Inter Generation Relationships in Taking Care of the Elderly in Karo, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study aims to uncover family conflict stemming from caring for the elderly in the Karo ethnic group in North Sumatera resulting in the elderly not feeling comfortable and prefering to live alone or go to a nursing home. An ethnographical study was conducted in Lingga village, Karo to gather information on what Cliffort Geertz has proposed as the thick description of cultural values and the expectations of the elderly. Data was collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews with the elderly with different characteristics. This study found that the elderly's ideal conception of a place to live is related to various social and cultural aspects of their society, which are interrelated with the functions of affection, obedience and tolerance as   family members in the community. This study finds that the elderly expect to have autonomy, but were in fact dependant on their children. This study also finds that research on the elderly should investigate sociocultural aspects of the elderly in order to minimalize conflict.

Keywords: elderly care, cultural perspectives, intergeneration conflict, Karo

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The elderly in Karo want to live separately from their children in their old age. They do not want to live with their children after they grow old because they think they will be a burden on their families, communities and even the country (Achmad et al., 2018). Living in their own house gives them a sense of calm and peace (protection function), freedom, more satisfaction, more comfort (physical and mental welfare function), and gives them the autonomy to manage and control a house that they own (Adib, 2008). Most elderly people prefer to live independently either alone or with their partners than with children, relatives, or in institutions because it is comfortable (Wong & Verbrugge, 2009).

Meanwhile, other studies of the elderly tend to look at aspects of the deterioration of their health, both physically and psychologically (Ibrahim et al., 2015), and also poverty in the life of the elderly (Suliswanto, 2010). Poverty, caused by being out of the workforce, has meant some of them have become homeless (Williams & Rikard, 2004). Some researchers highlight the issue of social isolation in the elderly due to a loss of social relationships (Lee et al., 2011). In addition to these issues, the weak position of the elderly has been seen by experts as a factor that positions them as victims (Ortmann et al., 2001). From this study the elderly are always seen as a group of people who have exhausted their heyday and are unable to fend for themselves, that is a problematic group.
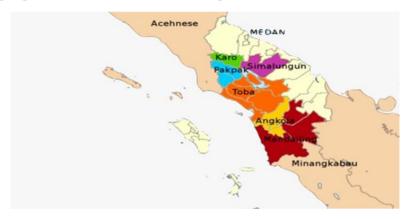
Research has not given adequate attention to aspects of authority and independence of the elderly, particularly regarding choices and decisions about their existence, including the choice where to live in old age. The purpose of this paper is, therefore to investigate the perspectives of the Karo ethnic group concerning the care of the elderly. Given this purpose, three questions can be formulated: (1) what is the ideal conception of the elderly in choosing a place to live in their old age? (2) what is the perspective of the child or family in caring for or looking after the elderly? (3) how do conflicting values between children and the elderly affect determining the place of residence of the elderly? The answers to these three questions will help explain inter-generational relationships, as well as cultural perceptions of the elderly and providing care.

This paper is based on three assumptions. First, the ideal conception of a place where the elderly will live in old age is

related to various social and cultural aspects of the society where the elderly live (Brooks et al., 2019) (Mo et al., 2017); (Winch et al., 2016). Second, perspectives of the social structure of the family that exist in society are related to functions of sharing affection, maintaining compliance, and tolerance within the family (Giang et al., 2019) (Sung, 2008). Third, there are conflicts of interests and obligations that are linked to a feeling of satisfaction in the elderly creating conflict over the choice of residence (Sung, 2008) (Mostafa et al., 2018).

