

Perceived Status of the Elderly in the Nigerian Family

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this study was to show how the traditional bonds between the elders and younger members of the family are gradually becoming weak. The major focus of inquiry is the nature and decline of status in old age. Powerlessness, alienation, loss of respectability, loss of authority are the major points of analysis. Findings in this study indicated a high positive correlation between these variables and old age in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

In traditional society, family has been the most natural and conducive social organization for the care and support of the old aged person. The care and support to old aged person was provided by the family members, especially the wife, sons, daughters, sons-in-law, and daughters-in-law. This care giving was backed not simply by the emotional bonds of relationship emerging out of blood relationship or marital relationship but by the force of pervasive influence of traditional values, norms, and behavior which were not simply practised as a matter of routine but also deified. The care of the elders was the moral imperative which was considered not only material bliss but also spiritual salvation (Gore, 1992). However, this traditional bond between the elders and the younger members of the family is gradually becoming weak in Nigeria.

The physical deterioration due to chronologically advancing age makes a person aged. In this process of becoming old, there are both intrinsic as well as extrinsic changes in the individual. The intrinsic changes are those which take place within the functioning of body organs. The basic deprivation gradually crops up initially in the form of reduction in the physical strength and energy previously enjoyed by the aged in the youth and adult age (Russell, 2003; Thurston, 2001). The aged is, therefore, deprived of smartness, promptness, dynamism, and confidence, which were basic personality features of youth and adulthood. Further, the optimistic outlook of the aged gradually turns into pessimism. Extrinsic changes among the aged are the effects of disorganized social institutions, values and norms arising out of surrounding, social forces of urbanization, industrialization,

modernization, and globalization (Ushasnee, 2004). Hence, the disorganized society, family, and personality produce deprivations to the aged in the contemporary society.

The greater longevity of the elderly demands care and support for a longer period and also entails high cost of medical and health care. The rising cost of living and shrinking income pattern often makes it difficult for the family to provide adequate care and support. Rising individualism and liberalism in the family have often boosted up the selfish and egoistic interest of the individual members of the family.

The blame is not entirely on the part of family members, but problems of maladjustment and strains in the family occur because of the typical personality traits and behavior pattern of the elderly also. The cynicism and eccentricism of the last phase of life, the excessive egotism of the elderly and resistance to change and adaptability result into crisis situation in the family (Blau, 1984).

Family care for the elderly is believed to be culturally determined and socially reinforced (Neysmith and Edward, 1984; Kalache, 1990; Sijuwade, 1991). The principle of seniority translates the cultural rules that children and other junior family members should care for older persons.

In the changing context of Nigerian society, the problem of strains and adjustment of the elderly has achieved pivotal importance. The elders in the family manage to live in the changed context. The response and behavior provided by the family members to elderly persons are crucial for understanding their problem. In this paper, major focus of inquiry is the nature and decline of status in old age. Powerlessness, Alienation, loss of respectability, and loss of authority are the major points of analysis.

METHOD

The present paper is a part of the study which was conducted on the elderly living in the city of Oyo and two surrounding small towns in the Southwestern part of Nigeria. For the purpose of the present study, persons between the age of 60 years to 85 years have been treated as elderly.

The sample technique adopted for the present study has been snow ball technique. In the first instance a retired person was located and then he was asked to inform about two or more retired or old persons. This process was replicated until the desired number of respondents, that is, 300 old aged persons, were contacted and interviewed for the study. These respondents portray a varied picture of the universe who differ among themselves on the ground of age, status, education, occupation, income, and residence. They represent an heterogeneous and variegated picture of the population of the old aged persons.

For the purpose of the present paper, the primary data have been collected mainly through the use of a structured interview schedule. Apart from this schedule, the primary data have also been collected through informal talks with the respondents and field observation. The interview was conducted by the investigator, with the help of two post graduate students from one of the Nigerian Universities, at the residence of the respondents. The difficult part of the exercise was to locate the respondents and to make them agree for the interview. Some of the elderly has the tendency to relapse into past memories and experiences and sometimes it was difficult to contain their monologue.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data related to nature and existence of decline of status in old age are interpreted as follows:

Sense of Powerlessness in Old Age: Old age is considered to be a period of life when physical and mental capacities fail and person becomes persona-non-grata in the family. The authority and the power gradually wane and nobody gives proper consideration to the elderly. The traditional respect given to old aged person in the contemporary society is on the decline (Russell, 2003; Ushasnee, 2004).

