Chapter 9
Social Networks and the Wellbeing of Older Adults in Singapore

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Introduction

While it is widely understood that the family forms the basis of social networks contributing to the wellbeing of older adults, in Asian societies, the family is all the more emphasized for its multi-dimensional roles beyond the provision of intangible emotional and psychological support, to include the tangible financial and care support for one's older parents and relatives in later life. The explicit expectations to rely on the family instead of the state in the caring of older adults has been regarded as the essence of Asian values which lays the foundation of not only the family, but also state policies on aged care in Asian countries (Croll, 2008).

Singapore is no exception in its consistent emphasis of the family as a key pillar of support for older adults under the rubric of the Asian family ideology (Teo, Mehta, Thang, & Chan, 2006). The State's welfare approach of "Many Helping Hands" mentioned in the 1999 Inter-Ministerial Aging Committee (IMC) Report states the need for multi-party partnerships to ensure the wellbeing of older adults; starting with the individual who has a personal responsibility to plan and prepare for his or her old age; and the family to come in as the first line, and community the second line of support for those who need care and support. The role of the State is thus to set the policy framework, and provide the infrastructure and resources necessary for the other sectors to play their part (IMC Report, 1999).

The 1999 IMC also initiated the framework of "successful aging" as a vision for its aging policy which continues to be adopted till this day. In 2007, when the new Ministerial Committee on Aging was formed to put in charge of aging issues,

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the four strategic tasks identified include "employment and financial security", "aging-in-place" "healthcare and eldercare", and "active aging". Although at one glance, they appear to focus more on self-reliance and independent aging, as a speech by the Minister of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) shows, besides being "healthy, active, financially secure and independent senior citizens", older adults are encouraged to be "integral members of their extended families and communities, actively involved in a supportive and mutually interdependent relationship with the latter" (MCYS, 2005).

While the image of an older adult who is healthy, financially secure, active, surrounded by caring and loving family members and friends indeed epitomizes the vision of what successful aging should be, on the contrary, the challenges of demographic aging and changing socio-economic trends have evoked the fear that with rising longevity and lesser number of children available, there will be limits to what the family may be able to provide for the older adults (Liu & Kendig, 2000; Teo et al., 2006). What are the nature and characteristics of the family as a core social network for the older adults? How do older adults strategize to maintain their social network, especially in cases where the family network is not available? Using qualitative data from a study of older adults who are either living alone or with family members, this chapter focuses on living arrangement as a platform to examine how prevailing living arrangements as expressed by the older adults shed light on the dependency of family. In addition, the role of non-family social network, in particular, friends and neighbors will also be explored in understanding their contribution to the wellbeing of older adults. A strong social network including family, friends and neighbors are known to play a vital role in reducing the vulnerabilities of social isolation, loneliness and enhances the well-being of older adults (Julha & Saarenheimo, 2010; Phillipson, 2004; Wu & Chan, 2012).

In focusing on social networks of older adults, this chapter is informed by Baltes and Baltes' (1990) theoretical model of selective optimization and compensation which views successful aging as a process of adaptation by way of selection, optimization and compensation strategies. From this perspective, can non-family network be perceived as a compensation of the lack of family networks especially for older adults living alone? Such a theoretical framework thus emphasizes the dynamic process of adaptation to achieve one's wellbeing without conforming one's wellbeing in later life to a single trajectory. The dynamics in the personal networks of older adults also relate to changes in situational and personal characteristics, highlighting the structural constraints and opportunities available to an individual in the process of change (Van Tilburg & Thomese, 2010).

In the following, the chapter will first provide a general overview of aging in the Singapore context. This is followed with a brief note on data collection before examining the nature and characteristics of family and non-family social networks as compared between older adults in different forms of living arrangements.

