The Impact of COVID -19 on Family Relations: Implication for Ageing

Nana Yaa A. Nyarko[1], Portia Edem Kpodo[1], Rosemond A. Hiadji[2] & Edward O. Nyarko[3]

[1]Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Ghana; [2]Department of Sociology, University of Ghana; [3]Public Health Division, 37 Military Hospital

Abstract

The COVID -19 pandemic continues to affect the well-being of individuals and societies. Its associated lockdown and social distancing measures have further impacted family relations by distancing individuals from family and social networks. Using the symbolic interactionism theory as a framework, this study aimed to find out the effects of COVID -19 on family interactions (relationships). Thirty students from the University of Ghana were purposively selected for the study. Participants were asked to write about their experiences during the pandemic and its effects on family relations. Data were collected over a period of fourteen days. Thematic analysis was employed in generating themes based on the responses. Respondents reported both negative and positive effects. Reports on the negative effects included *fear of contracting the virus* (hence distancing themselves from family members), nose mask wearing which *hampered communication* (hence their messages being misunderstood and misinterpreted) and *inability to visit and relate with extended family members*. On the positive effects, it brought the nuclear family together and improved interactions among them. Implication for ageing in the COVID -19 era and beyond is discussed with reference to the family as an institution.

Corresponding author: nyanyarko@ug.edu.gh

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant implications for the physical health, mental well-being and education of individuals, families, and communities. The effects of the pandemic have been far reaching, overwhelming health systems, causing economic losses, and disrupting the way of life of millions in COVID-19 hotspots around the world. People from all social classes including the rich, poor, aged, children, women, men, disabled and the vulnerable in society have had their normal way of life curtailed. Many countries-imposed lockdowns at various times to prevent the spread of the virus as well as limit deaths. On the 13th of March 2020, Ghana's Ministry of Health confirmed the first two cases of COVID-19 in the country. On 29th March, Ghanaian authorities announced a lockdown in Greater Accra, Kumasi and other localities which were deemed to be harbouring probable cases of COVID–19 to allow enhanced case detection and contact tracing of the cases. This lockdown was enforced by security personnel and was accompanied with public health authorities sometimes going house to house to trace COVID-19 cases and their contacts. These social restrictions and additional public health measures increased public anxiety. Self-isolation (not leaving the house even for shopping), depression and anxiety have been documented among older persons during the lockdown (Brown et al., 2020). There were positive experiences reported with less than 5% of the participants expressing being lonely most of the time. Studies on the impact of COVID have shown both negative and positive experiences (Brown et al., 2020; Kalil et al., 2020; Tener et al., 2021). It was projected that increased incidents of poor health (UNICEF, 2021) and food insecurity (FAO & WFP, 2020) resulting from the pandemic will intensify socioeconomic inequalities in life course outcome (Asante & Mills, 2020; Roxana, 2013).

Defining the family

Defining the Family

Family is the building block of every society (Preda et.al, 2020). It is not restricted to people living in one household at a time (Sharma, 2013) nor limited to blood ties (Yamaura, 2015), residential arrangements and legal status of a group of people (Tam et al., 2017). Functions of a family is derived from its definition. Families are expected to provide economic support, inherited social status, education, protection and care of the sick, religious training, leisure time and entertainment, emotional support, socialisation (Gibson & Gibson, 2020). Gerson and Torres (2015) like other family scientists posit that 'all societies have families, but their form varies greatly across time and space'. They argue that changing family forms have been because of:

> *'the interplay of shifting social and economic conditions, diverse and contested ideals, and the attempts of ordinary people to build their lives amid the constraints of their particular time and place'* (Gerson & Torres, 2015, p.1).

Gerson and Torres' (2015) definition lend support to the family being defined by its functions and types. Family sizes have become smaller as a result of education on family planning methods (Hazan & Zoabi, 2015). More 'single parent' families are common in recent times (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). Single parent families are households containing only one parent, usually a woman and one or more children as a result case of divorces, death, and other unpreventable factors. It is increasingly common to find unmarried couples living together, and unmarried women having children in cohabitating relationships. Another form is the blended families composed of a man and a woman and one or both their children from previous marriages. Hence, living with children who are not

their biological children as in step families (Portrie & Hill, 2005). Blended families can also be called reconstituted families. Finally, there are adult males or females living alone as a choice, a form known as alternative families (Scanzoni, 2001). This can be distinguished from the normal traditional families where a family is a group of people and not a single person.

