

## DESIRED AND ACHIEVED PRIVACY AND INTERACTION IN MULTIGENERATIONAL HOMES

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### Abstract

*It is imperative that the home environment functionally support the way families interact in response to the social changes of an elder parent moving in with an adult child while similarly accommodating the privacy of the individual family members. Privacy and the interactions that occur with family members in the home impact the use and functionality of the environment. The purpose of this study was to explore home environments, specifically looking at the privacy and interaction of an elder parent and an adult child living in a multigenerational home. Ten households of parents, 65 years and older, and their adult children, 30 years and older residing in the same home, were selected for case studies. All case studies involved a semi-structured interview, an activity log, architectural documentation, and a questionnaire. The findings revealed that the majority of families was achieving their desired level of privacy and interaction by setting up various boundaries and routines. The kitchen was cited as the space most used for interacting, while the bedroom was considered the most private space within the multigenerational home.*

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### Introduction

Interaction is important in sustaining family relations; however, it is equally necessary for family members to have their own personal space. Individuals need to be able to find private space within their residence for the continuous developmental process of self-identity (Harrison, 1994). It is healthy for family unity to have spaces within the home where interaction can occur as well as private space where individuals can be autonomous (Gunter, 2000). This is even more critical when an elderly parent and an adult child live together, creating a multigenerational family household.

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*HOUSING AND SOCIETY*, Volume 37, Issue 1, Pages 25–41.  
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*HOUSING AND SOCIETY*, 37(1), 2010

People age 65 years and older represented 12.8% of the total population in the United States in 2008 (Administration of Aging, 2009), and 5% of men and 17% of women age 65 years and older live with a nonspousal relative (Federal Interagency Forum, 2008). The population of persons age 65 years and older is projected to grow with the possibility of reaching 20% of the population by the year 2030 (Administration on Aging, 2009). According to the Federal Interagency Forum (2008), 14% of total healthcare expenditures were for long-term care facilities. In 2004, the average expenditure among occupants of long-term care facilities was \$52,958, compared with \$10,448 among community occupants. With an aging society, the role of the family as primary caregiver is projected to continue and expand (Brandon, 2008). Thus, the number of multigenerational households will likely grow, creating a need to understand how housing can help meet privacy needs for both generations.

Altman (1975) views privacy as a limited access approach relying not only on the physical separation from others, but the ability to control interactions, both visual and verbal. Achieving the desired level of privacy is a constant balancing act. Too little levels of privacy result in crowding and overly excessive amounts result in isolation. Desired and achieved privacy levels are essential to Altman's privacy model. Desired privacy is an individual's ideal level of contact with others at any specific point in time, whereas achieved privacy refers to the actual level of contact experienced by an individual at a particular point in time (Altman, 1975).

A minimum degree of privacy is fundamental to a healthy residential environment (Harrison, 1994); however, each individual within the residence may have a different view of the desired amount of privacy (Stewart-Pollack & Menconi, 2005). An individual's age, stage of life, and cultural background have an impact on privacy preferences (Stewart-Pollack & Menconi, 2005). The use of privacy can also serve as a major function of sustaining family relations (Berado, 1998) by providing experiences that sustain normal individual functions, stable interpersonal relationships, and continuous personal development (Margulis, 2003).

The home environment should provide optimal levels of both privacy and interaction with others. Miller and Maxwell (2003) examined family interaction patterns in the home by exploring parents' design preferences

for areas associated with promoting interaction. Their study concluded that spaces that support concurrent activities best facilitate family interactions. The kitchen and family or living rooms were spaces cited as being used most often. Sebba and Churchman (1983) investigated how individual family members classified each area and piece of furniture within the home in terms of ownership. They found that if clearly defined areas were not established, those areas were susceptible to becoming a source of conflict.

Altholz (1986) believes that in order for aging parents to retain independence, their living arrangements “should provide opportunities for interaction and intimacy, as well as for personal development and privacy” (p. 79). The sense of being at home is enhanced by familiar things, which can ease the transition to a new location for the elder parent (Eshelman & Evans, 2002). Personal items provide individuals with a sense of control over their surroundings and their own existence (Koncelik, 2003), connecting the aging adult with the ongoing process of self-identity (Boschetti, 1990). These items may also provide a psychological connection to previous moments in their lives, reminding them of meaningful experiences or loved ones (Rechavi, 2009). This comfort is important because the amount of time people spend inside their homes increases with age. Eshelman and Evans (2002) suggest providing an easily accessible location to display and integrate personal possessions into the parent’s bedroom if not in the rest of the home.

