Changing Intergenerational Transfers, Household Structure, and the Wellbeing of Elderly People in Bangladesh.

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Abstract

In the 1970s and 1980s, commentators on Bangladesh attributed high levels of fertility in part to the reliance on children as security in old age. Since then, Bangladesh has undergone a rapid fertility decline, along with a host of other forms of social and economic change. This paper considers evidence on shifts in household composition and intergenerational transfers and asks what these mean for the wellbeing of elderly people. Against a review of the broader literature on these issues, it presents new data from primary research on wellbeing in two districts in Bangladesh in the mid-2000s. These suggest significant hazards with respect to older people’s wellbeing, in the form of increased levels of transfer from older to younger generations; changing household structures and family relations resulting in reduced security for care in old age; and challenges to older people’s ideals about the entitlements proper to their stage in life, and more broadly their sense of how things are and ought to be.

Introduction

In the 1970s and 1980s the density of population and the rapid rate of its increase were like a mantra repeated dutifully within the first few pages of virtually every publication on Bangladesh. While some put this down to religion, others to the fertility of the soil, and others to the absence of contraceptive options, many favoured a sociological explanation. They argued that low levels of technology put labour at a premium, and the absence of any effective state welfare meant that parents invested in children as insurance for old age. With levels of infant mortality as high as one in four, people could never be sure that a child would survive, so they increased their number of children as insurance of the insurance. Attention was overwhelmingly concentrated at the beginning of the life span, but some also considered the implications for the elderly. Mead Cain in particularly was notable for his work on the dire consequences for elderly people of ‘reproductive failure’, defined as the absence of surviving sons (Cain, 1986).¹ His conclusion was a bold prophecy:

¹ This definition does not reflect Cain’s sexism, but rather his reading of the structures of patriarchy in Bangladesh at that time, which reserved labour that could produce a liveable income to men only.
that the pursuit of individual security goals will continue to produce fertility rates that are well above replacement levels.’ (ibid: 388)

In fact, however, Bangladesh has seen a marked decline in fertility, from an average of 6.3 births per woman in the late 1970s, to 2.7 in 2007 (NIPORT et al. 2009). While some have seen this as an exceptional about turn, others trace the beginnings of fertility decline to the early 1960s (Dyson, 1996, in Egero, 1998) and point out that fertility trends proclaimed as rapid in Bangladesh are comparable to those of states seen as rather slow in the Indian context (Das Gupta and Narayana, 1996, in Egero, 1998). Most commentators, however, concur that the change has been remarkable, and have concentrated their attention on why it has come about. The central intervention here, thrown like a stone into the social demographers’ pool, was a World Bank report by Cleland (1994) which claimed that the change had taken place in the absence of the social and economic change usually expected in a demographic transition, and thus could be attributed largely to the success of programmes promoting population control. The ripples caused by this study are still being felt, and have led to a forceful assertion of the significant processes of social and economic transformation that Bangladesh has been undergoing over this period (see e.g. Caldwell et al. 1999). This is the position of this paper also. Rather than discussing fertility in itself, however, I approach Cain’s prophecy from the other direction. Given his observation that security in old age has historically been achieved through high fertility, I ask what are the implications of the changed demographic context for the wellbeing of elderly people in Bangladesh. More specifically, I draw attention to specific shifts in the terms of intergenerational transfers, which see the older generation investing more heavily in the younger, and getting fewer, and less secure, transfers in return. I suggest that this does amount to a significant hazard for elderly people, not only in the material terms that Cain emphasised, but also in their social and psychological sense of the way things are and should be.

