



## Chinese people aged over 60 and intergenerational family cohabitation: A moderated mediation model of role perception, resources, gender, family power

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How to cite: Liu, X., & Bai, S.-Y. (2022). Chinese people aged over 60 and intergenerational family cohabitation: A moderated mediation model of role perception, resources, gender, family power. *Social Behavior and Personality: An international journal*, 50(11), e11999

We explored whether the perception of older adults of their role in the family mediated the relationship between resource contribution and sense of power, and if this relationship was moderated by gender. For data collection we adopted a stratified sampling method to recruit 1,200 Chinese people aged over 60 years who were living in intergenerational cohabitation with their adult children in Mengzhou City, China. The results showed that the family role perception of older adults mediated the relationship between their resources (including housing ownership and income level relative to that of their adult children) and their family decision-making power. Further, gender moderated the influence of resources on role perception, in that the relationships among housing ownership, relative income level, and role perception tended to be stronger for men than for women. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

### Keywords

role perception, resources, gender, family decision-making power, intergenerational family cohabitation, income level, housing ownership, older adults

### Article Highlights

- For Chinese people aged over 60 living in intergenerational cohabitation with their adult children, housing ownership and relative income level were found to have a positive impact on their sense of power.
- The family role perception of older adults mediated the relationships among their relative income level, housing ownership, and sense of power.
- Gender moderated the paths between relative income level, housing ownership, and role perception, such that the relationships were stronger among men than among women.

Since the middle of the 19th century, scholars have formed a common understanding of family development. That is, with the development of industrialization, the family structure has changed from a large family with multiple generations to a small family centered on conjugal relations (Smesler, 1959). In recent years, however, despite rapid economic growth in many developing countries, it has become popular for adult children to reside with their parents. There are many reasons for this, one being the high cost of housing (Li & Wu, 2019). Intergenerational relations in such families—especially in terms of sense of power—are increasingly important for the harmony of the family, as living together expands opportunities for intergenerational interactions.

*Family power* refers to the influence of members in making decisions about family affairs, especially in the allocation of resources (McDonald, 1977). There are two theoretical perspectives on family power: resource theory, which concerns marital power, and family modernization theory, regarding intergenerational power. Blood and Wolfe (1960) put forward resource theory, in which it is believed that whether the husband or the wife has more family power depends on who can provide the family with more resources (e.g., money, social resources). With the development of this theory, the concept of resources was extended. Rodman (1967) argued that cultural norms are also a resource. He compared the differences in the distribution of family power in different countries and regions, finding that in areas where a patriarchal culture prevails, the husband holds the primary power in the household even when the wife's income and education level are higher. However, individuals' relative resources play a decisive role in the power relationship between husband and wife in regions where an egalitarian culture prevails and the degree of modernization is high.

The theory of family modernization (Cowgill & Holmes, 1972) emphasizes the influence of changes in production mode and social culture brought about by the modernization of society on the family power of older adults. However, no consistent conclusion has been reached in this regard. Some scholars (e.g., Zuo & Bian, 2005) have argued that with the development of modernization, the family production mode has changed in that adult children and their parents enter the labor market as separate individuals, and parents are no longer able to control the main living resources of the family. The family status of older adults has declined from its peak in the agricultural society to a lower level in modern industrial society. Some Chinese scholars (Chow & Xue, 2011) have come to a similar conclusion. In traditional Chinese society, parents of adult children held the power to control the family economy and make major decisions. However, with the increase in the degree of social modernization and transformation of society, the traditional family system based on parental authority has undergone great changes and the family power of older adults has declined (Whyte, 2005). However, some scholars believe that with the continuing increase in social modernization, the social and cultural support resources of older adults will increase, thus improving (a) the material basis of their family power and (b) their family status alongside it (see, e.g., Vauclair et al., 2015). No matter which viewpoint is taken, according to the logic behind family modernization theory, resources are the key factor affecting the family power of older adults. Therefore, we believed that family modernization theory could also be classified as resource theory.