In a study of characteristics of the primary caregiver and the dependent elderly relative, Mindel and Wright (1982) identified that family life satisfaction in multigenerational homes increased if there were no feelings of inconvenience concerning the living arrangements. Additionally, a higher activity level of the elderly person corresponded with lower perceptions of inconvenience by the primary caregiver. Pruchno, Dempsey, Carder, and Koropecy-Cox’s (1993) study looked at household characteristics in relation to perceptions of household space and caregiving stress in multigenerational families. Their findings showed that the increased amount of time an elderly parent spent in shared living spaces, the more negative the daughter’s husband’s perception of the residence became. Hess and Markson (1980) believe that multigenerational housing could lead to loss of personal privacy, limiting leisure and social activities, and may dictate physical rearrangements of space within home.

A multigenerational family home can therefore play an important role in allowing both the elder parent and adult child to achieve their desired blend of privacy and interaction. It is imperative that the home environment functionally support the way families interact in response to the social changes of an aging parent moving in with an adult child while similarly accommodating the privacy of the individual family members. Privacy and the interactions that occur with family members in the home affect the use and functionality of the residence. Empirical studies regarding privacy and interaction perceptions of adults residing in multigenerational families are non-existent.

The purpose of this study was to explore home environments, specifically looking at the privacy and interaction of an elder parent and an adult child living in a multigenerational home. Specific questions of this study include: (a) Are there differences in privacy and interaction perceptions between the parent and the adult child in a multigenerational home? (b) What environmental factors, including spatial layout, type of rooms, size of the residence, etc., do residents perceive as affecting privacy and interaction in a multigenerational home?

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

The target population for this study was parents, age 65 years and older, and adult children, 30 years and older, biologically related to the parent and residing in the same home. The sample of parents was not suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's disease in order to ensure that the elder parents' perspectives were obtained and valid. The participating families were found through criterion purposive sampling with a snowball effect.

The total sample size consisted of 10 families (10 elder parents and 10 adult children) found in the greater mid-Michigan area. The sample included nine adult female children, one adult male child, eight elder female parents, and two elder male parents. The most frequent age range of the adult child was 55 to 59 years old; the most frequent age range of the parent was 80 to 84 years old. All of the parents were retired; nine of the adult children were

working. All of the parents were widowed, while five of the adult children were married, two were single, two were divorced, and the remaining one was widowed. In the majority of the cases (8), the elder parent moved in with his or her adult child. The number of people residing within the home varied from two to four with an average of 2.9 persons. The number of generations residing within the home varied from two to three with a mean of 2.3. All of the families owned their homes; the size of the homes ranged from 1,200 to 2,400 square feet ( $M = 1,705$  square feet).

### ***Instruments***

The instruments utilized in this exploratory multiple-case study were a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview using both closed and open-ended questions, an activity log, and architectural documentation. The family perspective utilized in this study required responses from multiple family members.

*Questionnaire.* A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect initial demographic, home, and perception information. Responses to demographic information, such as gender, ethnicity, age, and marital status, were presented in categories; questions about square footage of the home, and length of time resided in the home were left open ended so the participant could manually fill in the answers. The questionnaire also contained questions pertaining to an individual's desired and achieved levels of interaction based on Harrison's (1994) study. His instrument measured the ideal amount of interaction an individual wants and the amount of interaction an individual actually has with his/her family in their home. Responses were recorded using a 7-point rating scale ranging from "1," little interaction, to "7," a lot of interaction.

*Interviews.* Personal interviews were conducted with both the elder parent and the adult child. The guided interview questions were semi-structured to invite an open response. The interview questions were separated into categories that focused on aspects of how, when, and where participants achieved privacy and interaction within their home environments. Questions addressed such issues as personal space, territoriality, crowding, and feelings of isolation.

*Activity logs.* An activity log was used to help verify and confirm information gathered through the interview process, as well as to document family interactions and privacy patterns in the home. The logs were to be

completed by either the parent or adult child when both parent and child were home together. Directions were given to each participant to select a continuous two-hour period on two weekdays and one weekend for filling in the log.