Aging in the Singapore Context

The aging population is one of the biggest challenges facing Singapore today. Although the increase in the number of the proportion of persons aged 65 and over in the population has grown at a comparable rate to other industrialized societies – expanding almost threefold over the last 30 years, from 1970 to 2010 (Table 9.1), as the first post-war baby-boomers (born between 1947 and 1964) reach age 65 in 2012, the city-state is projected to experience an unprecedented rate of aging after that, reaching almost 19 % in 2030; in absolute terms, the older population will increase from 339,453 to 873,300 in a short span of 20 years (CAI, 2006). The realization of the magnitude of the challenge has led to active dialogues among different sectors with the State in the recent years, and more new measures and policies are expected to be formulated to better meet the needs of an aged society in the face of rapid socio-cultural and economic changes.

The rapid demographic shift in Singapore stems basically from two factors: the rise in life expectancy and a persistent fall in birth rate. With economic prosperity, coupled with improved public health and medical care, the average life expectancy in Singapore has risen rapidly from 65.8 years in 1970 to 78 years in 2000, and 81.8 years by 2010. In 2010, the average life expectancy for male and female is 79.3 and 84.1 years old respectively (Table 9.1). However, at the same time, the social phenomenon where more people are remaining single, marrying later and having fewer babies after marriage have translated to historic low birth rates; the TFR (total fertility rate) has seen a consistent decline from 3.07 in 1970, to 1.6 in 2000, and further fell to a critical level of 1.15 in 2010 (ibid.). The aging population

Table 9.1 Key demographic indicators and the older population (1970–2010)

	1970	1990	2000	2010
Total population (‘000)	2,074.5	3,047.1	4,027.9	5,183.7
Resident population (‘000)	2,013.6	2,735.9	3,273.4	3,771.7
Median age (years)	19.5	29.8	34	37.4
No. of persons aged 65+ (‘000)	68.5	164.5	235.3	338.4
Proportion of persons aged 65+	3.4	6.0	7.2	9.0
Old age dependency ratio (65+ years per hundred aged 15–64)	5.9	8.5	10.1	12.2
Old age support ratio (number aged 15–64 years per 65+ year)	17.0	11.8	9.9	8.2
Total fertility rate	3.07	1.83	1.6	1.15
Life expectancy at birth (average)	65.8	75.3	78.0	81.8
Male	64.1	73.1	76.0	79.3
Female	67.8	77.6	80.0	84.1

Sources: Singapore Department of Statistics (2011) Key Demographic Indicators, 1970–2011, Wong and Teo (2011) Table 1 for proportion and number of persons age 65 and over in 1990–2010, MCYS (2010) Table 1.1 for proportion and number of persons age 65 and over in 1970
Note: Except for 1970, all figures are based on resident population

that resulted as a combination of these two factors has led to a rise in median age and a shrink in old-age support ratio over the three decades (Table 9.1). Within the older population, the increase has been most rapid in the 85 years and over group, which has grown at an annual average of about 6 % in the last decade (Wong & Teo, 2011).

What characterizes the profile of older adults in Singapore? The statistics released in 2011 on resident population shows more females among the older population, with 0.795 and 0.491 male to one female for the age 65 and over as well as the 85 years and over population. One-third of the 65 years and over population is widowed, with more females (50 %) than males (12 %) among the widowed persons. The current cohort of older adults tend to receive less education; and allowance from children is the main source of support for older adults (63 %). 2.4 % (8,200) of older adults in residential housing were reported to be non-ambulant in 2010 (Wong & Teo, 2011).

Singapore is unique among the industrialized advanced countries to be characterized with a relatively high percentage of older adults living with their spouses and/or children. The 2010 census shows 86.1 % of older adults living under such an arrangement (Table 9.2). It is more likely for those in the 85 years and over group (63.3 %) to be living with children only, indicating higher incidence of widowhood in later age. In terms of gender, higher percentages of males (76.7 %) are living with spouses than females (38 %), reflecting the likelihood of older males to have spousal carers. The percentage of those living alone has shown a consistent increase, from 5.5 % in 1990, to 6.6 % in 2000 and 8.2 % a decade later and it is projected to increase further with changing preferences for living arrangement among the older population (Thang, 2011).