However, the focus in both resource theory and family modernization theory is on the external objective factors affecting family power, thus ignoring family members' self-perception of family role. Although some scholars have found that the role perception of wife and husband affects the distribution of family power between the couple (Davis & Rigaux, 1974; Green & Cunningham, 1976), few studies have focused on the relationship between the resource contribution of parents relative to that of their adult children, and the role perception of these parents, in spite of the possibility that both factors will affect their family power. Role perception, as a subjective psychological factor, is often studied as the mediating variable in other areas (Jung et al., 2015; L. Liu et al., 2021; W. Zhou et al., 2021). We reasoned that it is of interest to explore whether the role perception of people living with their adult children also mediates the relationship between their resource contribution and sense of power in the family. Further, although the traditional patriarchal culture in China was challenged in the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, vestiges of male dominance remain in Chinese culture, which may affect the objective resources and subjective role perception of the parents of adult children according to their gender (Ebrey, 2003). Thus, we also wondered whether the role perception of people aged 60 and over living in intergenerational cohabitation with their adult children would be moderated by gender.

As family decision making is the symbol and real embodiment of family power and the most direct and basic manifestation of family status (Zhang & Li, 2019), we investigated family power through family decision making. We mainly considered whether the role perception of parents living in intergenerational cohabitation with their adult children would mediate the relationship between their resource contribution and sense of family power, and whether gender would play a moderating role.

## **Resources and Family Decision Making**

According to resource theory, a family member who can provide more resources for the family is more likely to obtain dominating power. The core material resources of the family are mainly made up of two types: One is fixed assets,

consisting of housing, bank deposits, and cars. Since the commercialization of China's housing system in 1998, housing has been considered increasingly important and may even form the largest part of a Chinese family's wealth (Walder & He, 2014). According to the *2018 China Urban Family Wealth and Health Report* issued in 2019 by Guangdong Development Bank of China and Southwest University of Finance and Economics, China's housing assets then accounted for 77.7% of total household assets. Therefore, in this study we used housing ownership as the measurement variable of participants' fixed assets. In recent years, some scholars have found that more adult children are choosing to live with their parents to ease the financial pressure caused by soaring housing prices (Ruggles & Heggeness, 2008). Parents providing housing support for their adult children affects the resource allocation within the family, along with family behavior and intergenerational relations (Li & Wu, 2019). Therefore, we hypothesized that when parents living in intergenerational cohabitation with their adult children own the house, they may have more family power than those who do not.

**Hypothesis 1a:** For parents in intergenerational cohabitation families, housing ownership will have a positive impact on their family power relative to that of their adult children.

The other type of material resource is income. Regarding the relationship between material resources and family power, a number of previous researchers on marital power have shown that the higher a husband's income is relative to his wife's, the more decision-making power he has in the family (Doss, 2013; J. Zhou & Xiao, 2018). Following the same logic, we believed that in intergenerational cohabitation families the level of parents' income relative to that of their adult children would have a positive effect on their family power. When parents have an income that is higher than that of their adult children living with them, they can make a greater contribution to the family, which may result in more family decision-making power for the parents. In contrast, if parents' income is lower than that of their adult children and they are unable to make sufficient economic contribution to the family, or if they need to rely on the support of their adult children to meet their living needs, this may result in less family power for them. Therefore, we formed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1b:** The higher the income of parents in intergenerational cohabitation families relative to the income of their adult children, the greater will be their family decision-making power.

