

Elderly Parent-Child Relationship in Thailand: Types, Determinants, and Impacts

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Abstract

Children's obligation to support their elderly parents has a deep root in Thailand and is suspected to deteriorate due to population aging and socio-economic pressure along with technological progress. The study examined (1) types of elderly parent-adult child relationship, (2) factors influencing types of relationship, and (3) impacts of types of relationship on well-being of the elderly parents.

Methods: The data are from the fourth wave (2022) of the longitudinal survey on Health, Aging, and Retirement in Thailand (HART). Eight indicators from the manifest and latent solidarities were selected to classify the types of elderly parent-child relationship using the latent class analysis (LCA). The multinomial logistic regression was performed to analyze the influence of demographic and socio-economic characteristics on the types. Finally, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to examine the impacts of types on well-being of elderly parents.

Results: Four types of elderly parent-child relationship were classified as tight-knit, distant supportive, sociable, and detached. Using detached type as the reference category, the significant determinants of the tight-knit class were age, gender, and economic activity; while those for the distant supportive class were age and number of living children, and for the sociable type, the number of living children. The study found an overall significant association between types of relationship and well-being. To improve the well-being of elderly parents in the all age-groups and types, family policy on psychological health, especially, of the 70-79 age-group in the detached type should be focused.

Keywords: Family Solidarity, Typology of Intergenerational Relationships, Well-being of Older Persons, Thailand

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Introduction

To sustain and improve the well-being of older persons and their family is a crucial policy challenge in the 21st Century (United Nations, 2015, 2017; World Health Organization, 2019). Intergenerational family relations are becoming more complex with the extension of the life course, particularly an increase in life expectancy. Longer lives mean “more years of shared lives” across generations (Bengtson et al., 2003) and over half of the adult life was estimated for providing unpaid family care work including caring for elderly family members (Ophir and Polos, 2022). That is, in the context of population aging, the years we are expected to spend as care providers to older parents is increasing.

Parent-child relationship is the cornerstone of intergenerational solidarity. Greater attention has been devoted to elderly parent and adult child relationship since children are perceived as old-age security to their parents (Kagitcibasi, 1982; Arnold and Fawcett, 1975; Easterlin, 1975; Leibenstein, 1974; and Fawcett 1972). Children’s obligation to support their elderly parents has a deep root in Thailand. Its strength tends to deteriorate due to recent population aging and socio-economic pressure along with technological progress. Furthermore, it may be argued that the structure of parent-adult child relationship in contemporary Thailand are more diversified. According to studies in Western (Galen and Dykstra, 2006; Silverstein and Bengtson, 1997; Silverstein et.al., 2010) as well as Eastern Asian countries (Park et.al., 2005; Yan et.al., 2023; Yi et.al., 2009) found 3-5 main types of elderly family relations, both similar and distinctive.

There has been no empirical evidence concerning typologies of elderly parent-adult child relationship under the Thai context where Buddhism is widely practiced, except a study done by Anantanasuwong and Theerawanviwat (2023). For academic and policy implication, the present study extends previous research by including more dimensions of solidarity indicators to classify relationship types. Using data from the fourth wave of the longitudinal survey on Health, Aging, and Retirement in Thailand (HART), the study aims to examine (1) types of elderly parent-adult child relationship, (2) demographic and socio-economic factors influencing relationship types, and (3) impacts of types of relationship on the physical and psychological well-being of elderly parents.

Intergenerational Family Solidarity and Well-being

The complexity of parent-child relationships is clearly explained by the intergenerational solidarity model developed by Bengtson and colleagues (Bengtson, 2001; Bengtson, et.al. 2003; Bengtson and Roberts, 1991; Bengtson and Oyama , 2007). At the family level, the construct of solidarity comprises two forms-- manifest and latent solidarity. The manifest solidarity characterizes behavioral dimension of interaction and support between family members of different generations. It consists of structural (physical closeness or co-residence), associational (pattern and frequency of communication), and functional dimensions (assistance of both givers and recipients and exchange of the assistance covering cash and in-kind). Another form of solidarity, latent solidarity, involves an emotional dimension of support. It comprises affectual (emotional intimacy about their relationship among family members), consensual (values, opinions, and orientations between generations), and normative (the filial obligations expectations and family values) dimensions. The present study includes both manifest and normative latent forms of solidarity.