Nuclear and extended family

There are two types of family; the nuclear and extended family (Sharma, 2013). The nuclear family comprises of the father, mother, and children while the extended family is an amalgamation of different nuclear families within a lineage. The extended family in Ghana consists of grandparents, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces and cousins; people who transmit values, firmly rooted in the Ghanaian society (Dzramedo, Amoako & Amos, 2018; Mawusi, 2018). Family promotes a sense of community; therefore, efforts should be geared towards maintaining the sacred family bond and traditions held dear especially among extended family relations (Amoako & Mawusi, 2018). Members of the extended family provide care and loving support to the ill and unfortunate within the family system. This confirms that the family helps strengthen, sustain and revitalize individuals with the capacity to do their best in every sphere; contributing to societal, national and global development (Tanga, 2013). Regular interactions with family members make people feel like they belong; like they matter, while feeling a sense of responsibility, security and commitment towards all things they hold dear; their personal, economic and social lives (Jansen, 2017). Grandparents are important in shaping and assisting all matters relating to the progression and direction of family members (Stewart, 2007). The nuclear family is crucial in nurturing children and a simple, basic and elementary component of society (Chudhuri, 2011)

Family gives a group of people an identity and a shared history (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002).

Some Ghanaians belong to nuclear families, in which only two successive generations-parents and their children-share a household. But some households extend the family to include grandparents, uncles, and cousins as well. They are called extended families (Dzramedo et al., 2018; Stewart, 2007) often with three generations living in one household.

Family life cycle and dynamics

Family life course development is the undulating pattern of events, observable or expected within the family (Falicov, 2016; Ha, 2014). The modern family is characterised by an average period of about 40 to 45 years of married life and goes through three broad cycles: beginning, expanding, and contracting stage. In the beginning stage of the family cycle, young couples learn the art of homemaking and lasts for at least a year. The expanding period has two phases. The first represents periods when the babies arrive and family size increases from 2 persons to 3 or more. This stage is filled with physical care and supervision, loving and protecting babies and guiding older children (Kapinus & Johnson, 2003). The second phase of this expanding period known as the peak years ends at about the 25th year of marriage life when the youngest child reaches about 18 years of age. These years (when the children are in school) present their own unique problems in the family's monetary management just as the early years did. Teenage males and females begin making demands on the family income, on the time of other family members and on material possessions (Lubenko & Sebre, 2010). Even though family incomes increase, this happens to be the time of greatest expenses for the family. As adult children leave for school and

career, parents are left alone, thus the contracting stage. Problems related to the use of time arise; as the husband retires from his work, the wife also finds that responsibilities to her children no longer demanded her time and energy (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). The emptiness that characterizes the departure of grown children and retirement from a job are hard to face unless the parents have kept up interests outside the family and the husband's occupation through the expanding period of family life. The financial problems and boredom that characterize this later stage can be daunting for the ageing in families.

Ageing encompasses the apparent deterioration in an individual in the course of his or her life (Kirkwood, 2005) the collapse of bodily systems and impaired ability to survive in a fast-changing world (Candore et al., 2010; Vasto et al., 2010). Ageing is considered to be successful not in the absence of disease and disability, but when the members of the ageing population are able to carry out activities autonomously while maintaining strong family relationships and living in a harmonious environment (Nosraty et al., 2015). A strong social network (social bonding and a cohesive environment) and as revealed by Ding et al. (2020) is invaluable in ensuring successful ageing in older adults. Örgütü (2020) highlights key considerations for healthy ageing i.e., diversity and inequity. For aging diversity it is argued that a typical ageing person may not be found because 'some aged people may still maintain their mental agility, others may require care and support in achieving 'basic activities like dressing and eating.' To this end they recommend that policies be framed 'to improve the functional ability of all older people, whether they are robust, care dependent or in between.' In terms of inequity Örgütü (2020), recognises that,

> *A large proportion (approximately 75%) of the diversity in capacity and circumstance observed in older age is the result of the cumulative impact of advantage and disadvantage across*

> *people's lives… the relationships we have with our environments are shaped by factors such as the family we were born into, our sex, ethnicity, level of education and financial resources* (Örgütü, 2020).

Communication

Human interaction cannot exist without communication. Communications is defined as the process of sharing ideas, thoughts, and feelings among people. Information is usually transferred from a source (a person) to a receiver (another person) through a channel or medium (verbal, phone call or chats) which results in a feedback (Wornyo et al., 2021). Communication primarily involves making meaning out of symbols in a way that is accepted and widely recognized by a group of people (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Humans are social beings and often see themselves as belonging to groups of families and societies. As such, they consider it natural to show kindness, share material possessions with family members and thereby become distressed when physically alienated from close relations (Sauber, L'Abate, Weeks & Buchanan, 2014). Frequent communication is crucial in maintaining healthy family life, proper socialisation and is a sure means of resolving conflict (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). People view communication as an indispensable skill, essential in facilitating their quest for better lives (Tili & Barker, 2015).