1.2 Literature Review

Karo is an indigenous tribe inhabiting an area covering the Karo highland, Deli Serdang Regency, Binjai City, Langkat Regency, Dairi Regency, Medan City, and Southeast Aceh Regency. The name of this tribe is the eponym of the Karo Regencyand has its own language called the Karo language. Most Karo people are reluctant to be called Bataks because they feel different, although they are located in West Sumatera where the Batak is the dominant ethnic group. In addition to fluency in the Karo language, another important characteristic of the people relates to their clan structure and names. Karo people have five kinds of patrilineal clans or sub-clans, namely *Karo-karo, Ginting, Tarigan, Sembiring, and Peranginangin*. Each of these clans is divided into 13 to 18 sub-clans, so that as a whole as many as 83 sub clans can be found. All clans and sub clans have unique names that exist in the Karo community (Watson & Kipp, 1995). The distribution of ethnic groups in North Sumatera can be seen in picture 1.

Picture 1. Distribution of ethnic groups in North Sumatera

In order to study the elderly in Karo it is necessary to firstly understand the composition of the Karo community to provide the cultural setting for the care of the elderly. The important thing in the composition of the Karo community is the so called *Daliken Sitelu* (its literal meaning is a triple stove), which means a triple bond. Through the Daliken Sitelu all Karo people are regarded as related to each other, if not a blood relationship, there is a clan relationship. The Daliken Sitelu is the foundation of the kinship system and becomes the basis for all activities, especially activities related to the implementation of customs and interactions among fellow Karo people. The *Daliken Sitelu* is supported by three actors, *Kalimbubu* (family from the women's line), *Simbuyak* (same-sex) and *Anak beru* (family from the male line) whose social life is very strong influenced by customary rules (Sembiring, 2014). *Daliken Sitelu* is a social-cultural network of mutual cooperation and togetherness found in the Karo community. The relationships between the three is inseparable in terms of custom, which deeply infiltrates all aspects of life, determines rights and obligations in society, in ceremonies, law, and in the past and has an important meaning in economic life and politics. In the period before Dutch colonialism, it also included rituals, and all social activities. Within it lies the principles of cooperation, and deliberation in the deepest sense of the word.

Self-care means being able to care for oneself, the concept of self-care in the elderly has often been linked to autonomy, independence and personal accountability. Self-care behavior for seniors is aimed at maintaining and restoring their health through various institutions. An independent lifestyle for the elderly is related to cultural values and beliefs as well as health. This can also be affected by age, and decreased mobility (Mostafa et al., 2018) (Imaginário et al., 2018).

Several studies have confirmed that depression and social isolation are independent risk factors that consistently occur and become the biggest factors causing someone to commit suicide. Depression and isolation affect the elderly when social support for elderly patients is less, with the consequent risk of death due to suicide becoming higher. The correlation between depression and suicide ideas is very strong. This can be overcome by social relations or it can be done by direct intervention by social workers, nurses and psychologists (Brooks et al., 2019).

In the process of aging, each person will experience several changes that can be categorized as physical or physiological and psychosocial, where aging is accompanied by an increased likelihood of suffering from one, or more, chronic diseases such as respiratory diseases, arthritis, strokes, depression and dementia. These conditions can affect appetite,

functional ability or the ability to swallow, all of which lead to changes in food intake and impaired nutritional status or disorders in processing emotions (Mo et al., 2017) (Leslie & Hankey, 2015).

Intergenerational communication between parents and young people living apart can be a very severe problem. Most young couples with children will move out from their parents' house, so grandparents usually communicate with their children and grandchildren via telephone or social networking sites, creating two major problems, namely the grandparents having no experience in using technology and parents having difficulty in supervising their children and grandchildren, but for young people living apart from their parents it will make them more independent and autonomous (Mo et al., 2017).

In much intergenerational conflict literature (the relationship between parents and young people), it was found that this conflict was seen to have a negative impact both to parents and young people; however, (Suitor & Pillemer, 1988) have a different perspective that intergenerational conflict can be useful to bring down rulers, as well as prevent intergenerational political alliances. A study conducted by Dhillon et al. (2018) shows that a positive culture, with support given to elderly patients with traumatic brain injury (TBI), will greatly enhance their chances of living longer. There are differences in self-care and daily activities carried out by parents living in rural areas in Vietnam, the tendency of parents living in urban areas is still doing work to meet their needs while in rural areas they only do self-care and assist their children in caring for grandchildren while at work (Giang et al., 2019).