## **Role Perception, Resources, and Family Decision Making**

*Role perception* is the process whereby an individual, in various ways, perceives their power, obligations, and behavior patterns as belonging to a certain role. It includes the identification of role norms and role evaluation, consisting of the individual determining which roles to assume and what behavior is appropriate under certain conditions. The individual's perception of their role not only restricts and influences their behavior but also serves as behavior guidance (Kim et al., 2013). In their study of husband–wife relationships Green and Cunningham (1976) showed that differences in perception of the feminine role may affect family decisions. Davis and Rigaux (1974) further found that the husband's and wife's perceptions of their marital roles influence three stages of the decision process: problem recognition, internal and external search, and final decision. In a further study of family decision processes, Buss and Schaninger (1983) found that under the influence of family members' occupation, income, and other resource factors, the husband and wife form different role concepts, which also affect their family decision-making process and outcomes. According to the concept of mediating effects (Baron & Kenny, 1986), this suggests that the perception of gender role acts as a mediator between resources and couples' decisions. Intergenerational power and husband–wife power are both types of family power. If role perception plays a mediating role in the relationship between resources and husband–wife power, then it is reasonable to believe that the role perception of older adults (parents of adult children) may also play a mediating role in the relationship between resources and family decision making. The more resources parents of adult children contribute to the family in intergenerational cohabitation families, the more likely they are to perceive themselves as decision makers in the family. Thus, we proposed the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 2a:** The role perception of parents of adult children in intergenerational cohabitation families will mediate the relationship between the income level of parents relative to that of their adult children and their family decision making.

**Hypothesis 2b:** The role perception of parents of adult children in intergenerational cohabitation families will mediate the relationship between housing ownership and their family decision making.

Furthermore, we expected that the relationship between resources and role perception would be moderated by gender. Gender schema theory asserts that differences in gender identity may lead to different behavior patterns (Bem, 1981). Accordingly, men aged over 60 years may show different cognitive preferences and behavioral intentions than do women in the same age group. The remnant of male dominance in Chinese culture (Ebrey, 2003) means patriarchal culture has a greater influence on older than on younger adults. This may affect the perception of family role among those aged 60 and over differently according to gender. In particular, when a man aged 60 years or over contributes more to the family resources than his adult children do, his perception of his role as family decision maker may be stronger than would be the perception of a woman in the same setting. Therefore, we proposed the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 3a:** Gender will moderate the path between parental income level relative to that of adult children in intergenerational cohabitation families and the parent’s role perception, so that the relationship will be stronger when the parent is male rather than female.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Gender will moderate the path between housing ownership and the role perception of the parents of adult children in intergenerational cohabitation families, so that the relationship will be stronger when the parent is male rather than female.

The theoretical model used in this paper is shown in Figure 1.