Theoretical perspective: Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism (SI) coined by Herbert Blumer (Forte, 2010) states that humans behave differently based on the value they ascribe to things and the observable social context for an occurrence. Interactionists believe humans thrive in a symbolic environment (Forte, 2004) and that interactionism stems from

the notion that social contexts indisputably exude variant interpretations of an event (Forte, 2010). Symbolic interactionists seek 'to investigate collective social meaning from the ground up' (Del Casino & Thien, 2020) suggesting that societal meanings are constructed and reconstructed through practice. Symbolic Interactionism favours individuals over societies but

> *the intent is actually to consider the individual and society as mutually constitutive: all social action is interactive between individuals and thus it must be thought of as complexly intertwined with and productive of collective meaning* (Del Casino & Thien, 2020, p. 177).

Aksan (2009) corroborates that to understand human behaviours,

> *it is necessary to understand definitions, meaning and processes formed by humans first. Elements such as social roles, traditional structures, rules, laws, purposes, provide raw material to the individuals for forming definitions. In this context, symbolic interaction stresses social interaction, debate of definitions and taking emphatic role between people (*Aksan et al., 2009, p. 904).

Briefly, symbolic interaction is interested in the meanings individuals ascribe to events. Hence requiring a realist approach to inquiry. The event in the context of this study is the COVID-19 pandemic. Interactionists are concerned with people's perceptions and how their perspectives for interpretation affect quality of life (Forte, 2004). This study therefore sought to understand the lived experiences of participants' family relations in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 brought in its wake a lockdown (partial or total) and social distancing. Families were made to stay at home. It was sudden, unexpected, and left little time to plan for the long-term. How did families cope during this time? The study aimed at finding out how the incidence of COVID-19 affected the family interactions (relationships) of participants.

Symbolic Interaction methodology

Symbolic Interaction's goal is understanding the nature of the social world. To maintain the phenomenon under investigation, researchers should adapt 'a real world' methodology with flexible data collection strategies (Fontana, 2015). The argument here is that methods should be ever changing to fit the changes and events of the real world (Fontana, 2015).

Method

This study was conducted on the main campus of University of Ghana, Legon, located in the Ayawaso West Constituency in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana**.** It was the chosen site because of its cosmopolitan nature. It has students from all social classes and ethnic backgrounds.

Participants

The target population for the study was undergraduate students. Thirty (30) University of Ghana students were purposively selected for the study. The sample was based on students who had extended family relations and were available and willing to elaborate on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their quality of life. Informed consent of participants were sought and participation was completely voluntary (WHO, 2020).

Instrument

Data was collected using a semi-structured interview guide with an open-ended question which elicited variant personal responses.

Data Collection

Whenever a respondent gave their consent to take part of the study, each was taken through the objectives of the study and guaranteed confidentiality. Interested and available respondents were interviewed on their experiences during COVID-19 and its effect on familial relations. They were made to write out their experiences on paper, an approach 'more highly focused and reflective...facilitating data analysis and interpretation'(Handy & Ross, 2005, p. 40). COVID-19 protocol of ensuring social distancing was strictly enforced. Within a span of fourteen days, researchers retrieved and transcribed responses into a word document. Following ethical principles of WHO (2020) each transcript was assigned an alphameric (e.g., respondent 1 to respondent 30).

Analysis

Thematic analysis was the chosen method for analysis due to its flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The checklist for analysing qualitative data as outlined by Braun and Clarke, (2006) and revised in Xu and Zammit (2020) was employed. Researchers familiarized themselves with data, 2. Generated initial codes, 3. Searched for themes, 4. Reviewed themes, 5. Defined and named themes, before finally 6. producing the report (Xu & Zammit, 2020). To this end, responses were read, re-read and initial codes generated, additional reading of transcripts to select themes that evolved were done. Researchers verified 'themes against each other and the original data set' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 96). To ensure rigor in the analysis, this back-and-forth activity dealt with searching, reviewing, defining (redefining) and naming of themes. Themes were then checked for clarity and unambiguity and 'distinctiveness' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.

96). Relevant recurring themes were then grouped into *positive* and *negative* themes. These themes, discussed below, informed researchers on how the meaning, relationship and relevance of information obtained captured participants experiences on the effect of COVID 19 on their family relations.

Results

Demographic information

The study recorded more females (26) than males (4) participating in the study. They were between the ages of 19 and 24 which indicates that they were all in their youthful years as is expected in most tertiary institutions.

Themes from the study

The themes that evolved included both positive and negative outcomes. Reports on the negative effects included *fear of contracting the virus*, *hampered communication* and *inability to visit and relate with extended family members*. The positive effect was that it brought the nuclear family together and improved interactions among them.

Fear of contracting the virus

Five (**5**) of the thirty respondents stated fear of contracting the virus as a determinant of self-consciousness, heightened eagerness to self-isolate and attempts to avoid people formerly allowed to invade their personal space.