The elderly experience a series of neurological and sensory changes, including disturbances, hearing loss, decreased reaction times so it takes longer to process an environmental signal or new information. A case in point is elderly people whohave to master technology that is unfamiliar thus causing them distress. Digital tools that enable collaborative use by elderly patients with their family members or their caregivers also need to be adapted (Mohammed & Rosenkrantz, 2020).

The relationship among family members is considered as the main source of emotional comfort for each member, especially the relationship between children and parents and will greatly affect the quality of life. The emotional comfort of the family functions to improve both psychological and physical well-being. Parents who are closely connected to their families are less likely to experience depression than those who live alone or are left behind by their children when they are married (Giang et al., 2019) (Lu et al., 2017).

Functional decline in the body is defined as a setback in one's self-care skills, where functional autonomy is reduced and disability increases, in old age self-care becomes very important and can be done in various ways; one of them is through regular exercise (Curi et al., 2018). The elderly face health problems that need medical care but most of the elderly do not want to live in a nursing institution. However, several studies have shown that with a lot of long-distance care, the elderly can live their lives more independently without continuing to depend on the nursing institution directly (Mostafa et al., 2018) (Giang et al., 2019) (Sung, 2008). In relation to the previous studies, this study aims to uncover family conflict stemming from caring for the elderly in the Karo ethnic group in North Sumatera resulting in the elderly not feeling comfortable and preferring to live alone or go to a nursing home.

2. Method

An ethnograpical study was conducted from January to August 2019 in Karo Regency, North Sumatra, in Lingga village. Lingga village has been recognised as a cultural village since 1975, a village that is recognised nationally because it practises local cultural customs. Lingga village has one of the highest percentages of elderly people in North Sumatra with 12.25% of the population classified as elderly. The total population in the village itself is 3,467 people. According to State Regulation No. 13/1998 concerning Elderly Welfare, elderly means those aged 60 years or above. We attempted to understand social realities in depth, based on the structure of the subject's experience (native's point of view) at the research location.

The research subjects were five Karo ethnic families with elderly members who lived in Lingga Village. The group comprised one elderly divorced widow, one elderly widower, one elderly male who still lives with his unmarried children, an elderly female with unmarried children a living with her and an elderly female who lives alone.

In selecting these informants, we utilised a snow ball sampling method. First of all, we came to the village administration to inform them of the purpose of the research and gain preliminary research data, particularly with regards to the mapping of the situation of the elderly in the village. From there we then met with the elderly and conveyed the aims of the research. As one of the data collection methods was in the form of participant observation, village officials asked several elderly people if they were willing to accept researchers to stay at their homes in order to obtain data for the purposes of this study. Some elderly people expressed their willingness to accept researchers and research assistants living in their homes. The elderly who received researchers directly became informants who were observed by participants and interviewed. The results of the interview data are made in verbatim form and then categorized so that young people can interpret and gain benefit from the results of the study.

3. Results

The following part will present the results of this research. It is divided into three sub-parts: the ideal conception of where the elderly should live; children's or family's perspective about the Elderly's Residences; and, different perceptions in caring for the elderly between children and parents.

The Ideal Conception

Conceptually, the ideal place of residence for the elderly in old age follows three patterns: the first is the elderly, who conform with the social and cultural conception to live with their married children; the second is the elderly living in their own home; and, the third is the elderly living with their mature children who are unmarried (Achmad, 2016).

In the first conception, the problem of where the elderly will live has been arranged in the social structure of the Karo community. This decision is based on a series of arrangements. The elderly should live with their sons rather than daughters, as stated by informant G (75), who is also considered a traditional leader, said:

"The elderly lives with their sons and therefore, the son gets more inheritance than the daughter in order to support and care for their parents."

This pattern is also confirmed by informant B (70):

"We prefer to live with the son. If we live with the daughter, it means we stay with the son-in-law, not with our own, it's not good and is a burden to the other people's son."