The research on which this paper draws was conducted in 2006 in two villages - one in Dinajpur district in North-West Bangladesh, and the other in Manikganj, a district close to Dhaka, the capital city. This involved individual interviews with 70 respondents and 16 focus group discussions. Of the 70 respondents, 58 were from couples in which husband and wife were interviewed separately; 10 were elderly people who provided individual life histories; and 2 were focused on religion and family life. The project was part of the Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) research programme based at the University of Bath, UK, 2002-7 (www.welldev.org.uk). The interviews were conducted by members of the WeD Bangladesh team, following profiles which I had constructed. Most people were interviewed once, but the researchers returned to twenty of the couple informants with a further more targeted set of questions. Figures on household composition and other more general information were gathered through the WeD household questionnaire administered to 1500 households across three sites in each state, one urban and two rural. To capture a more extended sense of change over time, this contemporary data is set against discussions of household structure and intergenerational relationships in a series of earlier village studies, conducted from the 1960s to the 1990s, including my own doctoral fieldwork in 1985-6.

2 The case studies are coded as follows. If the first digit is zero the district was Manikganj, otherwise it was Dinajpur. Then comes the couple numbers, followed by a for female, b for male. The capital letter shows religion, ‘M’ for Muslim or ‘H’ for Hindu. The final letter provides a very rough economic categorisation: ‘r’ for rich, ‘m’ for middle, ‘p’ for poor. The respondent profile is as follows: Manikganj total 33: 7 Hindu 26 Muslim; 7 rich 13 middle, 13 poor; Dinajpur: total 37: 5 Hindu, 30 Muslim, 2 Santal (Advisi); 4 rich, 26 middle, 7 poor. The sample was chosen to provide a range of experience, not to be representative of the villages as a whole. All names have been changed.

3 The WeD programme undertook a mixed method, interdisciplinary study of wellbeing with country teams in Peru, Ethiopia, Thailand and Bangladesh.

4 The authors, time of fieldwork, and districts of study are as follows: Bertocci, 1960s, Comilla; Aziz, Comilla, 1974; Arens & Van Beurden,1974-5, Kushtia; Hartmann & Boyce, 1975, Rajshahi Division; Cain et
Cleland’s (1994) report notwithstanding, Bangladesh has undergone a remarkable transformation over the forty years since Independence, with an accelerated rate of integration within and exposure to outside forces, or globalised development. This takes material form in new roads, new businesses, new schools and offices, increased traffic of people and goods, more electrification, more sanitation, more media and communication. Perhaps most striking in social terms, traditional purdah prohibitions on women doing work ‘outside’ the household have shifted with increased needs for cash income and increased diversity of options for employment. While some still maintain that women should not work outside the home, for most people the major issues now are the kind of work, what and where it is done, and how women conduct themselves within it. Such discussions take place amongst a more generalised reflection on how ‘these times’, as people seek to make sense of the changes they are experiencing. Along with gender, changes in generational relationships form a significant focus of concern, both because they remain critical conduits for social welfare, and because they symbolise and embody the fundamental moral order.

In this paper I consider a small portion of this ferment. I begin by describing the understanding of wellbeing that I am using, and some basic structures of inter-generational relationships in Bangladesh. I then reflect on changes in household structure, setting our research in the broader context of village studies conducted in what is now Bangladesh since the 1960s. I then consider two trends which have resulted in older generations making greater financial contributions to the younger generation, but receiving less in return. These are increases in formal education, and the rising level of dowry payments. Finally I consider the implications these have for how elderly people talk about their relationships, and the significance this has for their sense of wellbeing.

**Structures of Relationship and Wellbeing**

This paper adopts the approach to wellbeing developed through WeD (Gough and McGregor, 2007; White 2010). This sees wellbeing as a multidimensional concept which integrates material, relational, and subjective dimensions. Wellbeing is experienced when people have what they need for life to be good. The material refers to the ‘stuff’ of wellbeing, such as food, bodies, shelter and the physical environment. This is in turn grounded in the relational, which concerns social interaction, the rules and practices that govern who gets what and why. In Bangladesh, this is structured strongly through kinship and family relations, which are patriarchal and patrilineal. This configures an ideology of male primary provision of basic resources, which female labour transforms into everyday consumption. While the main responsibilities lie with adults, historically children have contributed to household provision from an early age, especially where adult labour is lacking. Intergenerational relations are strongly hierarchical, but also cyclical and reciprocal. The structure of kin relations provides the grid for people’s location in life, ranking people by gender, birth order, generation, and maternal or paternal line. Convention specifies the substance as well as the structure of kin-based relations. While the father and his line stand for hierarchy and discipline, the mother and her line stand for comfort and support. This is mediated by age and birth ranking, however. The younger brother of the father, for example, is conventionally pictured as a gentler, more supportive figure, to both the sister-in-law/mother and her children.

