individual who assumes a maternal role. As a person grows, relationships develop and emotional bonds are created, thus establishing his/her belongingness to a family that guarantees mutual support and security. Such relationship forms an implicit agreement that assures every member of the family to receive the support which is inherent in the relationship. The desire to maintain or promote one's own well-being serves as a good motivator in keeping and strengthening the said relationship, because of the exclusive benefits it affords the family members. The idea that care shall be reciprocated by family members in times when it is called for, makes most societies place high regard on filial care. The mutually-implied reciprocated care between older parents and adult children (or other younger family members) is what makes filial piety a persistent cultural trait that exists until this day. Therefore, this theory assumes that **"Filial care is the fulfillment of the children's implied responsibility to ensure their parent's survival, well-being and integrity (assumption 1)".**

As adults grow older and start losing functional abilities, the society expects the younger family members to care for the older persons, as part of fulfilling their end of the implicit agreement within the family. Thus, this theory posits that **"Filial care is stimulated by the older family member's vulnerability (assumption 2)"**.

As with other cultural traits, filial piety evolves over time to reflect sociocultural advancements, and cope with the changing needs of the people. Filial care may not change significantly in its essence, but it transforms dramatically in its form. The increasing life expectancy, changing trends in family compositions, and family members living farther apart make spouses and adult children become less available for care giving. Oftentimes, despite being the fourth in line in caring for the ageing family members (next to the spouse, the children and other relatives), grandchildren may act as unwitting caregivers to an ageing grandparent, thus extending the responsibility of filial care beyond the parent-child relationship, yet maintaining its caring component for the older persons. Furthermore, in some highly developed and industrialized societies where family members are unavailable for caring duties due to employment and personal/academic commitments, filial caring duties may be perceived as a hindrance to personal and professional development among family members. As a result, the caring duties for older persons may be partially or fully assigned to institutions (ie, home for the aged) or non-family members (ie., domiciliary care). By that, it is an assumption of this theory that **"The manners in which filial care is fulfilled evolve as a result of sociocultural development and family dynamics" (assumption 3)**.

The caring role of adult children in ensuring the survival and in promoting the well-being of their ageing parents is an indispensable virtue in the society, especially among communities that are highly influenced by Asian and Latin traditions. Cultural interaction, advancement of societies, and dynamic family roles reshape the landscape of filial care. For the purpose of future research, theory development and validation, this theory shall be known as the **Filial Care Theory (FCT)**.

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