*Home environment documentation.* Architectural documentation was conducted of the living environment as part of the multimethod approach to gather information. The physical relationship of the home was examined in regard to the spatial factor of privacy and interaction. Room sizes and square footages were noted, as was adjacency and location of rooms, furniture arrangements, room finishes, and entertainment options available. The documentation was depicted through sketches of the furniture arrangement, room location, and adjacencies.

### ***Pilot Study***

Prior to collecting data, a pilot study was conducted with two adult children to test the interview format and questions. Following the pilot test, the researcher made three adjustments to methods for data collection. First, the less note taking the researcher did, the more detailed information was gained from the participant. Second, the sequence of the guided interview questions was modified for improved transition. Third, the activity log was slightly modified by adding shading to every other row for ease of vision.

### ***Procedure***

Each of the ten families contacted by the researcher participated in the study. Participation was voluntary and participants were asked to read and sign the consent form prior to the start of the interview. Standardization of the survey process occurred from the initial phone call to the arrival at the participant's home; the researcher used the same wording as used in the consent form to explain the purpose of the study and confidentiality. At the beginning of the first visit, participants filled out the questionnaire while the researcher began to do the architectural observations. After they were done with the questionnaire, the researcher conducted personal interviews separately with the elder parent and the adult child and each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. Once the interviews were complete, the interviewer continued recording architectural observations. In most instances, the interviewer visited the home on two separate

occasions. Interviews occurred at separate times for two reasons: (1) to ensure that each participant felt comfortable discussing their preferences for privacy and interaction; and, (2) the home environment was documented during the first interview and was verified during the second interview.

## **Results**

Constant comparative analysis, generative coding, and memoing were employed in the iterative process of analyzing the qualitative data. In addition to the qualitative analysis, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic data. Because of the two different response formats (self-administered questionnaire and interviews), somewhat different results were obtained and are noted in the following presentation of results. The findings make use of descriptive quotes, but references to individual names are identified by letters only (i.e., parent B, adult child B).

### ***Differences in Perceptions of Privacy***

Several questions were asked concerning privacy in an effort to lead up to the main questions that were used to measure desired levels of privacy. Such questions included whether participants had a place in the home where they could be alone if they desired, what space they went to when they wanted to be alone, and what activities they participated in when alone. All of the elder parents and eight of the adult children felt they had a space within the home where they could be alone if they desired. The location specified by those individuals was the bedroom. However, two adult children (M & K) cited lacking a place where they could be alone. Adult child M explains, "Bless [my mother's] heart; she always wants to help me, but I just can't ever be alone...if I am in the backyard, she's in the backyard, if I am in the front yard, she's in the front yard...she wants to be with me you know. It's just ahhhh!" Typical activities of the parent when alone were watching television, doing crossword puzzles, reading, and eating. The adult children's main activities when alone were to read, use the computer, or watch television.

In addition to having a space where they could be alone, participants were asked if they felt there was a space that they had control over, i.e., that belonged to them. Eight of the parents reported the bedroom as space within the home that

belonged to them. However, two of the parents (B & K) felt there was no space in the home that belonged to them; for instance, parent K said, "I don't have any space, actually I feel like I am homeless." Seven of the adult children felt there was no space in the home that belonged to them. The remaining three adult children (B, G, & L) cited the bedroom as the space within the home that they felt was theirs.

All of the parents and seven of the adult children felt they could be in a space within the home and not be disturbed. The remaining three adult children (H, J, & M) felt as though they could not be anywhere in the home without being disturbed. Adult child H explained her situation, "[My mother] stays up very late at night...she'll have a last minute thought and come upstairs at 11:30 at night and look to see if the lights are on and talk to me, so sometimes I think I can let down my guard but I can't." Adult child J mentioned she would not physically be disturbed, however, "It doesn't stop anyone from yelling up at me."

Three parents (B, C, & L) displayed feelings of loneliness but, when verbalizing it, they did so indirectly. Parent B said, "I've got plenty of time to myself now, but I'll tell you the dogs are awful good company. Oh yeah, I would be lonely without them." Parent C said, "I am alone now that she's found this friend. I don't mind, I can take care of myself."