al 1976-8, Mymensingh; Siddiqui, 1977-8 and 1997, Jessore; Jansen, 1976-80, Dhaka; Nath, 1978, Rajshahi; Islam, 1981, Tangail; Rozario, 1983-4, Dhaka; Ahmed and Naher, 1983-4, Narayanganj; White, 1985-6, Rajshahi. Studies done in different parts of the country with different areas of primary focus clearly cannot be read as providing a simple illustration of change over time. However, they do provide some longitudinal perspective on broad social trends.

5 For a fuller reflection on the moral order in Bangladesh, see Devine and White, 2009.
Overall, the life cycle is envisaged in terms of reciprocal (though unequal) exchange which accomplishes key transitions. Parents give birth to children, and give care and guardianship through childhood, up to and including their responsibility to get their children married. In old age, parents should receive care from their children, and in death their children's prayers enable their souls to move on (Aziz 1979). The life cycle is also strongly gendered. Girls and women are configured as properly dependent on male guardianship throughout their lives: on their fathers until marriage; on their husbands after marriage; and on their sons in widowhood. Norms of reciprocity across the generations are imagined primarily in male terms. It is the birth of a son that signals most securely the successful transition to adulthood; it is to their sons (often the youngest) that parents look for support in old age; and it is the prayers of the son that are critical at the time of death. While it receives less overt cultural celebration, the obedience of the son is delivered through the compliance of the daughter-in-law, as it is on female labour that the care of the elderly depends.

The final, subjective dimension of wellbeing concerns cultural values and ideologies and people's own feelings and perspectives. While Western ideologies like to position this as a free zone of authentic experience, in fact it too is structured in social terms (Abu Lughod, 1986). In Bangladesh, a critical idiom through which people negotiate these models of kinship and life transition, is the opposition between two categories: ‘apon’, own, and ‘por,’ other. This refers primarily to affect, degrees of closeness or belonging. It arises most straightforwardly when people want to clarify a relationship. Is a ‘brother’ one’s own brother (apon bhai), someone with the same parents as oneself or is he some other kind of brother – a cousin, or a friend whom one has ‘adopted’ as a brother? When a girl is married, she goes to a ‘porer bari’ (other’s house) a term expressive of social distance. A measure of belonging, by extension it also refers to feelings of distance or closeness. Ideally the two systems should overlap – one should feel close to those who are (according to the biological referents of kinship terminology) close. In practice things are not so clear. In the first place, as Das (1993) argues, ‘culture’ may at once appear to celebrate ‘natural ties’ and call for them to be transcended. Secondly, as Bourdieu (1977) warns, kinship terminology may specify the pathways, but in practice some will be well-worn, and others overgrown and indiscernible for lack of use.

Changing Household Structures

Before considering the evidence on household structures drawn from a range of studies, it is worth reflecting on the hazards involved in such an approach. First, village studies are located in different parts of the country. Although Bangladesh is often said to be homogenous compared with many multi-ethnic and multi-language states, there is still considerable variation between different regions in factors such as average landholding size, religious composition, level of economic development, and of course proximity to Dhaka and other urban centres. Comilla, in central south-eastern Bangladesh, is the district most intensively studied, with village studies sponsored by the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development In the 1960s and 1970s, and detailed and extensive surveys sponsored by the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B) more recently. Only one of the village studies measures changes over time directly: Kamal Siddiqui returned in 1997 for a re-study of the village he researched twenty years earlier (Siddiqui 1982; 2000). Second, methods of data gathering are quite different. The village studies vary from the highly quantitative, presenting a barrage of tables (such as Siddiqui), to the simply narrative, with no figures at all (Hartmann and Boyce, 1983). Most lie somewhere in between. Third, and most tellingly, the interests of the researchers affect what data are gathered, even at the fairly basic level of population and