Despite the high percentage of older adults living with spouse and/or children in general, further examination of living arrangement among 5,000 older adults through the 2009 SIHLS (Social Isolation, Health and Lifestyles Survey) reveals the norm of small household size among them, with 27 and 24 % living in two-person and three-person households respectively (ILC Singapore, 2011). This is

Table 9.2 Living arrangement of resident population 65 years and above, 2010

	Total	Male	Female	65–74 years	75–84 years	85+ years
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Living with spouse	**55.1**	**76.9**	**38.0**	**65.6**	**43.3**	**22.0**
No children in household	19.4	26.0	14.3	22.5	16.5	7.8
With children in h/h	35.7	50.9	23.7	43.1	26.8	14.2
Living with children only	**31.0**	**12.1**	**46.0**	**20.8**	**42.5**	**63.3**
Not living with spouse or children	**13.9**	**11.1**	**16.1**	**13.6**	**14.3**	**14.6**
Alone	8.2	6.3	9.6	7.9	9.0	6.7
With other elderly only	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.2	0.8
Others	4.4	3.5	5.2	4.2	4.1	7.1

Source: Wong and Teo (2011) Table 7

consistent with the increasing trend of smaller households nationally: the proportion of households with three persons or less has risen from 45.5 % in 2000 to 51.2 % in 2010 (DOS, 2011:12).

Intergenerational co-residence is commonly considered as an effective way to ensure the care of older adults by their children, even though there has been arguments about the assumption of living with children as a one-way support of the young for the old (Hermalin, 1997). Singapore's housing policy to promote three-generational living reflects such an underlying assumption on ensuring aged care in intergenerational co-residence, although in the recent years, with the increasing norm for nuclear households, the housing polices have expanded to include measures to encourage adult children and their parents to live close by, and not necessarily together. In this chapter, through an examination of the social network of older adults, taking into consideration their living arrangements, we seek to explore how the different living arrangements may affect the availability and their perception of social networks.

Method and Data

This chapter focuses on understanding the social networks of older adults, using qualitative data derived from a research project conducted with FeiYue Community Services on seniors living alone in Singapore between 2008 and 2011 (Thang & Lim, 2012). Although the project focuses on understanding the problems and concerns facing older adults living alone in Singapore, they provide valuable insights to one's perception of wellbeing and strategies to promote one's wellbeing. The chapter will refer to the interviews with 120 older adults living alone and 30 older adults who were living with their families. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted mostly in the homes of the older respondents; and questions were centered on living arrangements, social network, sources of support and care, their daily living and activities, among others. Understanding the social network of older adults is an important objective of the research, especially when living alone is a strong predictor for social isolation (Wu & Chan, 2012). Interview data from these two groups will form the primary data for discussion in this chapter. For anonymity, there will be no name mentioned in the text.

The respondents from these two groups ranged from 65 to 90 years old, with an average age of 75. Two-thirds among the group of older adults living alone were either single (28.3 %) or widowed (43.3 %). For those who were widowed with children, some had chosen to stay in their own apartments after their spouse passed on, while some others were forced by circumstances. For instance, an older Chinese woman (CF13) had to move out of the son's house as a result of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts.

Among the 30 older adults living with family, two-thirds (66.7 %) of them were married, out of which 11 were living with spouse only, 7 with spouse and children, and 2 in three-generation households with grandchildren. Among the 8 (26.7 %)

who were widowed, 5 were living in three generation households. Although the household composition looks the same regardless of whether the seniors moved in to live with their children, or their children stayed with them in the house that belongs to the seniors, in reality, it can affect the sense of autonomy felt by the seniors. One widowed Chinese older woman (CF123) staying in her son's home saw herself as having no other option but to rely on her only son. Older adults who came to live together with their children often focus on how they are playing a role in the children's family (such as to care for their grandchildren) to justify their claims of independence and their contributions to the family.