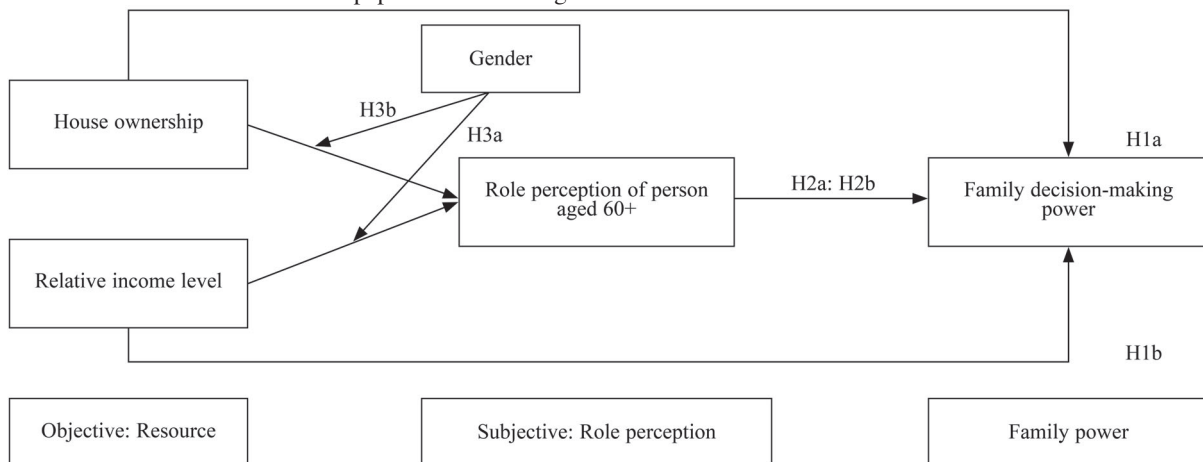


Figure 1. *Theoretical Model*

## Method

We conducted a cross-sectional survey in Mengzhou City, Henan Province, China, between March and September 2020. The reason we selected this city is that the age profile fitted the purpose of our study, in that in 2019 the proportion of the population aged over 60 years in this city was 20.6%, which is higher than the national average of 18.1% of the total population in China. Our preliminary survey in 2020 showed that there was a high percentage of intergenerational cohabitation families in Mengzhou City. The family structure of intergenerational cohabitation families is complex, including two-generation families and multigenerational families. Our aim was to explore the family power relationship between parents and their adult children, so the term intergenerational cohabitation family in this paper refers to a family where the parents and their adult children (including grandchildren who are minors) all live in the same house.

We used stratified random sampling to select participants. First, we chose two to three streets in each subdistrict office and two villages in each town or countryside. Then, we selected two to three communities in each street and three village groups (the group is the lowest unit in Chinese villages in the administrative structure) in each village. We used the help of committees in the areas to tell us which families in the community or village were living in an intergenerational cohabitation setting. Finally, we selected corresponding samples of people aged 60 or over. Simple random sampling was conducted within each stratum.

After design, trial investigation, and modification of items, we determined the items to include in our questionnaire and then recruited three doctoral students and trained them prior to sending them out to conduct interviews. The students explained the questionnaire to those in the sample of people aged 60 years and over, and distributed and then collected the questionnaires. They helped those with difficulties in reading or writing to complete the questionnaire. The students collected 1,200 questionnaire forms. After eliminating invalid responses with patterned and/or missing answers, we finally included 1,021 valid questionnaires in the analysis (response rate = 85.1%). Among the respondents, 241 (23.6%) were aged between 60 and 65 years old, 329 (32.2%) between 66 and 70 years, 235 (23%) between 71 and 75 years, 122 (11.9%) between 76 and 80 years, and 94 (9.2%) were aged over 80 years. There were 546 (53.5%) men and 475 (46.5%) women.

## Measures

### **Dependent Variables**

We used a scale consisting of seven indicators: daily expenditure, life insurance, investment or loan, housing choice, medical treatment, adult children's career choice, and grandchildren's living arrangements (X. Liu & Bai, 2022). These were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *unable to make decisions* to 5 = *completely able to make decisions*. Participants assigned a score for each indicator according to their perception of family power. Scores for these seven indicators were summed, so that the higher the score, the greater was the individual's decision-making power in the family.

### **Explanatory Variables**

According to the above theoretical framework and research hypotheses, explanatory variables were classified into the following categories: material resources and role perception. Material resources comprised house ownership and participants' income level relative to that of their adult children. House ownership was measured by their answer to the question "Do you own the house you live in?" A positive answer was assigned a score of 1 and a negative answer 0. Relative income level was measured by the question "Is your income higher than or lower than your adult children's (if living with multiple adult children, then compared with the highest income among your adult children)?" Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *far lower than the income of adult children* to 5 = *far higher than the income of adult children*. The higher the score, the higher was the participant's income compared to that of their adult children.

The second category of explanatory variables was role perception. As there have been few studies focused on family role perception among those aged 60 years and over, we used a survey question similar to the measurement of role perception of government public servants (Trondal et al., 2017): "In your family, to what extent do you feel you act as decision maker?" Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *fully*.

In addition, we controlled for two demographic variables that may influence the dependent variables: age and ability with daily living. Age was assessed as a 5-point continuous variable with a value of 1 for ages 60–65 years, 2 for ages 66–70 years, 3 for ages 71–75 years, 4 for ages 76–80 years, and 5 for aged over 80 years. *Ability with daily living* referred to whether the participant could independently complete tasks in their daily life: "Can you independently complete daily activities such as dressing, eating, and bathing?" As it is possible that one or several of the listed activities could be done independently, while the rest could not, items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *completely unable to take care of myself* to 5 = *completely able to take care of myself*.