In the second conceptual pattern, the elderly are happy to live alone in their old house, even though it is quiet at home without friends or friends talking (Kusmiati, 2009). This statement was obtained from the results of interviews with several informants, one of whom was informant F who said:

"*It is best to stay in our own house. It's up to us, nobody is angry or forbidding. And it is more comfortable having lived in it for decades.*"

The same thing is also stated by informant G, an elderly widow.

"It's nice to live in one's own house, nothing to think about, quiet too, in the son's house, if he and the grandchildren go out, it will be quiet too in the morning. Here I can go to the field and chat with friends the same age."

Children's objections to the elderly going to the field and having friends in the home, are reasons why the elderly do not want to live with their married children.

The third pattern is that the elderly lives with their unmarried children because they consider them as their dependents, even though their children are adults and working. While their children remain unmarried, their children will live with their elderly parent(s). This means that there are also a group of elderly people who live with their children, as stated by informant C.

"*There are also those who live with their unmarried children. Poor them. At least there's still someone who take care of them*".

So the reason the elderly live with their unmarried children is not because they are happier or more loving towards their unmarried children, but rather they are carrying out the responsibilities of being a parent to their unmarried children. Informant Q says that:

"*Children should live with their parents. As long as they are not married, they are still their parents' dependents; they still live with their parents and are provided with food. Just like taking care of kids.*"

Children's or Family's Perspectives

From the perspective of children and families there are two main factors which underlie the reason why children expect the elderly to live with them. The first factor is that children accept responsibility to care for their elderly parents in accordance with prevailing custom. In this custom sons receive a greater inheritance in supporting parents in their old age. The second factor is because children want to serve their parents.

The prevailing custom that elderly parents will live in their son's house is known and understood by all members of the Karo community. Sons support their parents in old age just like any other culture that is understood and embraced by various ethnic communities in Indonesia. Children looking after elderly parents is also a form of appreciation and respect by children for what they have received when still a family dependent. One of the informants stated:

"Yes, the elderly should live with their sons. Because parents have raised them, cooked for them by the sweat of their brow, not letting them stay ignores all of this. (D 45 years old)

Daughters-in-law in the home were asked about worries or objections to looking after a mother-in-law. This was not

seen as an issue with one informant saying:

"a wife will obey the husband, it is impossible for the wife not to be loving towards her husband's mother. So elderly parents will live with the son and that's no problem" (E, 40)

Sons assume that those who finance all their parents' needs after old age are their children, especially sons. Children will pay for their parents even though they may not live with them. In fact, if a daughter wants to help financially in paying for her parents' expenses, the daughter must ask her brother for permission to avoid conflict with her siblings. She must also ensure the gift is not more expensive than the gift given by her brother.   This is clearly stated by an informant who is considered as a traditional leader of the village where the elderly live:

  "[Whether] Living or not living with elderly parents at home; the son will finance the expenses of his elderly parents. If elderly parents live with the son, every cost will be paid by him but many of the elderly do not want to live with their children, they live at their old house nevertheless the children will transfer money for their parents needs." (G, 80)

This statement is corroborated by an informant, who is the son of one of the elderly:

  "although the ideal is to live with a son, but sometimes the parent feels more comfortable with a daughter, that's why it's okay, it's still a sibling. Costs for the needs of parents are sent or given to the daughter so that the son-in-law does not feel burdened by the parents of the daughter. The main thing is that elderly parents want to stay and feel comfortable, the children just come along. It's bad when you argue with your parents, then they will be offended and disappointed". (F, 40).

The children's or family's position on the elderly's place of residence is influenced by the obligations of a child towards their parents. This is coupled with the existence of a more democratic understanding by following the wishes of the elderly, but still fulfilling their responsibilities in meeting the needs of the elderly.

