

Adjustment in Later Life

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ABSTRACT There is today, an ever-growing number of old people in the Nigerian Society. The present study is an attempt to explore the relationship between aging and adjustment. The measure of adjustment considered are: attitudes to past life and to reminiscence; attitudes to the present modern day Nigerian society and attitudes to death and dying. The study is based on data obtained from 200 elderly people in Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria. Ife was stratified into ten of its eleven traditional and modern quarters and 20 respondents from each quarter were selected through snow balling sampling technique. Interviews were conducted by myself and Adisa Lateef, a Graduate Assistant in the department of Sociology/Anthropology, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. We adopted 'back-translation' to solve the problem of lexical equivalence. The main findings are as follows: (a) a greater majority reminiscences that they had a better life in the past than now; (b) although majority viewed the present day Nigeria as not favourably comparable with the past they still prefer to live in the present day Nigerian society; and (c) only an insignificant few expressed fear towards death and dying. One can therefore conclude that aging is not a particularly problematic period of life of elderly Nigerians.

INTRODUCTION

Aging is today, a phenomenon of increasing interest to both lay people, academics, policy makers, medical practitioners, demographers, and psychologist, unfortunately however, there is a dearth of sociological data in the available literature in Nigeria. More worrisome is that despite the obvious fact that later life awaits us all, it has been relatively neglected, at times avoided by Nigerian Sociologists. One explanation can be offered for this. Traditionally, Sociologists have had a tendency to avoid demography and aging has mainly, and wrongly been defined as a demographic issue. This condition of neglect by Nigerian Sociologists cannot be allowed to continue. This paper therefore attempts to fill the gap in this neglected area. Specifically, this exploratory study, tries to discuss the relationship between aging and adjustment. The three measures of adjustment

investigated in the study are: attitudes to past life and to reminiscence (Cumming and Henry, 1961; Butler, 1963; McMahon and Rhudick, 1964; Coleman, 1986; 1993; Haight, 1991; Moody, 1984; and Mergler and Goldstein, 1983); (2) attitudes to the present and to modern society (Seabrook, 1980 and Jerrome, 1988; Coleman and McCulloch, 1990; and (3) attitudes to death and dying (Munnichs, 1966, Kubler-Ross, 1969; Kalish and Reynolds, 1976; Cameron et al., 1973; Bengston et al., 1977, Keith, 1979; Hinton, 1975; Riegel and Riegel, 1972; Seavage et al., 1973 and Burning and Hesselink, 1986).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Attitudes to Past Life and to Reminiscence

The formulators of disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry, 1961) saw increased reminiscence as one manifestation of the process of aging, which they understood as involving growing inferiority and withdrawal from concern with the outside world. However, results of findings on the adaptive value of reminiscence remain inconclusive and conflicting. For instance, unlike Bukler (1963), Lieberman and Tobin (1983); Wong and Watt (1991); McMahon and Rhudick (1964) who found a relationship between reminiscence and adjustment, Marriam, (1980); Thornton and Brotchre (1987) produced disappointing results. Their results led to reflection on the varying functions of talking and thinking about the past. They found that reminiscence meant different things to individuals in different situations. Whether people stand to gain from reminiscence they argued will depend on their past histories as well as their present needs.

Attitudes to the Present and to Modern Society

A common perspective on aging is on change experienced by the person, in many ways older people. Past and present longitudinal studies

show stability of attitudes in later life over a number of years (Coleman, 1993). One change that usually has effect in later life change is value. Value changes have been found to be disturbing to people brought up with very different values. Seabrook (1980) identified such problems from his own interviews with older people.

McCulloch in a study of Southampton on older peoples' attitudes adopted the concept of 'moral siege' to describe a set of attitudes characteristic of a large number of people he interviewed. Such people actively compared the past with present, emphasizing differences between the generations rather than similarities, and giving a high moral estimation to old people and a low one to the young. He associated those changes to the upheavals of the first and second World Wars. Many of these people felt obliged to condemn society. Accepting the values of modern society is tantamount to denying meaning to their own lives as they have led them (Coleman and McCulloch, 1990).

Attitudes to Death and Dying

Disengagement theory was explicitly formulated as a functional theory of aging, in which older people prepare society for their eventual demise by disengaging first. Munnichs (1992) stressed that the growing awareness and acceptance of death are a major developmental tasks of adulthood and a crucial part of the dynamics of aging.