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6 Women generally marry men five years or more older than themselves, so widowhood is common.
7 These include McCarthy, 1967; Bertocci, 1970; Huq et al. 1978; and Westergaard, 1983.
household statistics. Variability is particularly pronounced on the question of household structure. Few national household surveys include this directly, it generally needs to be reconstructed from data on relationship to household head, where this is available (see e.g. Foster, 1993). Many of the village studies similarly settle (if they consider it at all) only for the average number of household members. Others present only the headline categories of ‘nuclear’ and ‘joint’. These obscure information on other potentially interesting categories, such as single person households, or those with less standard combinations of kin. The implication of all this is that it would be mistaken to read the studies in too linear a way as simply representing an illustration of change over time. This being said, including some degree of a longitudinal perspective is valuable in trying to assess broad trends.

A shift from the cultural norm of the joint family household, in which married sons and their families live together in their father's house, to the nuclear household of parents and their children only, is a pillar of modernisation expectations. This has been contested on various grounds in the context of South Asia and elsewhere (e.g. Conklin 1973; Cain, 1978; Caldwell et al., 1984; Shah, 1998; Laslett 1972). The ‘rise and fall’ (Bertocci 1970:208) of the household life-cycle means that there have always been a significant number of non-joint households, whatever the cultural norm. Using the village studies to track changes over time is rather difficult, as different studies define household composition in different ways. The table below illustrates the figures from those village studies that present them. A shift towards a smaller average size of family household is relatively clear. In part at least this reflects the drop in fertility noted above. Figures on household structure are more difficult to interpret. What is clear is that joint family households have not been the numerical norm since at least the 1960s. Confounding the expectations of many villagers and scholars, figures on the proportion of nuclear family households are surprisingly constant. With an average of 56%, they perhaps show a weak direction of increase, but nothing like a major transformation. This is consistent with Foster’s (1993) analysis of ICDDR,B’s data on 25,000 households in 1974 and 1982. He found "no strong change over time" (ibid.:104) and that 59% of households included no-one other than spouse, wife and children of the head. He quotes a similar finding from Caldwell et al.’s 1984 study in South India: ‘Most people believe that families are changing even when their structure is not.’ 8 The strongest statement of change comes from Siddiqui (2000:279), who claims that the proportion of nuclear family households in his study village had ‘more than doubled’ between 1977 and 1997. This should be treated with some caution, however: the figures for 1977 are not presented in either the original (1982) or re-study publication; and he distinguishes essentially only two types of household, ‘nuclear’ and ‘joint’. 9

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9 For purposes of comparability, I have therefore subtracted for the table his figure for female headed households (8.4%) from his reported 72.5% ‘nuclear’ category, and included the former in the ‘single/sub-nuclear’ category. His record of only two cases of extended family households as against 63 joint (ibid) also seems rather surprising, and out of line with other studies. Without more information on how these terms were defined, it is difficult to know how to interpret them.
If the evidence is ambiguous about changes in overall household structure over time, the relations between wealth and household division seem to be much clearer. All the Bangladesh village studies that discuss the issue confirm the findings from peasant societies more broadly (Bertocci, 1970: 216) of a positive association between wealth and the likelihood of being a joint household. The converse of this is confirmed by a 2007 study of 2000 Bangladesh households across a range of sites previously surveyed in 1994, 1996, or 2000. Preliminary analysis shows that if a household is poor in the baseline it is more likely to split than if it is non-poor, and among households whose head did not die, chronically poor households were more likely to divide, while non-poor households were more likely to stay intact (Peter Davis, pers.comm.). This opens the possibility that the more significant structural change is not from joint to nuclear households, but division amongst already nuclear households, perhaps in the direction of more fragmentary household structures. No inference can be drawn across the village studies, which simply show tremendous variation. However, national figures on the proportion of female headed households do suggest increasing fragmentation. Siddiqui (1997:281) reports a ‘definite increase’ in female headed households, to 8.4% 1997. The Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2007 records an overall 12.8% of households as female headed, with more (13.2%) in rural than urban (11.4%) areas (NIPORT et al. 2009). 2.1% were single person households, with again a higher proportion (2.3%) in rural than urban areas. This perhaps reflects the fact that there is a higher proportion of elderly people (over sixty years old) in rural (7.5%) than urban (5.5%) areas, since it is elderly people who are most likely to be living alone.