Different Perceptions in Caring for the Elderly

In social interaction in the family sometimes there is friction. Friction is sometimes the result of regulations that might be seen as something small and trivial. Areas of conflict between children and the elderly are listed in the following table:

Table 1. Different Perceptions in Caring for the Elderly

MATERIAL	PARENTS	CHILDREN
ACTIVITIES IN FIELD	Elderly parents still like to farm in the field	Seeing the elderly parent's condition, the children can't bear this and are worried if they should get ill, children forbid elderly parents to do any activities in the field
CLOTHES	Don't like to wear new clothes. Just simple clothes	Insist on good clothes
FOOD	Simple food	Nutritious food in order to stay healthy
PAMPERING GRANDCHILDREN	Pampering grandchildren	Pampering grand children too much can make them naughty in the future
ACCOUNTING	Do not want to spend more for their needs	Having a lot of money, but living simply and appearing poor
RESIDENCE	Living alone in a very simple house	Should live together in a more comfortable house

Source: Analysis based on interviews with elderly and their families

The table above shows the desires of the elderly that are contrary to the wishes of the child towards the perception of caring for the elderly. This table also illustrates areas of conflict between the elderly and children.

4. Discussion

Why does intergenerational conflict occur?

The results show the unwillingness of the elderly to live in their sons' homes, who feel the ideal place to live is in their own homes. Differences in perspective between children and parents, sometimes resulted in various tensions that

disrupt psychological and social relationships. For people in Karo, the son is positioned so as to control most of the inheritance, and therefore he is expected to have greater responsibility for his parents. The important responsibilities of the son also included the role of supporting the elderly, in which some of the assets are intended to provide financial assistance to parents.

Differences in preferences create conflict between children and the elderly unless discussed and solved properly. The elderly living in a son's house is facilitated by the son controlling most of the family's inheritance. All the responsibilities for looking after the elderly in the family will be left to sons. This also happens in many countries, for instance in Japan, sons become responsible for elderly parents. For this reason, a company will be bequeathed by Japanese families to their sons (Hardiansyah, 2012).

This study has found, however that the elderly prefers to live alone. For the elderly, living alone is more comfortable and not feeling as if they are a burden. The elderly did not want to live as a co-residents which will cause new problems for them. They have to adjust to new conditions, both in terms of physical location, feelings and habits. Morning habits such as sitting in a stall, then going to the fields, are no longer possible. These changes obviously need adaptation which can cause discomfort at the end of life (Filion et al., 1993). Instead the elderly will prefer to live with their unmarried children. This is done because the elderly assume that unmarried children are still their responsibility, even though the child is an adult.

There is inter-generational conflict where children who are married hope that the elderly will live with them, while in contrast the elderly do not want to live with their married children, worrying about losing the things that give them satisfaction. The nature of this conflict makes it a unique discussion (Pillemer & Suitor, 2006).

Conflict between the elderly and their children is avoidable it there is understanding or tolerance between children and the elderly in dealing with the wishes of the children and the wishes of the elderly. The understanding is that the elderly may choose to live anywhere, but as an obligation a child will continue to pay for all the needs of the elderly. So, the child will send some money to the elderly to pay for the elderly's needs. This understanding is a way out of conflicts between generations in a family.

Relationship between Culture and Elderly Care

Several studies have shown that the culture in a society provides a strong underpinning for behaviors supporting elderly people of various ethnicities (Maridaki-Kassotaki et al., 2020). It is obvious then that the perspectives of the children and families on how to care for the elderly is governed by the culture of a society. Each ethnic group or community has almost the same culture, but how cultural adherents implement its values in the practice of community life sometimes varies.

However, this study shows different conditions are operating with regard to the relationship between the elderly and children compared to other studies. In the Nias trib, for instance, respect for the elderly is called "*Carrying Lewato*", which means the gate of the graveyard. This symbolises that death is near. Therefore, children and their descendants will always care for the elderly well and carefully. Children will offer good food and proper clothing and obey their commands and serve them respectfully (Laiya 1983).

There are different cultural influences affecting the elderly throughout the world community. In Korean society, as indicated by the study of Sung (Sung, 2008), culture regulates how the family should respect and serve the elderly. For Chinese society the culture regulates sleep hours for the elderly so that they stay healthy (Lin, 2014).