Personal characteristics of parents as well as adult children were the determinants affecting the type of relationship (Dykstra and Fokkema, 2011). We, however, considered only characteristics of elderly parents that express the need for support, the potential or resources to provide help, and the readiness to receive and/or provide help.

Intergenerational relationship is widely viewed to be related to well-being over the life course of involved generations (Thomas, Liu and Umberson, 2017; Silverstein and Bengtson, 1991; Pearlin, 1999; Cobb, 1976). Several studies across social and cultural context have shown that intergenerational relationship is related to physical and psychological well-being of the elderly (Pinquart and Sorensen, 2000). But the findings have been inconclusive. Silverstein and Bengtson (1991) found that the close parent-child relationship helped reducing the mortal health risks, and hence increasing survival time of the American elderly parents experienced social loss. While Zunzunegui et. al (2001) reported that low emotional and instrumental support from children was associated with poor self-rated health of the elderly in Spain. Furthermore, in a study comparing the links between family relations and subjective well-being of elderly in European countries, Katz (2009) concluded that they were related in all five countries. In addition, the relationship between these two constructs is also found in China (Guo et.al., 2018; Yan et.al., 2023) as well as in Korea (Kim et.al., 2000). However, other studies have not supported this finding. Cicirelli (1990) suggested that family support might have negative effects on the health of the elderly due to psychological distress in declining self-esteem and loss of physical and economic autonomy. Few other studies found no or even negative association between children's support and subjective well-being of elderly parents (August, Rook, and Newsom, 2007; Markides and Kraus, 1985; Silverstein, Chen, and Heller, 1996; Lee et.al., 1995).

In summary, the complexity of the effect of intergenerational family solidarity on elderly well-being depends not only on the nature of the relationship itself, but also on the social and cultural context. Research assessing the influence of the types of parent-adult child relationships on elderly parents' well-being in Asian societies where filial piety is widely practiced, and inadequate public welfare is sparse. Therefore, the present study attempts to fill this gap of knowledge.

Methods

Data Source and Data Analysis

A dataset was obtained from the Wave IV survey of the Health, Aging, and Retirement in Thailand (HART)¹, which was conducted during June 2022 to July 2023. It was composed of 819 Thai elderly parents having at least one living adult child where 401, 287 and 131 persons are respectively 60 – 69, 70 – 79 and 80 or over years old; and there are 476 females and 343 males.

The following 3 statistical methods are employed to fulfill the study objectives: (1) Latent class analysis (LCA) to classify the latent class probability and conditional probability for the class model as suggested by Abarda, et.al. (2020), based on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the parents; (2) Multinomial Logistic Regression (MLR) to determine demographic and socio-economic factors influencing latent classes; and (3) Multivariate

¹The Human Research Ethics Committee of the National Institute of Development Administration (ECNIDA 2020/00012) granted the approval for the study's protocol, and participants gave their informed written consent. (<https://hart.nida.ac.th/>)

Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), one-way MANOVA, to examine the impacts of latent class on parents' well-being. Data analyzing tools are the poLCA R- package (Linzer and Lewis, 2011) for parts LCA and MLR, and program-R for MANOVA.