## Data Analyses

SPSS 26.0 was used to perform the data analyses. First, we inspected the descriptive statistics and correlations among variables. Then the mediating effect of role perception was tested with Hayes' (2017) PROCESS macro Model 4 in SPSS. Finally, PROCESS macro Model 7 was used to test the moderating effect of gender in the relationship between resources and family power. If the 95% confidence interval does not include zero, the effect is considered to be significant.

## Results

### Correlation Analyses

Table 1 shows the correlation matrix of the main variables in our study. For people aged 60 and over living with their adult children in intergenerational cohabitation, the age of older parents was negatively correlated with their family decision-making power. That is, the older the parents were, the less family decision-making power they had. There was also a significant positive correlation between family decision making and both housing ownership and relative income level. Hypotheses 1a and 1b were therefore supported. Table 1 also shows there were significant positive correlations between role perception and housing ownership, relative income level, gender, and family decision making. These statistics provided preliminary support for Hypotheses 2a, 2b, 3a, and 3b.

Table 1. *Correlation Matrix Between Independent, Dependent, and Control Variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Role perception	1						
2. Relative income level	.20***	1					
3. Housing ownership	.14***	.23***	1				
4. Family decision making	.35***	.40***	.33***	1			
5. Gender	-.16***	-.10**	-.16***	-.06***	1		
6. Age	-.10**	-.15***	-.15***	-.32***	-.07*	1	
7. Ability with daily living	.03	.17**	.09**	.22***	.06	-.33***	1

Note. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### Mediation Analyses

The results of mediation analyses are presented in Table 2. Models 1 to 3 were used to test the mediating effect of role perception in the relationship of relative income level and family decision making, Models 4 to 6 were used to test the mediating effect of role perception in the relationship of housing ownership and family decision making.

Models 1 to 3 show that after controlling for age and ability with daily living, relative income level significantly predicted role perception and family decision making, and role perception significantly predicted family decision making. The direct effect of relative income level on family decision making via role perception was significant, in that role perception explained 14.1% of the mediating effect of relative income level on family decision making. Hypothesis 2a was therefore supported.

Models 4 to 6 show that after controlling for age and ability with daily living, housing ownership significantly predicted role perception and family decision making, and role perception significantly predicted family decision making. The direct effect of housing ownership on family decision making via role perception was significant, indicating that role perception explained 12.7% of the mediating effect of housing ownership on family decision making. Hypothesis 2b was therefore verified.

**Table 2. Mediating Effect of Role Perception in the Relationships of Housing Ownership, Relative Income Level, and Family Decision Making**

Variables and statistic	Model 1 FDM		Model 2 RP		Model 3 FDM		Model 4 FDM		Model 5 RP		Model 6 FDM	
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Age	-.19	-8.03***	-.07	-2.40*	-.18	-7.64***	-.19	-7.77***	-.07	-2.46*	-.17	-7.35***
Ability with daily living	.10	2.87***	-.03	-0.74	.11	3.22**	.14	4.02***	-.01	-0.11	.14	4.28***
Relative income level	.34	12.44***	.19	6.01***	.29	10.97***						
Housing ownership							.57	9.94***	.25	3.97***	.50	9.08***
Role perception					.26	9.77***					.29	10.60***
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.23		.04		.30		.19		.03		.27	
<i>F</i>	102.25***		15.47***		107.69***		81.20***		8.59***		95.66***	

Note. FDM = family decision making; RP = role perception.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### Moderated Mediation Analyses

As shown in Table 3, the interaction effect of relative income level and gender on role perception was significant, as was the interaction effect of housing ownership and gender on role perception. As shown in Table 4, gender moderated the indirect relationship between relative income level and family decision making. Because the two confidence intervals (see Table 4) do not contain zero, the two moderated mediating effects were significant and Hypotheses 3a and 3b were supported.