10 Joint families include any that include a father and a married son, or two married siblings living together. Extended families are those of basically nuclear type, but with some additional members (usually a relative of the husband/father, also sometimes of the wife/mother). Nuclear families are husband, wife and children. Sub-nuclear households are either female headed, or couples with no children. Single households are people living alone. The final column shows female headed households as a percentage of the whole, which would typically have a strong overlap with the single and sub-nuclear types. These basic categories are taken from Bertocci, who in turn adopted them from Kolenda (1967). I have had to simplify slightly because of lack of detail across studies, and have re-named his ‘supplementary nuclear’, ‘extended’ as the more common term.
The general perception in our study villages and more broadly is that marital discord and divorce are on the increase. This reflects a more general sense of shifting structures of relationship, and challenge to the conventional moral order in which men and women, old and young, lived in the harmony of a gender/age hierarchy that was rarely questioned. However, figures from the older village studies certainly belie any notion that divorce is a recent phenomenon and one study reports that for Matlab at least, there are fewer divorces now than previously (ICDDR,B, 2006). Divorce is much more common amongst Muslims than Hindus. Bertocci (1970) records a divorce rate of more than 16% in the Comilla village he studied in the 1960s. Arens and Van Beurden (1980) suggest 15-20% for their study village, ‘Jhagrapur’ in Kushtia, Western Bangladesh. The name itself suggests that social strife is nothing new – ‘jhagra’ is Bengali for argument. Jansen (1986) gave a similar name to the Dhaka district village he studied between 1976-80, ‘Bhaimara’ – brothers fighting. He notes that divorce was ‘quite common’ (p 84) in the village, and quotes 1978 census figures as showing a 20% rate of divorce nationally. I found a divorce rate of 3% Hindus and 26% among Muslims11, in my 1985-6 study (White 1992). Alam et al. (2000) describe a 30% divorce rate in Teknaf 1982-3, compared with 16% in Matlab. Analysis of the Teknaf figures show 42% of the brides who had been divorced were still in their teens. The odds of divorce were higher in polygynous households; for women who had been married before, for younger marrying grooms; and for poorer people.

The shift away from joint living reflects a mix of many factors. Most obviously these include declining landholding per household as population rises; and the diversification of wages and sources of income, which make calculating fair shares in household resources much more complicated than they were in the past. Women’s outside employment can be a factor, either because it brings tensions with other women left to do all the work in the home, or because of the additional income it brings which people may be unready to share with the whole family. More rarely, women’s employment can enable household unification, when it offers an additional income source and encourages others in the family to view a woman with a new respect.

The most common explanation given for the perceived breakdown of joint family structures is that this reflects younger women’s desires to have an independent domain secure from the domination of their mothers-in-law. However, our data are equivocal on this. Older people, often talking in general terms, tend to blame the daughters-in-law and see it as another aspect of the broader shift towards less respect from the younger generation. However, in most specific cases that we have recorded the decision to divide is stated to have been that of the senior male – typically the husband’s father or sometimes the elder brother. This is something that could bear much closer research. It is difficult at the best of times to determine agency in family disputes, and disentangling the sequence of events from cultural narratives (e.g. of poor women as wreckers of family harmony; or of men as the ones who make the decisions) is especially hard. Costs and benefits are also disputed, with by no means all of the younger generation saying that separation is what they prefer. In most cases, however, ‘living separately’ still means that brothers are right next door, in separate rooms within the same living complex (bari). Some argue that this degree of separation actually facilitates good relations, that separate budgets and cooking lessens argument, and means that other tasks, such as childcare, can be more happily shared. What is less in doubt is the main group that loses by these arrangements. They leave elderly women particularly vulnerable, since differences by gender in age of marriage tend to mean that women outlive their husbands, and the establishment of their sons in a separate household means that mothers’ claims to protection and provision are by no means automatically honoured.