Measures

For *Solidarity dimensions*, the typology of parent-child relationships in the Thai context was constructed on the basis of the following eight dichotomous measures. *Geographic proximity* was measured by whether the elderly parent had at least one living child residing in the same village/municipal area (1 = yes, 0 = no). *Contact* was assessed by two indicators: whether the parent had weekly meeting (face-to-face contact) and weekly chat (contact via telephone, e-mail, and letters) with one or more adult children (1 = yes, 0 = no). *Financial support* was pertained to whether the parent had given money either regularly or occasionally to one or more adult children in the past 12 months, and vice versa (1 = yes, 0 = no). Similarly, two variables for the exchange of *practical support* by indicating whether the parent had helped one or more adult children with household tasks, transportation, paperwork, and emotional support in the past 12 months, and vice versa (1 = at least once a month, 0 = otherwise including not at all). *Filial obligation norm* was assessed on question: "What do you think about children taking care of their elderly parent?" The response scale ranged from (1) 'strongly disagree' to (10) 'strongly agree'. A score of 8 was also used as a cut-off value to create a dichotomous variable (1 = strong family obligation norm, 0 = weak family obligation norm).

Types of relationship between parents and adult children were determined by both personal characteristics of parents as well as adult children affected the type (Dykstra and Fokkema, 2011). However, this study considered only characteristics of elderly parents that express the need for support, the potential or resources to provide help, and the readiness to receive and/or provide help. Thus, *demographic, and socio-economic characteristics of the elderly* were *age* (60-69, 70-79 and 80 or over), *gender* (female and male), *marital status* (married/cohabiting and others), *number of living children* (1 and 2 or more), *Residential area* (urban and rural), *educational level* (no education/primary and secondary/higher), *economic activity* (work and not work) and *annual personal income* (less than or equal to 20,000 Baht and more than 20,000 Baht).

Well-being is related to a state of physical and psychological well-being (World Health Organization, 1948). Three measures are used, i.e., *self-rated physical, self-rated psychological/mental health* and *self-rated life satisfaction*. For all three measures, respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with their physical health, psychological/mental status, and overall quality of life. The answers ranged from (0) 'not at all' to (10) 'very satisfy'.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

The sample characteristics of elderly parents in terms of living arrangement, number of living children, residential area, educational level, economic activity, annual personal income, and ADL problem are shown in Table 1.

Characteristic		Age group (Years old)			Total
		60 – 69	70 – 79	≥ 80	
Living with spouse/partner	Yes	267 (66.58)	170 (59.23)	59 (45.04)	496 (60.56)
	No	134 (33.42)	117 (40.77)	72 (54.96)	323 (39.44)
Number of living children	1	106 (26.43)	57 (19.86)	18 (13.74)	181 (22.10)
	2	185 (46.13)	92 (32.06)	38 (29.01)	315 (38.46)
	3	86 (21.45)	82 (28.57)	29 (22.14)	197 (24.05)
	≥ 4	24 (5.99)	56 (19.51)	46 (35.11)	126 (15.38)
Residential area	Urban	210 (52.37)	149 (51.92)	64 (48.85)	423 (51.65)
	Rural	191 (47.63)	138 (48.08)	67 (51.15)	396 (48.35)
Educational level	None or primary	296 (73.82)	244 (85.02)	113 (86.26)	653 (79.73)
	Secondary or higher	105 (26.18)	43 (14.98)	18 (13.74)	160 (19.54)
Economic activity	Work	211 (52.62)	74 (25.78)	9 (6.87)	294 (35.90)
	Not work	190 (47.38)	213 (74.22)	122 (93.13)	525 (64.10)
Annual income (Baht)	≤10,000	149 (37.16)	145 (50.52)	52 (39.69)	346 (42.25)
	10,001 – 20,000	65 (16.21)	68 (23.69)	57 (43.51)	190 (23.20)
	> 20,000	187 (46.63)	74 (25.78)	22 (16.79)	283 (34.55)
ADL Problem	No ADL problem	395 (98.50)	279 (97.21)	109 (83.21)	783 (95.60)
	≥ 1 ADL problem	6 (1.50)	8 (2.79)	22 (16.79)	36 (4.40)
Total		401 (100.00)	287 (100.00)	131 (100.00)	819 (100.00)

Note: Percentages are exhibited in parentheses.

Table 1: Number and percentage of elderly parents in each age group by various characteristics

Sample Solidarity Dimensions

Solidarity dimensions are presented in Table 2. Overall, almost half of the parents have at least 1 child living in the same village, and more than half of them meet face-to-face weekly and chat weekly with at least 1 child. These proportions increase with age.