Similar to the general older population, both groups of older adults tend to have low education levels. Among those living alone, 89 (74.2 %) of them lived in one-room public flats. Rental public apartment blocks are limited supply of housing generally available only to those from the low-income brackets. As home ownership in Singapore is consistently high (above 80 %) in the population as the State's public housing policy encourages home ownerships (DOS, 2011), living in rental public apartments thus often indicate one's inability to own one's own property. Out of this sub-group, 34 were receiving Public Assistance (with a monthly cash grant of S$400 (equivalent to USD 320) and free medical treatments in government clinics and hospitals) only eligible for those without family support. 13 (10.8 %) lived in studio apartments which are 30 year-lease senior-friendly public housing where persons 55 years and older may purchase directly from the Housing and Development Board. Among those living with family, two-thirds were living in what is regarded as 4-room type public housing (about 90 sq m with 3 bedrooms and 1 living room) or smaller in size. The religious beliefs of both groups of older adults reflected the diverse ethnic and religious practices in Singapore (see Table 9.3 for profiles of the two groups). Chinese formed the majority of the older adults interviewed (total of 82 out of 150 respondents), parallel to the ethnic composition in the Singapore population, and there are equal number of males and females in both groups. In the following section, the two groups will be discussed in comparison under family and non-family social network.

Family Social Network

Family relations feature prominently in the social network of older adults. This is especially so for adults who live with their family, mostly their spouses, and/or children. Among the older adults living alone, half of them said that they would approach their family members – ranging from children to siblings, nieces and nephews when they need help. Family members provided varied forms of support for older adults, while those living alone tended to focus on monetary support, those living together reported more non-monetary forms of support such as housekeeping, transport, medical and emotional support with the spouses or children as the providers.

Table 9.3 Profile of older adults living alone and with family (per cent)

	Older adults living alone (N = 120)	Older adults living with family (N = 30)
Ethnicity		
Chinese	50 % (60)	73.3 % (22)
Malay	25 % (30)	13.3 % (4)
Indian	25 % (30)	13.3 % (4)
Religion		
Buddhism	18.3 % (22)	13.3 % (4)
Taoism	1.7 % (2)	13.3 % (4)
Catholicism	6.7 % (8)	6.7 % (2)
Christianity	16.7 % (20)	23.3 % (7)
Hinduism	14.2 % (17)	6.7 % (2)
Islam	32.5 % (39)	16.5 % (1)
Ancestral worship	–	3.3 % (1)
No religion	10.0 % (12)	10.0 % (5)
Marital status		
Single	28.3 % (34)	3.3 % (1)
Married	15.0 % (18)	66.7 % (20)
Divorced/Separated	13.3 % (16)	3.3 % (1)
Widowed	43.3 % (52)	26.7 % (8)
Housing type		
1-room HDB	74.2 % (89)	23.3 % (7)
Studio Apartment (HDB)	10.8 % (13)	3.3 % (1)
2-room HDB	5.8 % (7)	13.3 % (4)
3-room HDB	8.3 % (10)	20.0% (6)
4-room HDB	0.8 % (1)	13.3 % (4)
5-room HDB	–	10.0 % (3)
Private housing	–	16.7 % (5)
Education level		
No qualification	30.8 % (37)	30.0 % (9)
Primary	50.0 % (60)	36.7 % (11)
Secondary	14.2 % (17)	26.7 % (8)
Post-secondary	5.0 % (6)	6.7 % (2)

Spouse as the Core Social Support Provider

Eleven out of the 30 older adults living with the family lived with their spouses only. Older adults recognized their spouse as the main source of support especially when it was a couple-only household, as a 75 year-old retired Chinese man (CM120) said of his wife who was still working daily at MacDonald's, "You can say so. Be it emotional, moral, or my daily activities. She's (Wife) the best."

The respondent above lived in a de-facto couple-only household as his son and daughter-in-law living together were working overseas most of the time. Some older

adults had chosen to live only with their spouses and apart from their children believing that this was a way to improve family ties and reduce friction between parents and children. A 72-year-old Malay man with five children lived only with his wife (MM165); he said after hearing about the bad experiences of older adults who lived with their children, he thought it would be difficult to stay with their children and moved in to a rental apartment instead. Another 70 year-old Malay woman (MF166) who used to live with her children and their families now chose to stay with her spouse so that she could maintain her independence.