We also performed a simple slope analysis for both men and women, plotting the relationship between relative income level and role perception (see Figure 2), and between housing ownership and role perception (see Figure 3) according to gender. Figure 2 shows that the slope of the line for men was steeper than that for women; therefore, Hypothesis 3a was supported. In other words, the relationship between relative income level and family role perception tended to be stronger for men than for women. Figure 3 shows the slope of the line for men was steeper than that for women, which further supported Hypothesis 3b. Thus, the relationship between housing ownership and role perception also tended to be stronger for men than for women.

**Table 3. Moderating Effect of Gender in the Relationships of Housing Ownership, Relative Income Level, and Role Perception**

Variables and statistic	Model 1 RP		Model 2 FDM		Model 3 RP		Model 4 FDM	
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Age	-.07	-2.53*	-.18	-7.64***	-.08	-2.84**	-.17	-7.35***
Ability with daily living	-.09	-0.49	.11	3.22**	-.01	-0.22	.14	4.28***
Relative income level	.17	5.60***	.29	10.97***				
Housing ownership					.21	3.21**	.50	9.08***
Role perception			.26	9.77***			.28	10.60***
Gender	-.31	-4.92***			-.31	-4.88***		
Housing ownership × Gender					.42	3.30**		
Relative income level × Gender	.24	3.97***						
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.08		.30		.06		.27	
<i>F</i>	17.56***		107.69***		12.18***		95.66***	

Note. RP = role perception; FDM = family decision making.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 4. Index for Moderated Mediation Effect of Gender

Path	Index	SE	95% CI	
			LL	UL
RIL → RP → FDM	0.06	0.02	0.03	0.10
HO → RP → FDM	0.12	0.04	0.05	0.20

Note. RIL = relative income level; RP = role perception; FDM = family decision making; HO = housing ownership; CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

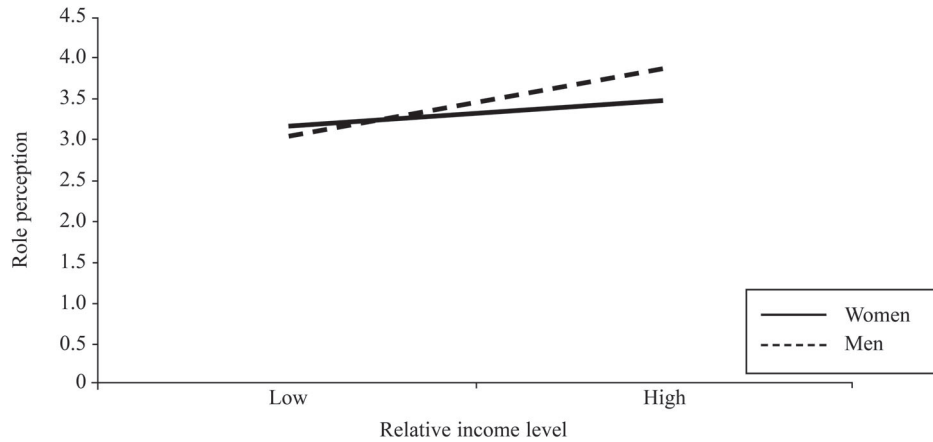


Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Gender in the Relationship Between Relative Income Level and Role Perception