Characteristic		Age group (Years old)			Total
		60 – 69	70 – 79	≥ 80	
At least 1 child living in the same village	Same	157 (39.15)	154 (53.66)	78 (59.54)	389 (47.50)
	Others	244 (60.85)	133 (46.34)	53 (40.46)	430 (52.50)
Weekly meet face-to-face	Yes	176 (43.89)	167 (58.19)	95 (72.52)	438 (53.48)
	No	225 (56.11)	120 (41.81)	36 (27.48)	381 (46.52)
Weekly chat via phone, email, letter, etc.	Yes	277 (69.08)	228 (79.44)	110 (83.97)	615 (75.09)
	No	124 (30.92)	59 (20.56)	21 (16.03)	204 (24.91)
Financial Received	Yes	273 (68.08)	205 (71.43)	97 (74.05)	575 (70.21)
	No	128 (31.92)	82 (28.57)	34 (25.95)	244 (29.79)
Help Received	Yes	325 (81.05)	245 (85.37)	118 (90.08)	688 (84.00)
	No	76 (18.95)	42 (14.63)	13 (9.92)	131 (16.00)
Financial Given	Yes	116 (28.93)	117 (40.77)	62 (47.33)	295 (36.02)
	No	285 (71.07)	170 (59.23)	69 (52.67)	524 (63.98)
Help Given	Yes	357 (89.03)	241 (83.97)	105 (80.15)	703 (85.84)
	No	44 (10.97)	46 (16.03)	26 (19.85)	116 (14.16)
Filial Obligation Norm	Strong	274 (68.33)	198 (68.99)	99 (75.57)	571 (69.72)
	Weak	127 (31.67)	89 (31.01)	32 (24.43)	248 (30.28)
Total		401 (100.00)	287 (100.00)	131 (100.00)	819 (100.00)

Note: Percentages are exhibited in parentheses.

Table 2: Number and percentage of elderly parents in each age group by various solidarity dimensions

For financial support, high proportions of parents receive money from their children (70%) and receive practical help at least once a month (84%). The percentage of parents who receive money and/or practical help increases when they become older. While the proportion of parents giving money increases with age but decline in giving practical help when they are older. Finally, most parents (70%) have strong expectation regarding filial obligation norm, especially for those 80 or over.

Types of Elderly Parent-Adult Child Relationship

Table 3 shows the four latent class model based on the conditional probabilities, the classes of parent-child relationship are named as (a) tight-knit, (b) distant-supportive, (c) sociable, and (d) detached. The tight-knit class is the most common parent-child relationship type (40.17%), characterized by high probabilities on all indicators of solidarity. Adult children

are highly engaged with their elderly parents. Such a high cohesion reflects the Thai traditional extended family. In contrast, the detached class, the second most common type (29.79%), is opposite to the tight-knit class. Adult children are not engaged with their parents based on any of the eight indicators of solidarity. It indicates independent parent-child relationships and hence low cohesion of family ties. The least common type is distant supportive (4.76%). Adult children are engaged with their parents based on frequency of chatting, giving financial support, and exchanging practical support but not based on geographic proximity, and frequency of face-to-face contact. This type of parent-child relationships is quite similar to the tight-knit class, except low on physical closeness. It suggests a form of modified extended family, which is feasible with advanced technology. For the sociable class (23.81%), adult children and their elderly parents tend to connect to each other based primarily on filial responsibility expectation and communication through frequent contact, both face-to-face and chatting. Parent-child interaction would enhance family relation quality by promoting more understanding, affection, empathy, and emotional commitment within their relationship.