11 A significant proportion of these divorces were in one particular Muslim neighbourhood, however. This pattern of pockets of intensity has been noted in another study (ref) with respect to polygyny.
Increased transfers from old to young

The expansion of formal education is a striking feature of the changing landscape of contemporary Bangladesh. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2002) shows the literacy rate for the population of five years and upwards in 1981 was 23.8 percent, with the female rate 16 percent, and male 31. In 2001 the total figure is 43 percent, with the female rate at 39, and the male at 47 percent. Our figures are not directly comparable to the BBS, since they relate only to adults. Also, the totals are driven upwards by the inclusion of urban informants as one third of the sample: 85 percent of those in urban sites were able to read and write, compared with 54 percent in rural. Our data clearly show that literacy overall declines with ‘remoteness’ from the urban centres, but show no clear correlation of this with the degree of difference by gender. Across the whole sample of 1500 households, women’s literacy comes out as 12 percent behind men’s, a slightly greater gap than that which BBS records.

As children are staying longer at school, their contribution of labour to the household is proportionally reduced. Government programmes to encourage girls to stay at school notwithstanding, educating children also costs the family in direct financial terms. Aside from the payments associated with school itself, many families feel that their children must also go to a private tutor if they are to have a chance of doing well. In addition, for middle class families at least, demands on parents for social reproduction within the household have increased, especially with regards to supervising children’s education.

The costs of education notwithstanding, people show a striking level of commitment to it. In our interviews it appeared as an almost unquestioned good, a necessary investment in future prosperity, which justifies considerable expenditure even for quite poor families. The need to gain money to support children’s education is one of the accepted explanations for women going out to work. The importance of education is expressed in both material and symbolic terms, employing a mix of folk and liberal modernist idioms. It will increase earning power; enhance parents’ ability to support their children’s learning; extend humanity and understanding; and evoke social respect. What dissension there is from such views refers to anxieties about the moral order. While some see education as the ground of moral behaviour, others worry that educated young people are likely to have their own ideas. This is voiced particularly with respect to daughters-in-law, for whom compliance and malleability have historically been seen as the primary virtues. This links also to changing norms regarding the arrangement of marriage.

Narratives about change in the arrangement of matches are extremely common, especially in our focus group material. One concerns a shift from considerations of lineage (bongsho) to finance. This relates both to the high cost of dowries and to the economic standing of families, which is distinguished from their status or character. Another concerns a move from negotiation between families – and particularly the senior males within them – to greater involvement of the young couple themselves. Marriages are taking place later than they were, and the norm has shifted to ‘deka-dekhi’ (look-see) marriage, rather than the previous model of sight unseen. While this constitutes a shifting of the locus of control between the generations, the parents by no means always find it unwelcome. Some say that since marriages are now happening when the couple are more mature, and especially when they are educated, then they have more of a right to a say. Parents also express the fear that if things go wrong in the marriage, they will bear all the blame. To involve the couple themselves in the choice offers some protection against this. Even the relatively uncommon ‘love
marriages’, which still attract social censure, have the merit of offering one of the few chances of avoiding paying dowry.  

Where education is seen as a social good, the other major ‘new’ financial transfer from the older to younger generation is universally condemned as an evil. This is dowry, commonly called locally by the English term ‘demand’. A shift from the traditional practice of relatively limited gifting on marriage, borne mainly by the groom’s side, the presentation of large amounts of dowry from the bride’s family to the groom’s is now required almost universally, before a marriage can take place. For parents of daughters the scale of these transfers can be ruinous. Davis (2007:3) notes that dowry was rated first amongst causes of household economic decline by 116 focus groups across 11 Bangladeshi districts in 2006. There are many debates about the reason for this change and its implications, which I cannot rehearse here. What is of importance to the argument of this paper is that demand dowries constitute a further, sudden and intense moment of transfer across the generations. Many years ago Shirley Lindenbaum (1968) noted that dowries were significantly composed of display goods, that enabled grooms to display a certain form of modern masculinity. Our data shows that this has now been superceded. Dowries are now taking the form of significant amounts of cash, or (easily convertible) gold. Increasingly, grooms are using the payment that they gain on marriage to establish themselves in business. In one case in the sub-project, a marriage even took place quite explicitly on the expectation that the father-in-law would provide the groom with a job.