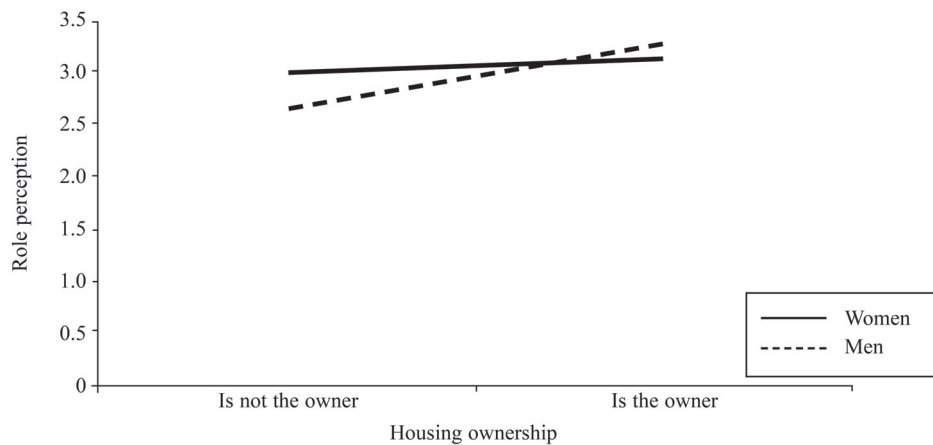


Figure 3. Moderating Effect of Gender in the Relationship Between Housing Ownership and Role Perception

## Discussion

We explored the relationship between resources and family power among people aged 60 years and over living in intergenerational cohabitation with their adult children in Mengzhou City, China. Housing ownership and income level relative to their children were included as resource variables, and family decision making as the family power variable. We also examined the mediating effect of the role perception of these older adults and the moderated mediation effect of their gender.

First, we found that in some family affairs, such as daily expenditure and medical matters, our participants were able to participate in family decision making. One main reason may be the impact of resource contribution on family power. With the rapid development of China's economy, although people's income has increased, the cost of living has also gradually increased. A greater number of adult children are choosing to live with their parents to reduce the pressure caused by soaring housing prices, which has given parents more power to participate in family decision making. It can be seen from our results that older adults to a large extent obtain power in the family through their resource contribution, instead of relying on the traditional hierarchical family relationship that existed between parents and their children in China.

Second, the resource contribution of parents living with their adult children in intergenerational cohabitation was found to affect their perception of their role and then their objective family power. Older adults who own the house and whose income is higher relative to that of their adult children are more inclined to think that they are decision makers in the family, which affects the actual intergenerational power distribution. The increasing number of people aged over 60 years in China's population is making it more urgent to re-examine the contribution of this age group to society. Scholars have put forward the view of active aging, that is, improving the market participation rate of people aged 60 years and over so that those individuals in this age group who have spare time and are physically fit can make a greater contribution to society (Um et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2021). This also has significance for improving the material quality of life and self-efficacy of older adults. As a result, it may enhance their perception of their role as family decision makers and thus influence their family actions.

In addition, we found that gender mediated the impact of resources on family decision-making power. When men made the same resource contribution as the women did to their family, they had a stronger perception of being the decision maker of their family. This indicates that in Chinese families living in intergenerational cohabitation, especially for the men who are living with their adult children, the influence of the patriarchal culture still exists, but in a more implicit way than formerly.

This study has some limitations. First, although we verified the mediating effect of older adults' role perception, the subjective perception of their adult children was not taken into account. Second, we measured participants' role perception through a single question. This may not be as comprehensive as measurement with a scale, and may affect the accuracy of the results. In subsequent studies we will develop a more comprehensive scale to measure role perception accurately.

As Peng and Hu (2015) pointed out, "China's family changes are far more complex than those of Western countries, and family development is a multidynamic process" (p. 132). The factors affecting intergenerational power relations in Chinese families are also a multidimensional dynamic system that includes objective resources, subjective cognition, and behavior. By revealing how objective resources affect family power, and that the effect is further affected by the factors of subjective perception and gender, this study builds on resource theory and enhances understanding of the influence mechanism of family power, along with providing new ideas for future research on family intergenerational power relations.

## Acknowledgments

This work was supported in part by the Fundamental Research Fund for the Central Universities of China (HIT.HSS.202232).

The authors extend special thanks to Harbin Institute of Technology for support.

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