Indicator of Solidarity	Tight-knit n=329 (40.17%)	Distant Supportive n=39 (4.76%)	Sociable n=207 (25.27%)	Detached n=244 (29.79%)
Lives in same village/municipal area	1.000	0.177	0.482	0.051
At least weekly contact face to face	1.000	0.312	1.000	0.000
At least weekly chat	0.940	1.000	0.907	0.204
Parent receives financial support	0.862	0.845	0.620	0.362
Parent receives practical help	1.000	1.000	0.551	0.536
Parent gives financial support	0.502	0.279	0.360	0.247
Parent gives practical help	0.985	0.903	0.627	0.701
Strong filial obligation norm	0.740	0.654	0.849	0.643
<i>Defining Characteristics</i>	<i>Highest solidarity on almost all dimensions</i>	<i>Low face to face Contact but highly chat, high on functional dimension</i>	<i>High on associational dimension, highest filial expectation</i>	<i>Lowest solidarity on almost all dimensions</i>

Note: Probabilities in bold indicate defining characteristics of each latent class.

Table 3: Four-Class Model of Elderly Parent-Adult Child Relationships (Conditional Probabilities)

Determinants of Types of Parent-Child Relationship

The results of the multinomial logistic regression on types of relationship with ‘detached’ class as the reference category are shown in Table 4. For the tight-knit (T-K), the significant determinants are age ($p < 0.05$), work activity ($p < .10$), and gender ($p < .10$). The older age groups are more likely to have the T-K relationship. The odds of the 60-69 and the 70-79 age groups are 0.522 and 0.906, respectively, compared to the 80 or over. The working parents are less likely to have the T-K relationship with the odds of working is 0.647 compared to the not-working parents. Finally, female parents are more likely to have the T-K relationship than the male and the odds of female is 1.323. The rest of the demographic and socio-economic determinants are not statistically significant.

The determinants associated with the distant supportive (D-S) are age ($p < .05$) and the number of living children ($p < .01$). The older age groups are more likely to have the D-S type as indicated by the odds of the 60-69 and the 70-79 age groups being 0.399 and 0.529, respectively, compared with that of the 80 or over; while the parents with one living child are more likely than the ones with 2 or more children to have the D-S type with the odds of one living child is 3.462. Lastly, for the sociable (S-c), only the number of living children is significant ($p < .01$). Parents with only 1 living child are more likely to have the S-c type with the odds of 5.924.

Socio-economic Variable	<i>Tight-knit (T-K)</i>		<i>Distant Supportive (D-S)</i>		<i>Sociable (S-c)</i>	
	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
Age						
60 - 69	-0.649**	0.522	-0.919*	0.399	0.087	1.091
70 - 79	-0.099	0.906	-0.637	0.529	0.059	1.061
≥ 80		1.000		1.000		1.000
Gender						
Female	0.280*	1.323	0.179	1.197	0.336	1.399
Male		1.000		1.000		1.000
Marital Status						
Married/cohabiting	-0.013	0.987	-0.053	0.948	0.058	1.060
Other		1.000		1.000		1.000
Number of living children						
1 child	-0.295	0.745	1.242***	3.462	1.779***	5.924
2 or more		1.000		1.000		1.000
Residence Area						
Urban	- ch0.160	0.852	-0.394	0.674	0.175	1.192

Rural		1.000		1.000		1.000
Education						
No education/primary	0.326	1.386	0.103	1.109	0.074	1.077
Secondary/higher		1.000		1.000		1.000
Economic activity						
Work	-0.436*	0.647	-0.031	0.970	-0.220	0.803
Not work		1.000		1.000		1.000
Annual income (Baht)						
≤ 20,000.00	-0.063	0.939	0.075	1.078	-0.346	0.708
> 20,000.00		1.000		1.000		1.000
Constant	0.549	1.731	-1.458***	0.233	-0.809**	0.445
n	329		39		203	
Model Chi-square (df)	162.595***(27)					
R-square (Cox and Snell)	0.184					

Note: * p<.10; ** p<.05; *** p<.01

Table 4: Multinomial Logistic Regression on the Types of Elderly Parent-Adult Child Relationship (with “Detached” as the Reference Category)
Impacts of parent-child relationships

Since *self-rated physical, psychological health* and *life satisfaction* has highly positive correlation to each other, MANOVA is an appropriate tool for comparing their means. Statistical values concerning Roy’s largest root test² (Table 5) indicate that overall and in each age group, the latent classes have impact on elderly well-being at 10% level of significance.

