

MULTIGENERATIONAL RESIDENCE AND PERCEPTION OF OLD AGE BY NIGERIAN YOUTHS

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In this study, I examined the influence of multigenerational residence on Nigerian youths' perception of old age, and the influence of perception of old age on the youths' expressed fears of aging. Results showed that youths residing in multigenerational households viewed old age more positively compared to youths who did not live in such households. There were also differences in the expressed fears of aging between youths who viewed old age positively versus negatively: the former feared dependency and death, whereas the latter feared isolation and physical and mental deterioration.

Keywords: multigenerational residence, youths, elderly, perception, old age.

On the basis, perhaps, of the understanding that the way in which people define *others* determines their behavior towards those others, and with the practical/policy insight that attitudes toward a presumably disadvantaged group determine the type, amount, and mode of resource allocation to that group, many researchers in Europe and the USA have examined the attitude of the nonaged towards the aged. Earlier results indicate that negative social labeling of the old has been common (McTavish, 1971; Tuckman & Lorge, 1952, 1953); more recently, however, Brubaker and Powers (1976) suggested that attitudes towards the aged vary by age groups and entail both negative and positive attributions.

In this study, I examined Nigerian youths' perception of aging as a biocultural process, to explore the influence of residential proximity between youths and the aged on the former group's perception of old age and expectations about their own inevitable aging. The general assumption extant in Nigeria today is that youths have little understanding of and

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respect for the elderly, because the nucleation and increased mobility of the family has left this group with few opportunities to interact with and develop understanding of or respect for the aged. However, this claim remains empirically unverified; as such, I empirically examined if there are differences in perception of aging between youths who reside with grandparents and those who do not.

Literature Review

Many scholars have investigated perception of old age and aging (Brubaker & Powers, 1976; McTavish, 1971; Peters, 1971). The studies reviewed here are some of those in which the focus was on the impact of contact between youths and the elderly on the former's understanding of and attitude toward the latter. Jantz, Seefeldt, Caalper, and Serock (1976) studied attitudes toward the aged among children aged 3–11 years and found that these children had limited interaction with and knowledge about the elderly, and did not in general view the aged positively.

Using a multigenerational sample, DeMoyne Bekka and Taylor (1966) compared the attitudes of students who had living grandparents and those who had living great-grandparents. A significant difference was found between the two groups, such that those with living great-grandparents held less stereotypical views of old age. Similarly, Sheehan (1978) revealed that there is a direct positive relationship between frequency of young children's contact with and their ability to identify the elderly. Finally, Kastenbaum and Durkee (1964) indicated that youths with a negative view of old people also tended to avoid considering the later years of their own life.

My purpose in this study was to explore the impact of close intrafamilial contact with the aged on youths' perception of old age, and to determine if there is a relationship between adolescents' perception of aging and their expectations about their own old age.

Theoretical Framework

Particularly pertinent to this study is the concept of *role taking*, which—according to the symbolic interactionist framework (Blumer, 1969; McCall & Simmons, 1966; Mead, 1934)—is the ability to put oneself in another person's place and to imagine performance from the viewpoint of others. Role taking becomes possible when some components of one's own role are at least generally similar or complementary to the identities that are salient in another's actions; for example, a student may take on the role of a teacher (Charon, 1979). However, role taking only becomes possible in the case of familiarity or contact with the other, thereby

providing opportunities for anticipatory socialization. As an example, this occurs in the transition from medical student to doctor (Huntington, 1957).

Role taking is learned not only from accumulated experience with various roles but also from observing the counterrole performance of those who have interacted with us. In this way, children gain a sense of what it is to be a parent, and young person can learn about what it is to be old. Role taking also has implications for self-expectations when one is eventually required to perform in that role. Thus, role taking involves selective perception of the actions of others and selective emphasis on role components, organized around the purpose and sentiments attributed to the other (Turner, 1962). On the basis of the above reviewed literature, I formed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Youths who reside in the same household with a grandparent will have a more positive view of aging compared to youths who do not reside with a grandparent.

Hypothesis 2: Youths who perceive old age negatively versus positively will differ in their expressed concerns about their own aging.

Method

Participants

Participants were 100 high school students from four secondary schools in Ile-Ife Township, Nigeria. Two schools were situated in the traditional quarters of the town, one in a modern newly developed area of the town, and one within the university campus. From each school, 25 pupils were randomly selected from the class registers of the two senior classes.