Respondent 1 said, "I *thought all hope was lost, I had different thoughts going through my head; 'am I going to die' 'what happens if I contract the virus*". Jopp et al. (2015) threw more light on the

role vibrant social environments play in unproblematic lifelong ageing; how family alienation propels premature ageing. Fear of contracting the COVID-19 virus causes a tear in family bonds, a loss of trust and avoidance behaviour in the family, consequently affecting well-being. Based on three (3) respondents, the stigma associated with family members who test positive for COVID-19 makes family members trust themselves less and have less fruitful conversations. Respondent 8 elaborated, "*While my aunt battled with COVID-19, she was never spoken to, not even on the phone. Nobody was willing to engage her in any conversation and so she couldn't experience the love and affection. She felt neglected.*"

Hampered communication

Ineffective communication due to obstructed body language signals

Three (**3**) respondents said communication with family was ineffective owing to verbal and body language signals not being observed through the phone. Respondent 10 stated, "W*e lost things that made us feel good or helped us understand a message better since non-verbal cues were not applicable through phone calls".* Nine (9) respondents indicated that the messages were unclear and likely to be misinterpreted because nose masks muffled the words sent across. Respondent 19 highlighted: "*face mask in particular muffles sound and hides facial expressions during face-to-face communication... If it had not been for the pandemic, messages would be clearer right away".* Family interactions are rendered unfruitful in the absence of meaningful cues and conducts, leading to a deterioration in family relationships (Brown et al., 2020)

Inability to visit and communicate with extended family members

Seventeen (17) respondents stressed on the issue of not being able to visit their extended family members as the cause of rift in relationships. Respondent 17 said, '*during this stressful period, our extended family members cut ties with us. They were reluctant to visit us. Therefore, non-verbal communication with them ceased too."* This person lost contact with the people he needed the most in a debilitating circumstance. Three (3) respondents said they were not able to communicate with family because their grandparents lacked mobile phones and the knowledge to operate them. People end up being lonely especially when all efforts to reconnect with family have proved futile. An assertion that was corroborated by Ayalon and Avidor (2021). A lack of dexterity in mobile phone operation is a cause of worry for many grandparents, according to respondents. Doraiswamy et al., (2020) implores society to be empathetic towards the ageing population as most of them may not be technologically inclined.

Fifteen (15) respondents grieved that the relationship and frequency of communication with extended family members became costly owing to the need to purchase large internet bundles to ensure consistent contact online. To lessen such a burden, de Biase et al. (2020) recommends a multidisciplinary approach to rehabilitating affected individuals. Seven (7) of the respondents aired the concern that poor network caused problems as far as effective communication with loved ones was concerned.

Respondent 6 recounted, "*Sometimes, there are network problems due to the weather. Other times, the credit gets finished.* These issues make communication not as effective as they used to be before the pandemic, exacerbating the effect solitude has on ageing and well-being.

Conflict resolution and strengthening of nuclear family bonds

With regards to the positive impact of COVID on the traditional Ghanaian family system, nine respondents said they were able to maintain communication with extended family members by using social media applications such as Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, and Microsoft Teams. Respondent 27 said, "*We expressed our concerns, resolved some unsettled issues and also enjoyed quality family time*". More than half (19) of respondents said family members were able to resolve conflict, reconnect and spend time with each other which strengthened the family bond. Brown et al. (2020) found an increase in the 'sense of community' and social connectedness with neighbours as a positive aspect of COVID-19 because the pressure of 'having to go out' had been taken away. Respondent 23 agrees that "*the pandemic led to so many crises but strengthened communication among family members; we always had morning devotion together, washed and ate together*" Four respondents said the situations surrounding COVID-19 propelled them towards developing their communication skills and aptitude at using social media.

Discussion and conclusion

Ageing runs across the lifespan and requires certain factors to progress smoothly; one of which is a substantial social environment within which one feels loved, appreciated and able to communicate thoughts and experiences freely. In today's world, the individualistic culture has set apart families and destroyed the extended family relations in the Ghanaian culture. This has made it difficult to meet as a family and share long-held traditions. In the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for social distancing people stood far from each other when

having conversations, were not as eager to visit or allow visitors as before and had less inclination to stay connected with others. In a setting or environment, people prioritize the things they care about and perceive things in whichever way they deem fit. In effect, they associate the detached nature of their closest family members as a sign of little interest in them, which hurts their pride; they just want to be loved and appreciated. According to the respondents in this study, little time was spent with family outside of their immediate environments, especially because they feared contracting the virus which made them unwilling to be too close to family even in moments when they end up being together. COVID-19 has ingrained in us a fear so immeasurable that some people now have almost no social contact. The aged are at risk of being socially alienated and requires that family and or community reintegration efforts are deliberately undertaken. In this life, we need people to survive.

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