Children and Mutual Dependent Relationships

For the older adults living alone and had children, children contributed to their wellbeing mainly in the form of monetary support (e.g. providing them with monthly allowance, paying for their medical expenditure). A 66 year-old Indian widow (IF132) living alone in a rental apartment had 9 children who rotated to provide her financially but she insisted that she would not take money from those who had financial difficulties themselves, such as a daughter with kidney problem and another who had an unhealthy child. Older adults also relied on their children when they needed care, such as after-hospitalization care. A 72 year-old Chinese man (CM14) who was a widower living alone had two married daughters who visited him occasionally. When he had an eye operation a few years ago, besides providing monetary support, one of his daughters provided care by receiving him temporarily in his home while he was recovering.

Although it is common for older adults in Singapore to receive monetary support from their children, recognizing the children as important source of social network does not necessarily meant that the children must be supporting them financially. Two older adults (CM151 and CM140) whose sons lived with them depend on them for monetary and care support as both of the sons did not work due to illness and disability respectively.

Among the older adults living with families, 4 of them were still working and another 3 had spouses still in the workforce, thus they still had an income. Probably due to the ambulant state of the older adults in the study, it was not uncommon for them to consider themselves as supporting their children instead. With the norm for young dual working-couples in Singapore, older parents who live together with their children often play essential instrumental roles such as caring for grandchildren, doing household chores and cooking for the whole family (Teo et al., 2006).

The Significance of Siblings and/or Their Children in the Lives of Older Adults Living Alone

Most of the older adults living with the family were in active contact with their siblings. It could be in the form of close social contact, such as in the case of

69 year-old Chinese woman (CF133) who went out with his sister for a walk on some Saturdays, and 81 year-old Chinese widow (CF149) whose sister called her everyday to chat. CF13, a 73 year-old Chinese widow used to have little contact with her siblings when she was living with her younger son's family as her daughter-in-law disallowed her to play mahjong at home with her siblings. After she moved out to live on her own in a rental apartment, relationships with her siblings became closer as she now has the liberty to meet them, and it had become a weekly affair for her siblings to get together at her apartment for mahjong sessions.

Siblings are also important as a provider of financial support. A 79 year old Indian divorcee (IM55) who was childless and lived alone often depended on her elder sister financially, although he felt uneasy about his dependence on her.

Among the older adults living with family, a 66 year-old Chinese man who was single (CM131) lived only with his younger brother in a one room rental public apartment. His siblings were his main sources of support, his younger brother worked to support both of them since he had stopped working and his younger sister living at a nearby block visited him daily to keep him company in the afternoon while his younger brother was at work.

Some older adults who were single and living alone might also receive support from siblings and their children. CF10 was a 68 year-old single Chinese woman who relied on the daughter of her foster sister for visits to the doctor each time. She had stayed with them for 4 months when she underwent breast cancer treatment a few years ago. Another 69 year-old single woman (CF08) living in rental apartment received financial support from her older sister and brother. She also maintained close relationships with her sister's three children and grandchildren as she used to live with them for 36 years and cared for them. She only moved out of her sister's house when their family expanded and needed more space for the grandchildren. Now, her siblings and their children visited her weekly and her nephew brought her to the doctor on a regular basis. Her close relationships with the nieces and nephews had provided her with a sense of security and support resembling those who have children.

However, several single older adults also mentioned that they had little contact with their family and relatives. Their definition of 'some contact' with their kin, when probed further, often refers to minimal contact such as once a year visit during the festive seasons. A 65 year-old single Chinese man (CM05) living in a rental apartment said he was disappointed with his siblings,

> Yes, I have brothers and sisters. But I don't want to talk about them. They have money. If I visit them, they would immediately be afraid that I want to borrow money. They have no heart, that's just how I feel. So I'd rather just be by myself. Forget it. (CM05)

More men living alone mentioned about dwindling contact with their kin compared to the women, and many saw their parents as the point of contact for the family, once their parents passed on, contact with siblings reduced significantly. For CM05, instead of family members, he found friends and neighbors more important as his social network,

> Sometimes, your friends are better than your own family, let me tell you. It's true... With friends, you can depend on them for help. For example they will take you to the hospital, and see the doctor. (CM05)

The diverse responses to the significance of siblings in one's social network implies the extent to which the siblings and/or their children is considered a compensation to the lack of spouse and own children in contributing to one's wellbeing.