Kubler-Ross (1969) did the first known work on the psychology of adjustment to death in which she describes five stages in the process observed in terminally ill patients. Previous studies on attitudes to death show that older people think and talk more about death (Kalish and Reynold, 1976; Cameron et al., 1973). Researchers have shown also how readily older people seek about death (Munnichs, 1966; Lieberman and Tobin, 1983; Schneider, 1987). Studies which have focused on fear of death have found as expected less fear expressed in the older people (Bengston et al., 1977; Kalish and Reynolds, 1976).

Available literature on the subject does not support a fearful idea of death in old age. Kastenbaum found that older people most often personified death as 'gentle and well-meaning' (Kastenbaum and Alsenberg, 1976).

Little research has been done on the experience of impending death itself. No serious studies have been conducted to find out whether people follow a particular psychological path to death. Hinton (1975), studied 60 terminally ill cancer patients. The results suggested that those whose mood and acceptance of death were highest were those who had previously shown high coping skills, high life satisfaction, and good marital relationships.

Variable Definition

There are two major variables in this study - *adjustment and later life*. As a result of the many diverse definitions of these concepts, some discussion of each is useful.

The term adjustment has to date been variously considered by scholars and researchers. Viewed from a statistical point of view Davidson, and Weale (1974) point out, that the basic idea is to measure a number of psychological characteristics of a number of people and to regard the extreme of such characteristics as *maladjusted*. The average on the characteristics is then interpreted as *adjusted*.

Another way to consider adjustment is to subjectively define it. For instance, adjustment can be considered adjustment from a person's self-report of psychological distress and discomfort. Such reports involve declarations of unhappiness, depression or discontent. From a social adaptation definition, adjustment is equated with being adapted to one's environment. This definition focuses on the individual's ability to meet changing conditions. It also stresses the importance of a person's relationship with the external world, particularly his social milieu. Consequently, adjusted behaviour is that which is seen as socially accepted.

Pollak (1956) defines adjustment as 'the efforts of an individual to satisfy his person needs as well as to live up to the expectations of others'. According to Pollak, 'the well-adjusted person is able to satisfy his needs quickly and adequately as they arise; a poorly adjusted person is unable to satisfy certain of his needs'. On the other hand Cavan et al. (1949) define maladjustment as behaviour which does not completely satisfy the individual and social needs

of the person, even though it may reduce his drive tensions.

The conceptualization adopted in this analysis approximates Coleman's ideas of attitudes to past life and reminiscence, attitudes to present society, and attitudes to death and dying. Although not peculiar to old age, together they give an idea of some of the general features of adjustment that characterize the last stage of life. The maladjusted person is assumed to reminisce often by talking and thinking about the past being better than the present society, have negative attitude towards the present society; and considers discussion about death as a taboo because of the fear he has towards death and dying.

Up-to-date, there is still some arbitrariness in choosing a particular age as marking the start of later life. In this paper, age 60 is adopted. This is because by this stage in Nigeria all working men (except judges) and academicians working in paid employment are expected to retire. By this definition, later life is considered as including old age but it is not coterminous with it.

METHOD

Subjects: In an attempt to test the assumptions of some authors about poor adjustment in later life, data were analyzed from a study of 200 old people aged 60 years and above in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. The non-random method of selection was adopted. First, Ile-Ife was stratified into ten of its eleven traditional and modern quarters, and it was decided in advance that 20 respondents would be interviewed in each quarter. The snowball sampling technique was adopted. With the assistance of an indigene of Ife, a few elderly people in each quarter were identified and interviewed. These persons were then used as informants to identify more elderly people. These other persons also assisted in identifying other elderly people. This method was adopted until the 20 respondents were reached in each quarter. 'Back-translation was adopted to solve the problem of lexical equivalence. The 200 respondents were made up of 113 males and 87 females, with a mean age of 72 years. A greater proportion (48%) were widows and widowers; 25% were married, while 20% and 7% are divorced and separated respectfully. A preponderance, 67% are illiterate, engage mainly in farming,

trading, artisan jobs, church and community activities.

Measures: To measure adjustment in later life three indices devised from Coleman (1993) were used. The respondents were interviewed on these measures entitled: "Attitudes to the Past and to Reminiscence"; "Attitudes to the present modern day Nigeria"; and "Attitudes to death and dying". The measures are composed of the following items:

Attitudes to Past Life and to Reminiscence

Please reflect back into your life in the past and tell us about your life experiences.

Please specifically talk about your self-fulfilment in life; and

Please take us through some of your past unpleasant experiences in life.