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Of the 100 youths, 53 were male, the oldest was aged 22 years, and the youngest was aged 14 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 16$). Twenty percent had university educated mothers and 42% had illiterate mothers. This reflects the efforts I made to include youths from diverse socioeconomic family backgrounds.

Among the respondents, 69 had living grandparents. Those who had no living grandparents noted that they had elderly aunts and/or uncles who were like grandparents to them. As at the time of survey, 52 students were living in the same household with at least one grandparent.

Instrument

The study questionnaire consisted of items soliciting information about the youth, and his/her contact with old people in general and his/her grandparent(s) in particular. I also collected data regarding the youth's perception of old age.

Residence with grandparent(s) was ascertained by the item "Do you live in the same house with your grandparent(s)?"

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Perception of old age was measured using two sentence completion items with the following stems:

- (a) "Old age people are..."
- (b) "The older one gets, the..."

Expectations about one's own old age were measured using a sentence completion item with the following stem:

"The thing I fear most about getting old is..."

Results

Perception of Old Age

Of the two sentence completion item utilized to measure this variable, only the "The older one gets..." item was a successful measure of the youths' perception of aging and old age. In reviewing and judging the responses to this item, 8 out of 10 independent judges agreed that from their statements, 68 students portrayed aging and old people in a positive way and 22 students had a negative view. Examples of the statements categorized as reflecting positive perception of aging are as follows:

"The older one gets, the more important one becomes."

"The older one gets, the more understanding one becomes."

"The older one gets, the wiser one becomes."

Examples of statements categorized as reflecting negative perception of aging include the following:

"The older one gets, the weaker one becomes."

"The older one gets, the dirtier one becomes."

"The older one gets, the nastier one becomes."

The second sentence completion item yielded inconclusive reports as most students completed the statement by referring to chronological age (e.g., "Old people are...the grandparents"). Therefore, the judges could not successfully categorize the responses as either positive or negative, and I excluded this item from all further analyses.

Table 1. *Residence with Grandparent and Perception of Aging*

		Residing with a grandparent	Not residing with a grandparent	Total
Perception of aging	Positive	41	27	68
	Negative	11	21	32
	Total	52	48	100

Note. $\chi^2 = 5.7, df = 1, p > .02$.

As can be seen in Table 1, a significantly higher percentage (78%) of those youths who lived with at least one grandparent had a positive perception of aging. Hypothesis 1 was, therefore, confirmed.

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Table 2. *Perception of Aging and Expressed Fears of Own Aging*

		Fears of own aging				Total
		Death and dying	Physical and mental deterioration	Dependency	Isolation	
Perception of aging	Positive	22	7	34	5	68
	Negative	4	12	0	0	16
	Total	26	19	34	5	84

Note. $\chi^2 = 28.6, df = 3, p > .001$.

Self-Expectations About Aging

As can be seen in Table 2, the predominant fears expressed by those who viewed aging positively were (a) death and dying, and (b) dependency. In contrast, the predominant concerns of those who viewed aging negatively were (a) isolation, and (b) the physical and mental deterioration that attends old age. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was confirmed.

Discussion

In conducting this study, I aimed to answer two questions: (1) What, if any, is the influence of multigenerational residence on youths' perception of old age? and (2) To what extent does perception of old age influence youths' fears of their own old age? In relation to the first question, those youths who lived with at least one grandparent tended to view old age more positively than youths who did not live with a grandparent. These findings are similar to those of Jantz et al. (1976) and Sheehan (1978), and confirm Homans' (1951) proposition that interactions between persons lead to sentiments of liking, provided that each person's activities do not irritate the other too much.

Of the 52 students residing with at least one grandparent, 37 said that they liked their grandparent(s) a lot and only one person expressed an outright dislike for their grandparent. In explaining why they were so fond of their grandparents, most youths mentioned grandparents' kindness and understanding, and the material things they were given by the grandparent(s). Thus, it appears that most participants found the presence of a grandparent in the house rewarding, both materially and emotionally, and it is not surprising that many also had a positive view of old age.

In relation to my second hypothesis, a larger proportion of those who viewed old age negatively also expressed fears of isolation and physical and mental deterioration in their own old age. Among youths with a positive perception of old age, the predominant fears expressed about their own old age were dependency on others and the inevitability of death. This contradicts the findings of Kastenbaum and Durkee (1964), who

reported that youths who have a negative view of old age also tend to omit any consideration of the later years in their own life. This contradiction may reflect the measurement technique used in the present study, whereby role taking was artificially forced by employing a sentence completion item.

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