Non-family Social Network

Besides the family relations, which generally forms the core of the older adults' social network, social lives with non-family relations constitutes the other part of one's life domain determined by the presence of friends, community and social activities (Penning & Chappell, 1987). In this section, the discussion focuses on friends and neighbors but it should be noted that for older adults who live in housing blocks that have senior service centers on the ground level, such as senior day activity centers and neighborhood link centers, they served as a venue to make friends and build non-family relationships. These eldercare centers provide a space for socialization, such as through the availability of common areas for relaxation and exercises, and organized activities such as morning group exercises, outings, tea gatherings, and classes such as Basic English lessons and cooking classes. More females were observed to be attending these centers than males. Likewise, for those who were actively engaged with church fellowship groups and other religious entities, these places where people congregate are also a node for non-family social network. Non-family social network can play a more significant role than the family domain compensating for the lack of family close by, especially for older adults living alone.

Friends

Among the older adults who are living alone, those who do not have any existing family ties tend to rely on their neighbors, friends or the social service centers in their community and religious organizations. The definition of friends is broad and could refer to colleagues or ex-colleagues from their current or previous workplaces, fellow older adults whom they have met at the social service centers or within the neighborhood and friends from their religious communities.

Friends offer a source of companionship for the older adults living alone, where they chat over the phone with, go travelling with and enjoy leisure activities together. Although living alone, the 68 year-old retired Malay divorcee (MM93) said he did not feel lonely since he had friends from the social service centre below his block as well as friends from the neighborhood coffee shop which he frequents. While friends

could be acquaintances for some, "just talking to pass time" (MM106), they could also serve as confidants for others, providing emotional wellbeing and support. As the 68 year-old single Chinese woman who recovered from breast cancer said,

> "....make more friends. Confide in friends whenever you have problems. In this way, you will feel better. Like me, I always confide in my Marsiling (place name) friend whenever I am met with problems. It is not good to keep everything inside, you will end up in depression this way". (CF10)

Other than providing emotional support, friends also offer instrumental assistance to older adults. For 85 year-old Malay widow (MF85), her friends regularly accompanied her to the market to purchase groceries as she had walking difficulties. CM05 found friends to be closer than his own family members; as he was partially visual-impaired, he relied on his friends to bring him to medical appointments in the hospital. Friends were a source of financial support for 72 year-old Chinese male divorcee (CM11); his friends would lend small amounts of money and provide mutual financial assistance to each other. Similarly, 69 year-old Chinese single man (CM18) said that among his friends, they would inform each other of the various sources of financial help available to them. Compared with older women, the older men tend to refer to their former work colleagues as friends that they still kept in touch with occasionally. Public places like coffee shops in the neighborhood are the usual meeting places for men with their friends (and neighbors). Older women tend to make friends through social activities such as karaoke groups and exercise groups that they joined.

Compared with the older adults living alone, those living with their families tend to situate their friends more within the scope of social and emotional support. Friends provide companionship in activities such as singing karaoke, having drinks, shopping or travelling together. Friends also provide emotional support equally important to those provided by family members. A 65 year-old Chinese man (CM118) who lived only with his wife in a three-room public apartment (two bedrooms and one living room) that they purchased after selling off the larger five-room apartment (three bedrooms and two living rooms) was active with various leisure and life-long learning activities with fellow older adults. When asked if he considered his wife as providing the biggest moral support, he didn't agree totally, saying that "friends' support is equally important because as we get in touch with friends, it will also improve our mood."

Neighbors

Neighbors feature more prominently among older adults living alone and those who have been living in the same rental public housing blocks for many years. CM5 who was single and living in rental housing alone regarded his friends and neighbors as more important to him than family members. He knew most of the neighbors, and felt especially grateful to one lady who together with her son, brought him to the

hospital when he needed to get admitted some years back. They also visited him at the hospital and even invited him to attend Chinese New Year reunion dinner at her place.