Attitudes to the Present day Nigerian Society

If you compare the present day Nigeria with the Nigeria of your youth, do you think your time is better than the present or not?

If you have to relive your life again, would you prefer to live in Nigeria of the past or the present?

Attitudes to Death and Dying

Do you think the concept of death is one that should be commonly discussed by Nigerians?;

What is your personal attitude to death and dying?; and

Imagine that you are told that you will die within the next 30 days, please tell us what changes you think you would make in your life as a result of this prediction?

RESULTS

Attitudes to Past Life and Reminiscence

Data analysis shows that 92% are reminiscers while 8% are non-reminiscers. Respondents reflected on their past life experiences with mixed feelings. Those who reminisced positively talked about the following things: ability to give their last daughters out in marriage, ability to own their personal buildings, to educate their children when the energy was there, and the

experience of boom in their business.

On the other hand, those who reminisced negatively talked about the loss of a spouse or loved ones, flop in business, inability to own a building, and inability to educate all their children before now.

Majority of the respondents (73%) claimed to be fulfilled while 27% claimed to be unfulfilled. Those who claimed to be fulfilled-made reference to their achievement in life as just discussed, while the unfulfilled ones also made reference to their failures in life as just discussed.

Majority of the respondents (92%) used the opportunity provided by the question on past unpleasant experiences to do a thorough review of their lives. Most of such experiences as reported below are pathetic, and they include: Loss of spouse or loved ones, prolonged illness, family experiences, fire and motor accidents and bad business. Some examples relating to these unpleasant experiences are reported below.

A 73-year-old widow said - "I lost my lovely husband 23 years ago the very day I was to elaborately mark my 50th birthday. He had marked his own 5 years earlier. My husband had gone to Iwo town to buy a cow for the birthday party, but had an accident on the way to Iwo and died".

An 82-year-old man said though he is happy today for what God has done in his life, but has a pathetic life experience. He narrated his story thus - "I lost three children in a day. At about 9.00 a.m, on this fateful day, the first child died after a very brief illness. Neighbours and relations came to sympathize and also assisted in burying the dead. By 3.00 p.m. another child in secondary school took ill and died shortly after. A few neighbours and relations showed up to sympathize and again assisted in burying the dead. Before 7.00 p.m. I lost the only female child of the family as at that time. Not a single sympathizer showed up. I did the burial myself".

Many other respondents also talked about their experience of successive loss of children "Ogbanje" or "àbikú" before age five. Some of the respondents punctuated the narration of their ordeals with tears.

A 68-year-old cement dealer talked about his business problem: "I took a loan from a community lender at a higher interest rate. Shortly after the loan, the price of cement skyrocketed, and not many customers could afford the new price. Within three months, I sold my two houses and my only commercial vehicle.

This is the reason I am a tenant today. One is however grateful to God that my children are of great assistance to the family".

A 70-year-old diabetic and hypertensive patient also narrated her plight. "I used to be a successful business woman until about ten years ago when I lost my husband. My problem became complicated with diabetic and hypertension. The little money that should go into business and family maintenance now goes on drugs. But for support from my children, especially the medical doctor amongst them, I probably would have died by now".

Attitudes to the Present Modern Day Nigeria

On comparison between the past and modern Nigeria, majority of the respondents turned to story telling-painting a 'beautiful' past and a 'horrible' present. References were constantly made to their *halcyon* days. Most respondents attributed the present state of horror to the following: military intervention in governance, the civil war of 1967 - 1970, change in values, external influences as well as level of literacy, and breakdown in family institution.

On military interference, some respondents talked about the state of peace and security to lives and property before the advent of military government. The military, they claimed brought about political instability, institutionalized bribery, corruption, and nepotism. This is supported by Ogunbameru (2000). The civil war is also linked to military interference in the polity. According to some, stealing of farm produce at minimal levels took place in the past, but shortly after the civil war, armed robbery with sophisticated arms leading to maiming and killing of victims became the order of the day.

Some even identified the present state of *robbery* and *cultism* in tertiary institutions of learning to education and foreign influence. Most Nigerian youths now due to the novels they read, and foreign films they watch are afflicted by imported violent cultures. The present Nigerian parents according to some female respondents do not set good standards and values for their children. The pursuit of money has taken over the time of most parents at the expense of child training. To a lot of the respondents, education does not just start and end with the payment of school fees, it also involves attention. Lack of respect for elders in

the modern day Nigeria also forms part of the decadence of Nigeria today according to some respondents. An elderly woman mentioned a case of where a senior secondary school boy beat up his mother because the mother did not allow him to keep company of some 'bad' boys in their neighbourhood. Quite unexpectedly, however, majority of the respondents (68%) still prefer to live in the Nigeria of today than in the Nigeria of the past. This may be attributed to mere resignation. As it is not possible to bring back the 'good' old days as being painted, it is equally impossible to drastically change the contemporary world, so people are bound to live with what is available.