During the interviews, all of the parents reported that they were achieving their desired levels of privacy. In regard to the adult children's desired amount of privacy, seven reported that, in general, they had time to themselves. The remaining three (K, L, & M) stated that they do not have time to themselves and felt crowded. For instance, adult child K said, "When I feel like I want privacy I don't always get it, because [my mother will] come walking in doing whatever." Adult child M corroborated this feeling, "With her constantly truckin' through my bedroom, I feel like this is my one private area and you're just always in it, you know, and I resent it." Adult child L said she did not have time to herself, but when asked what she would do with more time to herself she responded, "I would . . . I don't know, it's been so long since I've had time."

### *Differences in Perceptions of Interactions*

Questions concerning interactions were asked before asking questions about their desired levels of interaction. Questions included the location where most interactions within the home occurred, the type of activities that typically

occurred in the home, means of communication, and where individuals typically dined within the home.

The questionnaire revealed that seven of the parents (B, F, G, H, J, L, & M) were achieving their optimal levels of interaction. However, during the interview, six of the parents (B, C, G, J, K, & M) cited that they had optimal levels of interaction with their adult children; however, three of these had not indicated so on the questionnaire.

The questionnaire revealed that two of the parents (C & D) were experiencing feelings of isolation. However, in the interview, four parents (D, F, H & L) indicated they felt isolated at times and would like more interaction with their adult children. Parent L said, "Well if [my daughter] had time I think I would," and parent D mentioned, "Well I think I would like to do more with the family." Additionally, although parent M previously cited being happy with her interaction levels, she later implied she had too much time alone, specifically stating, "more time than I like."

In regard to the adult child's desired amount of interaction, there were also varying results between the questionnaire answers and the interview responses. In the questionnaire, four of the adult children (B, C, G, & J) reported having an optimal amount of desired interaction. In the interview seven of the adult children (B, C, D, H, J, K & L) were content with the amount of interaction they were receiving.

In the questionnaire, four of the adult children (D, H, K, & M) reported having too much interaction with their parents. Whereas, in the interview only one adult child (M) reported having too much interaction with the parent. Adult child M commented, "She's constantly around. I don't know why it is; it drives me crazy!"

The remaining two adult children (F & L) reported in the questionnaire that they felt isolated from their parents. In the interview, two of the adult children (F & G) cited feeling isolated from their parents. These children attributed feeling isolated due to the demands of their jobs or other obligations. For instance, in response to the question, "Would you like to do these or other activities more with your parent?" adult child F stated, "A little bit more...it's difficult between having a major job where I am on call and so forth, and dealing with various kid things." Adult child G, said, "I don't talk

to [my mother] as much as I used to because she can't hear me...it's too much work, I'll weigh what I am saying and I'll just think [it is] not that important."

The qualitative analysis revealed more adult children (7) achieved their desired levels of interaction than their parents (6). Both the parents and adult children felt isolated; however, more parents (4) felt isolated than adult children (2). None of the parents felt crowded; whereas one (1) of the adult children felt crowded.

The primary activity of interaction identified by the parent and adult child during the interview was talking. The second most often activity was watching television. Most participants identified a couple of activities they did simultaneously, like eating and talking or watching television while eating. The findings from the activity log coincided with the answers given during the interviews with the participants—the kitchen was the area in which most interaction takes place. However, almost as often, the family room was recorded as the room location where families were interacting. In addition, the activity log confirmed the answers given in the interviews; the main activities recorded were talking, watching television, reading, and eating with one another.

#### ***Impact of Environmental Factors on Privacy and Interaction***

The size, location, and finishes of the rooms as well as acoustical factors and square footage of the home were investigated to determine their impact on privacy and interaction. The environmental factors that affected privacy were acoustical issues. The environmental factors that had an impact on the desired amount of interaction were the home's square footage, acoustical properties, and room adjacencies.