There are numerous examples eliciting the importance of neighbors in the lives of the older adults who were living alone. An 88 year-old man (CM09) living in rental housing and on public assistance readily mentioned three neighbors who helped maintained his wellbeing and independence: one female neighbor living on a different floor would help him with the cleaning of the house and provide for him breakfast and lunch. The other two male neighbors helped to carry things for him and also bought him dinner daily. They chatted with him on a frequent basis to ensure that he was doing fine. Neighbors whom one meets frequently may become closer than one's family members at times. For the 71 year-old Chinese male divorcee (CM11), many of his neighbors were old neighbors he had known before they were all relocated together to this block from a nearby district. He often hung out with them, "....they would look me up to go drink coffee (at the coffee shop).....If you do not go out to eat, drink coffee, talk with friends, it would be very boring to stay at home alone." He referred to his group of old neighbors and himself as a group who "had no money and no wives, alone....". They thus seek help mutually in more ways, including financial help. For CF10 who still worked at age 68, whenever she was at home in her rental apartment, she would keep her door open "so that my neighbors can keep a look out for me. That is what neighbors are for. We help to look out for each other". She had lived in the same block for 25 years.

Even for a 68 year-old Chinese single women (CF08) who had stayed in the rental apartment for only 5 years, she engaged actively in neighborly exchanges to compensate for the restriction she faced with her weak legs. She was grateful that her Malay neighbor who lived next door usually dropped by her place to ask if she needed anything whenever he was going for grocery shopping. CF08 considered her 88-year-old neighbor who lived downstairs in the same block as a good friend. She cooked everyday and often cooked extra so that she would be able to pack some food to bring to the 88-year old female neighbor living downstairs, regarding it as an act of a "good neighbor." They met and chatted often and the granny would call her on the phone to ask why she was not coming to her place whenever she did not visit her in the afternoon. This serves as an example of intra-generational mutual help among older adults.

Parallel to the Chinese saying that "relatives far away cannot be compared with neighbors close by (远亲不如近邻)", useful and helpful neighbors have shown to be more important sources of social support than the family for older adults who are living alone. Neighbors also provide more ready support than friends who do not live in close proximity. They help with daily tasks, provide companionship and look out for each other's wellbeing. On the other hand, relationships with the neighbors tend to be mostly casual for respondents who live with the family. Although most enjoy a harmonious relationship with their neighbors and get along well with one another, few of them consider their neighbors as sources of social or emotional support. The 65 year-old Chinese woman who lived only with his husband in a condominium unit (CF134) was one exception, she enjoyed swimming and other leisure activities

with her neighbors, and saw neighbors as important in providing mutual help and support, "We talk and help each other. If they have problems, we will go and help. Like some children when their parents are not around, they want to put their children at my place, I will help them". (CF134).

It should be emphasized that in discussing the different types of social networks present among older adults, we should recognize the co-presence of the different forms of relationships at the same time, forming what is termed a 'convoy' of persons surrounding a person (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). While this perspective is commonly explained through a life course perspective as some relationships diminishes in importance in providing certain form of support, and compensated by other new forms of relationships, CF13's re-structuring of social lives as a result of her forced move out of her son's house to live alone is a good illustration. While she used to center her daily life around the care of her granddaughter, it had transformed dramatically after she came to live alone. In place of the diminished contact with her son's family was an expanded social life as an active volunteer at the day activity center situated on the ground level of her rental apartment block. Besides helping out at the reception counter and attending the array of activities organized by the center, she also resumed contact with her retired friends and now met regularly with them for karaoke sessions. In addition, she was able to rekindle ties with her siblings and their spouses now through regular mahjong sessions. In her case, the change in living arrangement enables new members into her social network.

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter, in examining the nature and characteristics of social networks among older adults in Singapore has shown that as expected, family relations is a significant domain of one's social network. Among older adults who are living alone in Singapore, those who have children also tend to rely on their children to provide for them financially, if not emotionally and practically as well. Indeed, as research findings on family life in the West have shown, despite population aging and changes in family structure, family relationships remain significant and children still form the core of the social network of older adults (Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips, & Ogg, 2001; Silverstein, Burholt Wenger, & Bengtson, 1998).

Given the higher likelihood of family and kin in providing unconditional instrumental and emotional support to their older adults (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1995), it is without doubt that family remains as the most preferred social network. Nevertheless, a study of the social networks among older adults with family and those who were living alone suggests changes in the nature and characteristics of dependency on the family. Further, the compensation of the lack of family social network with other forms of non-family networks among older adults living alone reveals how individuals strategized in ensuring the availability of appropriate social network in later life, whether out of choice or the lack of choice.