Effect	Age 60-69		Age 70-79		Age ≥ 80		Total	
	F-test	p-value	F-test	p-value	F-test	p-value	F-test	p-value
Latent class	3.334	0.020*	2.583	0.054*	2.834	0.041*	3.612	0.013*
Constant	3195.294	0.000***	1900.458	0.000***	1441.316	0.000***	6488.554	0.000***

Note: * p<.10; ** p<.05; *** p<.01

Table 5: Statistical values concerning Roy’s largest root for MANOVA on comparing means of self-rated physical, psychological health and life satisfaction between types of elderly parent-adult child relationship (latent class) within age groups

² In this study, Roy’s test is considered per “its power is best only when there is a single nonzero eigenvalue and, at the same time, the power is large” (Johnson and Wichern, 2007).

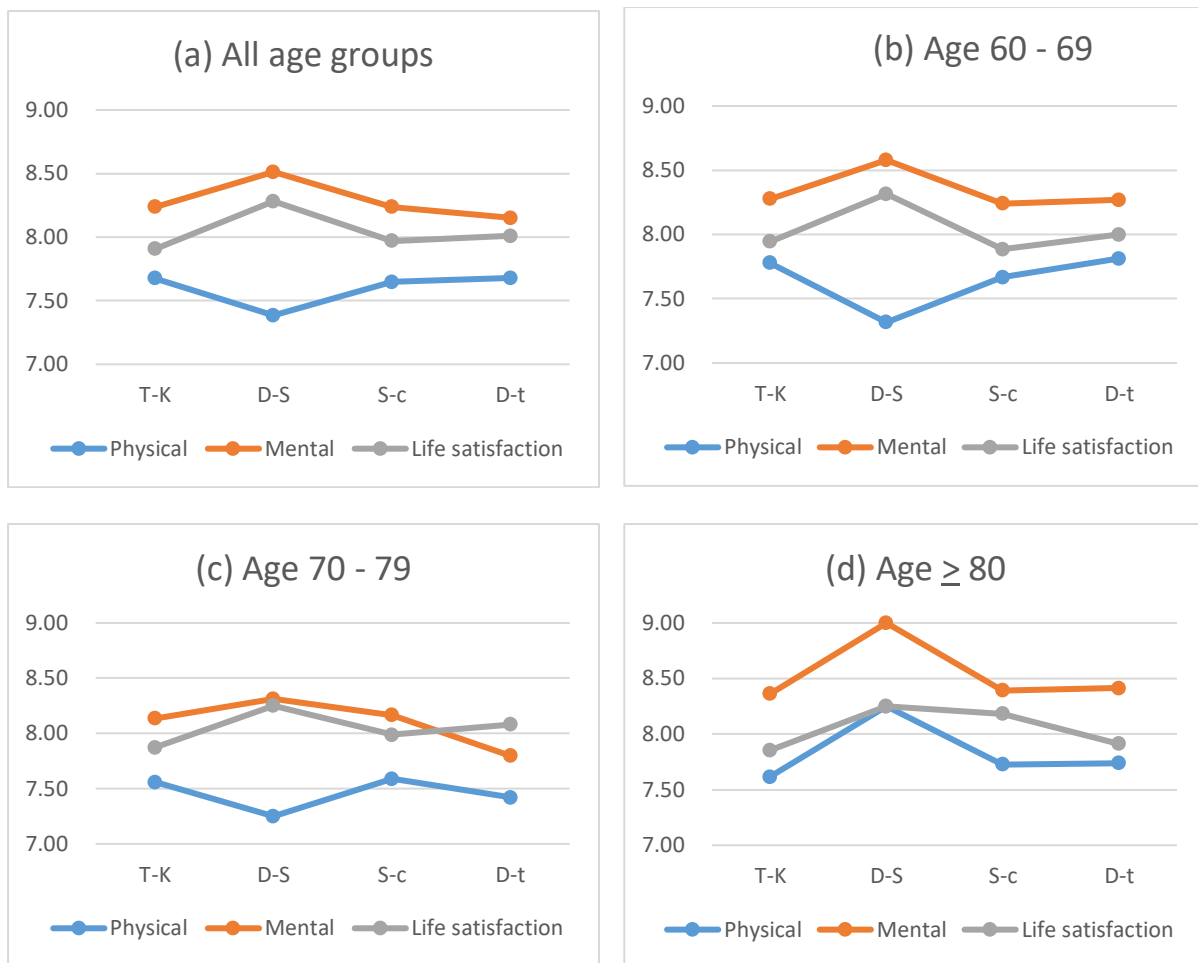
However, for pairwise comparison, significant impacts are not found for the means are slightly different (Table 6 and Figure 1). The well-being mean scores of the 4 types are shown in Table 6. The mean scores of all aspects of well-being are rated in high ranges but in small variation by all age groups in every type of relationship. Graphic presentation in Figure 1 provides better understanding of the impact by type and age group (see Figure 1 [a] – [d]).