To understand the situation of the elderly in the family situation, the respondents have been

asked to state whether they have become powerless in their family because of old age. A majority of respondents (64 percent) have affirmed that they have become powerless in their family on account of old age (Table 1). There are only 25.75 percent respondents who do not feel this way. They feel that they are still capable of playing decisive role in their domestic life. There are 10.25 percent respondents who did not express any concrete opinion in this regard. Thus, there exists a feeling of powerlessness in the majority of the cases.

Another problem faced in the old age is that of alienation. When an old aged person feels that he has become marginalized in the family because of old age, declining physical ability, and economic non-productiveness, then he suffers from alienation. Exploration made in this direction reveals that 63.25 percent respondents subscribe to the view that they feel alienated in their family because of their old age (Table 2). There are 27.75 percent respondents who have not confronted this situation. These respondents are of the opinion that the family members pay due regard and consideration even though they have become old.

Opinion About Declining Respect to Elderly: The respondents have been asked whether they feel that the elderly are not being accorded that much respect which they have enjoyed in earlier days. There are 63.75 percent respondents who have opined that there is decline in respectability of the old aged persons (Table 3). There are 19.50 percent respondents who have not subscribed to this view point. There are 16.75 percent respondents who are ambivalent in their attitude towards declining respect to old aged person.

For those respondents who stated that in

Table 1: Sense of powerlessness in old age.

<i>Sense of powerlessness</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	223	64.00
No	70	25.75
Don't know	7	10.25
Total	300	100.00

Table 2: Feeling of alienation in old age.

<i>Feeling of alienation</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	219	63.25
No	78	27.75
Don't know	3	9.00
Total	300	100.00

Table 3: Opinion about declining respectability of elderly.

<i>Declining respectability</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	221	63.75
No	45	19.50
Don't know	34	16.75
Total	300	100.00

contemporary society, old aged persons are not being accorded high respect, they were further asked to state the reasons for the same. This study has suggested that increasing importance of caring member in the family coupled with the changing values have resulted into loss of authority and prestige of elderly who have also become physically frail and mentally incapacitated.

Attitude Toward Withdrawal from Worldly Life: It is considered as high value that the elderly should devote their time to religious activities rather than engage themselves in mundane affairs of the world. Our inquiry has suggested that a majority of the respondents (76.75 percent) have stated that elderly should not withdraw from worldly life. There are 18.50 percent respondents who are in favor of retreatism from worldly life, whereas 4.75 percent respondents could not state clear-cut opinion on this issue.

Involvement in Social Activities: The respondents have been asked whether they feel that old aged persons should devote their time and energy in social welfare activities. There are 87.00 percent respondents who have stated that the old aged persons should devote their time and energy in social welfare activities, whereas 11.25 percent respondents do not agree with this view (Table 5). Thus it is clear that the respondents prefer active involvement of the old aged person

Table 4: Attitude toward withdrawal from worldly life

<i>Withdrawal from worldly life</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	43	18.50
No	238	76.75
Don't know	19	4.75
Total	300	100.00

Table 5: Involvement in social welfare activities

<i>Social welfare activities</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	281	87.00
No	12	11.25
Don't know	7	1.75
Total	300	100.00

in social welfare activities.

Painful Aspect of Old Age: The respondents have been asked that in their opinion what is the saddest part of the old age. Majority of the respondents (58.50 percent) have stated that the disrespect shown by younger generation towards elders is a saddest part of the old age (Table 6). There are 19.50 percent respondents who have stated frail health and poor appetite as the most agonizing aspect of old age. Non-fulfillment of personal wishes and aspirations has been enumerated as the most painful part by 13.75 percent respondents. There are 8.25 percent respondents who have stated that the saddest part of old age is poor control over things around and feeling of powerlessness among the old persons.