One changing trend relating to staying with family for older adults is the emerging phenomenon of mono-generation households consisting only of aging spouses. With longer life expectancies among older men and women, 'staying with one's family' can no longer be regarded simply as living with their children; and the trend is expected to rise with changing living preferences among the aging population. According to the 2009 baby-boomers survey, 75 % of baby boomers expect to live with their spouses for most of the retirement years/old age (MCYS, 2009:69). The availability of more housing options, such as the building of more studio apartments catering to older adults by HDB is predicted to further support the increasing trend. However, in Asian culture where family relationships tend to focus on intergenerational relations between parents and children, spousal relationship in later life is still a relatively new subject in understanding family relationships. With the increase in older spouse-only households, we can expect more concerns in areas such as the physical and financial abilities facing spouses who are the only caregiver for their husbands or wives. As a recent study on caregiving in Singapore with more than 3,000 older patients has shown, spouses constitute the largest number of caregivers for aged sick at home where many are reported to face a lack of social support and health problems of their own, among others (Poon, 2012).

Among the older adults living with their children and/or grandchildren, it is also important to recognize the two-way flows of intergenerational relationships between older adults and their adult children in co-residence arrangement where the flow can be that of adult children supporting their frail parents at a later point of time, as well as older adults supporting their adult children through grandchild care and household chores while they are ambulant. A study on childcare-giving in Singapore notes that with the preference among younger generations for childcare assistance from their own parents, grandparents in Singapore are not simply 'reserved army' to provide emergency childcare, but a 'regular army' expected to provide help in normal times (Sun, 2012).

Among older adults who live alone, 'family' as a social network has shown to entail a broader range of relations beyond the direct parent-child relationships, where one's lack of children may be compensated with closer relationship with nieces or nephews, who can play essential supporting roles like their own children. However, the replacement relationship of children with nieces and nephews may require cultivation from an earlier stage, such as through early years of co-living and constant contact and is mediated by one's closeness with their siblings as well. In this aspect, they relate to Baltes and Baltes' (1990) components of successful aging, where selection and optimization of available resources in relationships is essential to facilitate successful compensation to what is lacking.

The social networks of friends and neighbors in compensating for the lack of family members close by is common especially among older adults living alone. In this chapter, they are depicted through invitations to have reunion dinner together, daily visits to/from a neighbor to ensure the wellbeing of one another, receiving help from neighbors or simply the gesture of leaving one's main door deliberately open whenever at home. It also appears that neighborly network increase in importance especially when health problems further confines one's mobility and movement.

Such increasing significance of neighbors in one's social network echoes the findings by Wu and Chan (2012) in their empirical study of the neighborhood influences on the social interaction and amelioration of social isolation of older adults in public neighborhood-built environment in Singapore. Their conclusion that the HDB neighborhood environment has positive impact in the social interactions of older adults who are neighborhood-based and neighborhood-bound is especially evident among older adults living in one-room rental public housing blocks as well as studio apartment housing. Besides more likelihood of contact with others as a result of compact living in apartment housing, the availability of social service centers on the ground or second level of some of these blocks further serve as a meeting place for residents where friendship and neighborliness could develop, and possibly expand in a different capacity. However, the extent through which social network could alter in old age depends not only on the environment, but also the individual choice and personality. Gender-wise, older women have shown to be more active than older men in the utilization of these social services and thus benefit more from their presence close by.

In this chapter, the study of the nature and characteristics of social networks among older adults from different living arrangements highlights the circumstantial and structural constraints/opportunities available in contributing to the dynamics of social network for one's wellbeing. It suggests the need to tease out from the broader definition of family-centric support what interindividual variability (Dannefer, 1988) there may be, serving to remind the state that policy measures should take into consideration the variety of circumstances that may alter the availability of family support and how policy measures should be sensitive to the needs of appropriate social network among older adults so as to ensure the wellbeing of individuals in later life, whether with family living close by or otherwise.

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