While the gender implications of inflated dowry demands have received most attention, they also have significant impact on generational relations. Dowries may be seen as a kind of pre-mortem inheritance, not - as some have argued - for the daughter through the blood line, but for the son-in-law through the affinal line. Parent-child relations are clearly governed by social norms and by affinity and affection, so to reduce them to economics is to do them violence. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that fathers (and less commonly, mothers) who control significant assets have more leverage over their sons than those who do not. This is part of the reason that sons of landless families are more likely to split away earlier from the parental household, than are those of landholding groups. With the high amounts of dowry now being paid, and being more usually kept by the grooms rather than passed onto their families, not only are fathers having to give away significant resources while they are still alive, but also sons are receiving such resources from other fathers, which reinforces their ability to be more independent of their own. This may be a further aggravating factor in the trend towards more nucleated family forms.

Decline of Affinity

The final way in which change is evident is in the substance of relationships and the feelings that this engenders. In older people’s narratives this often turns on a perceived re-centring on the marital rather than the parental relationship, associated with the changes discussed above in marriage arrangement and the decline of joint family living. This has a material aspect: many older people expressed doubt that they would receive their children’s support in old age. Others expressed resentment that they were still having to work, and even help out with their children’s responsibilities, rather than receiving help themselves, and therefore being released into a more leisurely existence. Osman Ali (17b) is one of these:

I don’t like any more hassle at this old age. I hoped that my sons would grow up and get proper jobs and look after me. But how can they look after me? They don’t have the

12 I discuss changing norms of marriage in greater depth in a companion paper.
13 I discuss these in my paper on marriage noted above. The trend affects most of North India as well as Bangladesh. For further discussion see Tomalin et al. 2009.
capabilities. That's why I have to keep the shop at this old age. And it is I who has to think about my own belly. My sons are supposed to think about me, but it is I instead who has to think about them. I have to support their children. There are many people in the world, and even in this village, who are fed by their earning sons. They may be eating only lentils and rice; still they can pass their time by praying to Allah in their old age. I don't have anything like that in my fate. My time passes while I keep shop. When can I manage the time to pray to Allah?

While at one level Osman Ali is complaining about his material situation, there is also another layer of meaning, a real sense that the norms of reciprocity are not being upheld, that relationships are not the way they are supposed to be. This gives a rather different register of concern, compared with people's comments changing norms of marriage arrangement, where the fears of disorder were rather generalised, reflections on the state of society, rather than threats to individual wellbeing. Where parents feel that their relations with their children are breaking down, and particularly that norms of intergenerational reciprocity no longer hold, this is, by contrast, a deeply personal matter. The final concern to be discussed here is thus the decline of affinity.

Hasina Bewa presents a fairly standard account of the ebb and flow of feelings of closeness or belonging, expressed by the term 'apon', but ends on a poignant note:

All do not remain apon always. At different times different people become apon. During my childhood, my parents and siblings were the most apon. None else were more apon than them. After marriage, as I moved away from them, they became por at least to a little extent. People in fact become apon or por because of attachment. Staying close means one becomes more attached. Moving away reduces it. Coming to one's husband's home after marriage, all in the in-laws' home become apon gradually. When children are born, the attachment to them becomes the strongest. Although even now I feel attachment to all, I'm alone now. No-one is that apon any more now. Now no-one needs me, but I need everyone.

The pain that Hasina Begum expresses is given a particular sharpness by the cultural context. As Sarah Lamb (1997) describes for the middle class Hindu Bengalis she studied, the end of life is culturally seen as a time when the elderly should be shedding ties, rather than longing for closeness that others deny them.