Family perspectives in caring for the elderly are indeed different, but it refers to an ideal perspective. The reason for the elderly living in their own home and in the family allows family members to carry out the function of obligations that have been taught by culture and religion, namely respecting parents (Adib, 2008).

It is also enforced by the State that the elderly were appropriately cared for. In Ministry of Social Affairs Regulation No. 11 in 2009 regarding Social Welfare Article 64 paragraph 2 it states that for those who neglect the elderly they will be subject to appropriate sanctions. It seems that this legal sanction has not yet been invoked with the conviction of a child for abandoning his parents. Whereas in society there are social sanctions in the form of criticism and ridicule of children who neglect the elderly.

In contrast in the Karo community, there are norms that limit communication between sons-in-laws and daughters-in-law as well as between brothers and sisters. This custom is called the "*Rebu custom*" (Sembiring, 2014). The *rebu custom* does not mean that you cannot speak, but there are limitations in communication. This limitation is obeyed as a norm and is an etiquette also between family members which has been practised for a long time by the Karo community. Therefore, as indicated by Achmad et al. (2018) the elderly are reluctant to live with their children. According to this custom, a father-in-law is not allowed to communicate with his son-in-law. So, the problem arises, how can they feel comfortable living in a house if they are not allowed to communicate.

Importance of Authority

This research shows that the elderly who are living autonomously is the result of friction between the different conceptions of the elderly and their children as to the ideal place to live. The elderly of Karo ethnicity are old people who cannot be opposed or denied what they want. Therefore, what came to be called the autonomy of the elderly, plays a role in supporting the elderly's conception of the ideal place to live rather than the wishes of their children and families. This contradicts Liu et al. (2013) who have indicated that the elderly living alone was inclined to utilize less preventive health care services, and therefore have a higher level of risk to their health.

Problems will arise if the elderly feel their wishes, seen as needs, are not being met. A rebuttal will cause psychological discomfort that can eventually alienate and reduce the health of the elderly. Activities such as working in the fields remains an important part of their life that they do not want to leave. Although in the fields they only do simple work such as cleaning, and weeding it is nevertheless part of something they have been doing for a long time and if they stop working in the field, they do not feel well. On the other hand, children seeing the condition of parents who are old become afraid their parents could get injured. Therefore, children forbid the elderly to do farming. If the children continue to protect their parents by not letting them go farming it will make the children uncomfortable. In fact, one of the goals of supporting the elderly is for the elderly to live happily, enjoying the rest of their lives.

The elderly wants to have the freedom to choose for themselves what they want to do and to wear. The elderly wants to manage their lives without anyone else regulating it even though it is their own child. Interference and regulating make the elderly feel that they do not have power over themselves and are not independent. This is contrary to the principle of the elderly Karo who do not want dependence on others (Achmad, 2016).

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate family conflict stemming from caring for the elderly in the Karo ethnic group in North Sumatera. This study has found there is conflict caused by different perspectives in the Karo ethnic group that occurs in the family which causes the elderly to feel uncomfortable and want to live alone or go to a nursing home. The key findings are: *first* the ideal conception of a residence where the elderly will live in old age is related to various social and cultural aspects of the society where the elderly live. Cultural factors play an equally important role with social factors in determining where the elderly people should live. *Second*, perspectives of the social structure of the family that exist in society are interrelated with the function of affection creating compliance and tolerance as part of the function of family members. *Third,* the conflict between interests and obligations of children towards their parents feeling satisfied results in a conflict that ultimately allows the elderly to choose their residence.

This study implies that research on the elderly should also investigate sociocultural aspects of the elderly. The authhonomy expected by the elderly in this study has shown that being elderly does not necessarily mean being a dependant. This study does not pretend to cover the intergenerational relationship in taking care of the elderly, as this study mainly was focused on the Karo ethnic group. Other research projects need to be conducted in different setttings and areas in order to investigate whether intergenerational problems have also occured between the elderly and their children.

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