Age Group	Elderly well-being	Types of elderly parent-adult child relationship				Total
		Tight-knit	Distant-supportive	Sociable	Detached	
60 - 69	Physical health	7.78	7.32	7.67	7.81	7.74
	Psychological/mental health	8.28	8.58	8.24	8.27	8.28
	Life satisfaction	7.94	8.32	7.89	8.00	7.97
70 - 79	Physical health	7.56	7.25	7.59	7.42	7.51
	Psychological/mental health	8.14	8.31	8.17	7.80	8.07
	Life satisfaction	7.87	8.25	7.99	8.08	7.98
≥ 80	Physical health	7.62	8.25	7.73	7.74	7.71
	Psychological/mental health	8.36	9.00	8.39	8.41	8.41
	Life satisfaction	7.85	8.25	8.18	7.91	7.97
Total	Physical health	7.68	7.38	7.65	7.68	7.66
	Psychological/mental health	8.24	8.51	8.24	8.15	8.23
	Life satisfaction	7.91	8.28	7.97	8.01	7.97

Table 6: Sample means of self-rated physical, psychological health and life satisfaction by age and types of elderly parent-adult child relationship

For all ages as shown in Figure 1(a), all types of relationship have similar pattern of impacts on elderly well-being with the highest mean score on psychological/mental health, the second on life satisfaction, and the third on physical health. However, the mean score of physical health of the D-S type is the lowest among the other types.

Further considering the impacts by each age-group, it is found that for the 60-69 age-group (Figure 1(b), the pattern of the impact is consistent with those in all age-groups (Figure 1(a)). However, for the D-t type in the 70-79 age group (Figure 1(c)), the mean score of psychological/mental health drops lower than life satisfaction. For the D-S type in the 80 or over age-group (Figure 1(d)), the mean score of physical health is as high as life satisfaction.



Note: T-K = Tight-knit, D-S = Distance-supportive, S-c = Sociable, D-t = Detached

Figure 1: Sample means of self-rated physical, psychological health and life satisfaction by age group and types of elderly parent-adult child relationship

Conclusion

Using LCA, four types of elderly parent-adult children relationship are classified. Setting detached class as the reference category, the significant determinants of types of relationship are, age, gender, and economic activity for T-K; age and number of children for D-S; and number of living children for S-c. Overall, the significant association between types of parent-adult child relationship on the elderly well-being are found with slightly different pattern of mean. The mean scores of elderly well-being is high in all dimensions. The impact on elderly well-being of all types of relationship and for all age groups reflects the strong family solidarity in Thailand. The public policy to promote Family Day during ‘Songkran’ holidays and other privileges provided for the elderly as the incentives for family reunion are important to keep strong family solidarity. The policy to mitigate loneliness or improve psychological health of older persons, especially for those aged 70 or over in the detached type of relationship should be strengthened.

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