Blessings of Old Age: The respondents have been asked to state their opinion about the blessings of the old age. There are 40.75 percent respondents who have stated that old aged persons have greater understanding of life and the people (Table 7). According to 27.50 percent respondents, the major blessings of old age is having a sense of fulfillment for a life well spent. There are 21.00 percent respondents who have stated that the sense of achievement over the material possessions and satisfaction over the progress of the family members are the major blessings of old age. Whereas 10.75 percent

Table 6: Painful aspect of old age

<i>Painful aspect of old age</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Poor control over things around	28	8.25
Flouting of authority of elders by younger generation	184	58.50
Frail health and poor appetite	58	19.50
Non-fulfillment of personal wishes and aspirations.	30	13.75
Total	300	100.00

Table 7: Blessings of old age

<i>Blessings of old age</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
A greater understanding of life and people.	129	40.75
A sense of fulfillment for a life well spent.	77	27.50
A sense of achievement over material possessions and progress of family members.	64	21.00
Greater respect by family members and kin groups.	30	10.75
Total	300	100.00

respondents have stated that blessings of old age is greater respect by family members and kin groups. Thus, maturity and insights into the affairs of life have been considered as the greater blessings of old age.

Old Age as Best Part of Life: It is said that in the old age after completing all assigned duties and responsibilities the old aged persons enjoy the best years of their life in a burden free environment. The respondents have been asked whether they agree with this view. There are 55.75 percent respondents who have stated that they do not agree with the view that old age is the best years of life (Table 8). However, there are 33.00 percent respondents who consider old age as the best part of life. There are 11.25 percent respondents who have not given any clear-cut opinion on the point.

Table 8: Old age as the best part of life

<i>Old age as best part of life</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	102	33.00
No	173	55.75
Don't know	25	11.25
Total	300	100.00

Necessity of Husband and Wife Companionship in Old Age: It is said that companionship of husband and wife is indispensable during old age. The respondents have been asked to state their agreement with this statement. A majority of the respondents (85.00 percent) have shown their agreement with this view (Table 9). Whereas 5.75 percent respondents stated that they do not agree with this view that the companionship of husband and wife is most required during old age, there are 9.25 percent respondents who did not express their view on this issue.

Table 9: Necessity of husband and wife companionship in old age

<i>Spouse Companionship</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	240	85.00
No	23	5.75
Don't know	37	9.25
Total	300	100.00

CONCLUSION

Thus, it is perceived that every facet of Nigerian society is characterized by rapid social transformation and each segment of its population is experiencing change. The old aged

population is no exception of it. The increased longevity, the better health and medical care facilities are contributing to a change in the status and role of old aged persons. The old aged persons with educational background and deep anchoring in modern occupational and economic life are likely to be quite enlarged. In such changed social scenario, the traditional role configuration and the image of the old aged person are likely to be different. The findings of the present paper analyze the perceived status of the old aged persons in the family.

It has been found that most of the respondents (64.00 percent) agreed that they had become powerless in their family because of old age. They have also stated that old age had resulted into alienation in the family life (63.25 percent). They felt that in contemporary society, much of respect was not being accorded to old aged persons as it was given to them in the olden days. They felt that increasing importance of earning member in the family and changing values of the society were the main reasons for loss of prestige and power of elderlies.

Majority of the respondents agreed (76.75 percent) that elderly should not withdraw from worldly life. They also agreed that old aged persons should devote their time and energy in social welfare activities.

Most of the respondents felt that flouting of authority of elders by younger generation was the most painful aspect of old age (58.50 percent). They also agreed that old age was not best part of life. The respondents have also stated that husband-wife companionship in old age (85.00 percent) was essential to make life less troublesome.

After having analyzed the plight of the old aged persons, we are in a position to project some recommendations for the betterment of the perceived status of the elderly in the family. The elderly should be made to realize that they are very much needed in the society. The general attitude is that as soon as the elderly persons lose their earning status, they are no more needed. Such negative attitude leads to disastrous consequences. Old aged persons may lose their earning status, they may also become physically frail yet they are a great source of knowledge, experience, and skills. Throughout their life, they have witnessed many trials and turbulences, rise and fall and thus the old aged persons become a great reservoir of skills and knowledge. The

elderly must be provided financial support both by the government and family members. They must be helped to realize that their waning years are not meant to be frustrating and fruitless.

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