Ayesha Begum (16a Mm) describes how affinity can decline, even in the closest of family relationships:

'But my son after marriage became por from me. Earlier he could think of nothing else but his mother. But as his wife doesn’t want it, he doesn’t even eat with us. Even though he stays under the same roof, we feel he is far away. My daughter-in-law has made her husband apon, but not us.'

In a culture where the mother-son relationship is perhaps the most highly stressed and celebrated, such a statement is an extremely strong and painful one to make. It does not, however, reflect an isolated bad relationship, but a more general feeling amongst older people concerning the growing tendency for young couples to move out of the joint family household. Osman Ali (17b) expresses this clearly:

14 The extent to which older people in Buenos Aires may remain net contributors to their children, rather than the reverse, is discussed by Lloyd-Sherlock and Locke, 2008.

15 Although there are obviously differences by religion between Hindus and Muslims, there is nevertheless considerable culture in common amongst Bengalis of whatever community.
‘Earlier sons would stay with parents even after marriage. They would bear the responsibilities of their wives simultaneously with that of their parents. But now, after marriage it is only their wives whom they feel to be apon. They forget their responsibility to their parents. If there is any quarrel between wife and mother, the son favours the wife no matter whose fault it might be. During our time, it was not like this. The position of mother was above everything. Even if she was in the wrong, we accepted her view as she was our mother. Now, even though they stay under the same roof, the father’s home is no longer apon to sons after marriage. But you can’t say that they become completely par. It is the sons who look after their father in need and bury them when they die. You can only say that the relationship is less close.’

Osman Ali suggests the ‘multi-stranded’ character of the parent-son relationship of love and support is being stripped down to the essential elements that cannot be substituted for: the ritual and representational functions. Other respondents indicated that in their disappointment with sons they are seeking more material and emotional support from their married daughters. In general the data suggest that the substitutability of functions between sons and daughters may be greater than one would suppose and has historically been the case. Closer relations with daughters after marriage are of course also facilitated by improved road and communications. A more bi-furcated set of relations between parents and children, augmenting the ‘traditional’ primary dependence on sons with greater closeness to daughters and sons-in-law, would also be consistent with the argument regarding the logic of marriage payments set out above. However, it must be emphasised that these are simply indicative findings. Further research would be needed to discover whether they reflect any more general patterns.

For some elderly people who find themselves alone, there is great bitterness. The way things should be presents a judgement on the way things are, producing a sense of isolation and grievance. Thus Rahima (010a Mm) laments:

‘As long as you have a body to work, then you’ll have apon people; once your body is weak there is no-one left who is apon, not even your own son.’  
(ei dehota jotodin ache totodin apon, deho poira gele keu apon na, cheleo na).

This evokes Sylvia Vatuk’s (1990) observation amongst the elderly people in India, that to depend on their families in general was an accepted part of life, part of the proper order of things, but what they feared was bodily infirmity, which would make them dependent on others for their core functions. Even worse than having to depend on others, of course, is having no-one on whom you can depend. A sense of isolation was expressed by several of our elderly respondents. As Bina Rani (09a Hr) put it:

‘the only person close to me is God.’ (gobido-e amar apon).

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16 This term is used in South Asian sociology to describe the multiple links of for example land tenancy, labour and credit relations that may tie together patrons and clients.
Conclusion

The paper shows that elderly people in Bangladesh face a paradox of increasing investment in children through education and inflated marriage payments, just at a time that parents express less security in their hopes of care from their children in old age. The development literature has lauded rising levels of education, and decried high levels of dowry, especially from a gender perspective. Relatively few, however, have looked at the implications these have for changing generational relations. This paper joins a rising chorus which suggest that the elderly deserve to be taken much more explicitly into account in poverty-focused research and policy, and this already shows signs of being one of the major themes for the years 2010-20 (see e.g. UNDESA, 2008). This promise of taking wellbeing as focus lies in its commitment to explore the roundedness of things, the symbolic along with the material, people’s subjectivity along with their practical circumstances. The situation of elderly people in Bangladesh brings out clearly the centrality of the relational in grounding both material and subjective. It also reinforces the interplay of economic/political and socio/cultural orders, with the more intimate dimensions of love and affinity.

References


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