Adult child K explained privacy issues she had that related to the acoustical properties of the home, "The sound carries very much through here. Even when I'm trying to get a little bit of privacy maybe with a phone conversation, I'll pick up my cell phone and go outside." Whereas parent L discussed acoustical factors that enabled her to achieve privacy in her home, "The way this house is built it's always quiet. Like they can have the television on in [the living room] and I can have it [on] in my room and they can't [hear it]; it doesn't interfere." On the contrary, adult child F's situation, "Now with my father's hearing problem, even with his hearing aides in, we can often

hear his TV two to three rooms out.” Adult parent H explains a solution, “When I listen to the TV, I always use [head] phones, because it helps me hear better...I [would] have to have it on pretty loud to hear it.”

One of the parents (G) and both adult children (B & G) living in homes that had 1,200 square feet, cited optimal levels of privacy. However, parent B indirectly verbalized feelings of isolation. All of the participants living in homes that had 2,400 square feet, cited optimal levels of privacy. The parents (B & G) and adult children (B & G) living in homes that had 1,200 square feet, all reported optimal levels of interaction. However, both the parents (C & D) living in 2,400 square foot homes reported feelings of isolation.

Setting up boundaries can help individuals cope with aspects of infringement on areas they feel they have control over, sometimes referred to as territoriality. Territoriality is a connection between an individual and physical space where each space has a set of expected environmental behaviors (Sebba & Churchman, 1983). This can be seen in adult child G’s discussion of spatial issues involving territoriality, “As soon as I got [this] job we bought the house, ‘cause I knew I wasn’t going to live at her home, that was HER house, this is OUR house, and there is a difference. We do things differently, so I knew that I didn’t want to share a living room, or a bedroom, or a bathroom.”

Various rooms within the home contributed to desired and achieved interaction levels, but the overwhelming majority cited the kitchen. Most of the kitchens (8) had an eat-in location and were open (9) to at least one other room. Other rooms listed were the living/family room, the dining room, or the elder parent’s bedroom as the location where most interactions took place. Adult child H explained interactions she typically has with her mother, “We talk, she usually sits at the table, and I am usually setting the table, and [my husband’s] cooking. [The kitchen/dining room] is where most of the family interaction takes place.”

### ***Respondent Themes***

Respondent themes emerged from the interpretation of the responses of the participants and provide insights into the situations that support the research questions. The themes also provide background information into the participants’ living situations. The themes were organized as follows:

possessions, routines to attain privacy, communication and privacy, and routines for interacting.

*Possessions.* The parents in the study had a wide range of belongings, varying from a dresser to a fully furnished living and bedroom set. Each of the parents had their own bedrooms. Nine had televisions and telephones of their own; eight had their own furniture in their bedrooms. Two of the rooms were already furnished when the parents moved in.

*Routines to attain privacy.* Three adult children cited using examples of a routine as a means of obtaining privacy. This was usually an implicit arrangement, as was the case for adult child B who said, "My dad goes to bed every night at 7:30. I think he does that so I can have the space to myself for a while, because he doesn't go to sleep until later." Even though adult child K felt as though there was no place she could go to be alone, she explained, "[My mother] does give me a little bit of time during the day, and so it's kind of like an unspoken sort of arrangement that we have when I get home from work. She'll take [the dog] for his walk and I'll have about an hour alone with [my daughter]."

*Communication and privacy.* The adult children who discussed a significant lack of privacy were afraid to communicate these feelings to their parents. This was the case of adult child K, "I never say anything because I do want her to feel unwelcomed." Adult child M corroborated this feeling, "I just feel like I can't really tell her because, because of the way I know she'll take it. It would crush her . . . so it's just easier not to say or do anything."

*Routine for interacting.* Two adult children and one parent cited having a routine for interacting with one another as described by adult child L, "I will normally watch TV in my mom's room. That's how I visit her at night. You know, I go in there and crash on her bed, and we watch movies or talk while she's in her chair knitting." Parent H described a routine she has with her daughter, "[My daughter] comes down when she comes home from work to see me...it's working out quite well and I'm really happy."

## **Discussion**

This study explored information regarding adult children's and parents' perceptions of privacy and interaction in the multigenerational home

environment. Many results of this study corroborate previous studies, whereas other results are contradictory.

Privacy of parents in this study was never infringed upon, whereas the adult child's privacy was cited as being infringed upon by three of the participants. The similar numbers of achieved desired levels of privacy showed that multigenerational living does not lead to a major loss of privacy for parents. The adult children never experienced too much privacy. Altman (1975) looked at privacy in two parts, attaining physical separation from others and the ability to control interactions; the findings from this study are in line with Altman's findings. In this study, the parents are not achieving their desired interaction but are obtaining their privacy needs. The adult children on the other hand were lacking privacy. They were not able to control when or where the interactions took place or the amount of interaction they received.