Attitudes to Death and Dying

All the respondents support the idea that the concept of death should be freely discussed by Nigerians. Most of them argue that the world is 'nobody's' home, that it is not only transient but that there is no armour against death. Some submit that death is like a 'debt' that all mankind must repay. Some even made reference to conflicting number of years that God has destined a man or woman to live. For instance, an 80 year old man stated that he is not sure whether he was already spending "'over time"' based on the mandatory 75 years prescribed by "God", whereas an 83 year old woman claimed she still has 27 years more to live based on the prescribed 120 years in the Bible.

One woman simply describes death as an advanced stage of sleep. She said further that death is to her a 'gentle' and 'kind' phenomenon in old age. She sees the fear and sorrow of death as problems of the living especially the young ones who probably do not want to do away with their material wealth.

On their reaction to being told of an imminent death within thirty days, 50% said they would be more prayerful and closer to their God while awaiting the last day. 10% showed indifference. According to them, except people whose past shadows are worrying, there is no need for any special arrangement or changes in life patterns. 15% said they would put their WILL in good shape to avoid squabbles among their wives and their children. 20% said they would confess their sins and repent so that they can go to heaven rather than hell. 5% expressed fear for being told of an imminent death within 30 days.

They said they would eat well, dress well and enjoy themselves within the limits of their resources before the last day.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented here show that adjustment or maladjustment in later life in Nigeria is contingent upon certain factors among which is the economic and political environment, especially the negative outcome, and a continuing obsession with certain events (for example military coups and military regimes), and the lack of any solution to our economic problems up to date. Most Nigerian elders have seen dramatic political and economic changes, such as Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), indigenisation, and the introduction of new technologies. There have also been changes in culture and values. All these rather than aging *per se* may be affecting their present life experiences.

Those respondents who reminisced negatively did so because of the problems brought about by political instability, high cost of living, and insecurity in the land rather than old age *per se*.

The findings of the study also seem paradoxical when set against the evidence of a present horrifying Nigerian society and preference for the present rather than for the past. Also contrary to expectations, the findings of the study show that majority of the respondents claimed to be fulfilled in life. This may be due to the high level of endurance and patience of the older people over the young ones. These characteristics of the older generation may be considered to have assisted in genuine developmental changes towards greater self-acceptance and resilience in the face of difficulties. The present findings are in line with the findings of Dittman-Kohli (1990); Baltes and Baltes (1990); and Coleman et al. (1983).

Another major finding of the present study is that most elderly people in the study did not share the idea that people should hesitate or feel reluctant to discuss death. Like Lieberman and Tobin (1983) found, this study found that the elders talk about death openly and in personal terms. In general therefore, aging *per se* appears not to have any major effect on adjustment.

SUGGESTION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study illustrates one point - the need to conduct more investigations into the area of aging and adjustment in Nigeria. It is suggested that such studies should ask individuals to describe their actual behaviour.

On policy recommendation, it is suggested that policy makers must not adopt the stereotype method of looking at old age with blinkers, which make them recognize sickness, poverty, and mental deterioration alone. Although these may be some of the signs of old age, they should also consider the pleasures and achievements of aging. This means that there is the need to establish a Medicare programme for all people over the age of 60 in Nigeria. One of the important problems for the future is the training of physicians in the special problems of older people. Departments of Medicine in all Nigerian Medical schools need to develop awareness among young physicians and paramedics of the physiological characteristics of older people, which are important in treating their ailments and diseases.

There is also the need to improve the quality of living for the elderly. One may include the development of housing facilities. For the elderly with limited incomes, a certain percentage of Government housing estates should be allocated to the use of the elderly people.

There can also be the Home-maker services, day care centers, meals wheels, counselling services and activity centers. All of these social policies will contribute greatly to the quality of living in the post-retirement years of retirees.

Finally, it is a basic fact that as we grow old, we work, produce and earn less, and therefore need a secure source of income to see us through life. The government may therefore, start to think about the old people "maintenance income". This is different from a pension, in that whoever is above 60, whether he ever worked in the private or public sector or self-employed should be entitled to a certain amount of money that will be adequate for subsistence.

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