All of the multigenerational families had various levels of desired and achieved privacy and interaction. In the majority of the families only one person in the pair was not meeting their desired level of privacy or interaction. For instance, a parent may be achieving a desired level of privacy and interaction; however, that parent's adult child would like more privacy. There was only one parent and adult child pair where neither was achieving their desired interaction or privacy levels. In this situation, the parent obtained privacy but wanted more interaction, and the adult child wanted less interaction and was not achieving any privacy.

Results concerning the desired interaction levels varied between the interview and the questionnaire. This may be explained by the fact that the self-administered questionnaire was completed before the interview, so the participants had time to think about the situation for the interview questions. Another possible reason for the discrepancy is that the parents may have been confused by the questionnaire and felt more comfortable talking to someone about their situations. Also, some adult children may have had trouble verbally expressing that they wanted less interaction with their parents and, for them, writing it down could have been easier. Even though varying results were obtained, the multimethod approach worked well since the interview rationalized and explained some of the questionnaire results. The differences in responses

between the questionnaire and the interview of some adult children regarding their desired amount of interaction may also be attributed to three adult children misunderstanding what the term interaction meant. They indicated during the interview that they might have answered in regard to privacy instead of interaction on the questionnaire. During the interview, they indicated that they were content with the amount of interaction with their parents, but they lost the ability to control when the interactions took place.

Several of this study's findings supported previous research about privacy and interaction in multigenerational homes. The overwhelming majority of both parents (10) and adult children (8) specified the bedroom as the place they would go to be alone. This supports Sebba and Churchman's (1983) finding that the bedroom is most often where individuals feel as though they have the most control and will not be disturbed, although Sebba and Churchman's participants were families consisting of parents with young children.

Boschetti (1990) found that a sense of being home is enhanced by surrounding oneself with familiar things. Similarly Eshelman and Evans (2002) found that true satisfaction with the home occurred when it was a reflection of the individual's personality. In this study, all of the parents had something of their own with them. In two cases, it was a single dresser with personal mementos; in the other eight cases, it was a complete bedroom set from their previous home. These personal possessions may explain why the majority of the parents was so pleased with their current living arrangements.

This study also corroborates Miller and Maxwell's (2003) findings. Their study found that areas that support concurrent activities best facilitate family interaction in regard to homes with young children. This study found that the kitchen and family/living room were cited as the locations in which most family interactions take place. These rooms were all open to each other allowing visual access between the spaces, as well as accommodating multiple activities.

This study provides designers and others interested in multigenerational family home environments with information about how the home is used to achieve privacy. Whether the home is supporting privacy or interaction, the elder parent and adult children expected to be able to perform multiple activities in rooms in the home. The accommodation of multiple activities

within the same space has an impact on how one would go about designing a space. Furthermore this study acts as a stepping-stone to more in-depth studies on multigenerational families and their homes.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Limitations must be considered if one attempts to generalize from the results of this study. First, the sample size was small, which restricted the ability to make broad generalizations and recommendations to the greater population. Second, the sample was limited to the greater mid-Michigan area. Different expectations of privacy and interaction of individuals living in other geographical areas, e.g., solely rural or in other parts of the country, could result in different responses. Third, the homes were different in their configurations and could have influenced participants' reactions to their spaces. Lastly, the study employed the use of a single interviewer that has the potential of interviewer bias influencing the interview process. To avoid that potential, the interviewer was careful to ask the questions in the same way with each participant, and the interviewer had predetermined explanatory comments if the participant did not understand a question.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, future research should be conducted on a larger sample of multigenerational families from other geographic regions in the U.S. as well as other countries. The Federal Interagency Forum (2008) found that 5% of men and 17% of women aged 65 years and older live with a non-spousal relative; separating these households by race of the older person, the percentage increases to 32% for Black, 30% for Asian, and 33% for Hispanic women. Therefore, subsequent research should include a variety of ethnic and cultural groups. Additional research could explore how well multigenerational homes function in regard to privacy when the elder parent is suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's disease.

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