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AGING SCENARIO IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY: THE CHALLENGE OF THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

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Summary

Nigeria is becoming an aging country given the projections of the elderly by demographers. Yet very little is known by way of national policy and preparation to meet the need of the emerging situation has not been contemplated. This paper highlights the needs of the elderly population and envisages the problems that are likely to be posed in the next two or three decades. On the basis of the available research work on the aged, it outlines psychosocial strategies of meeting situational exigencies as far as the elderly are concerned in the twenty first century.

KEY WORDS: Ageing Scenario, Elderly future, Twenty First Century Expectations in Nigeria

Introduction

The greatest hope for mankind is hope itself. Most men live by hope and hope alone. If anything, it is ignorance of the future that makes life so enchanting and at the same time so bewildering. It is the same hope that we hold, standing at the portals of the 21st century, for a better tomorrow. What hope can there be for the elderly as we entered the 21st century. The 21st century is the subject of our survey discussion.

For many, old age is dreaded age. Notwithstanding the advancement of science, with marvelous successes in man's unending quest to unravel the mysteries of nature, he is still at the receiving end in so far as his own aging is concerned. All of us, the poor and the rich, man and woman, the scientist and the common man, willy-nilly, have to countenance what old age has in store for us. Yet, Gerontology as the science of aging, has as its objective a "Liverlier Longevity". The attempt is to make old age a golden age, to make the most of what exists and to lead a life of calm and quietitude so that he may have a sign of happiness instead of diving into the depths of despair and often times holding aloft his hands in prayer to the Lord above to enable him to enjoin the Almighty speedily.

Demographic projections have shown that in the next few decades there will be "elderlyboom". This according to them would be achieved through improved health and hygiene for all the citizenry. As a result, Nigeria's aged would progressively increase. It is expected that if this trend is obtained one would find more elderly women outliving men who are more stricken with the stresses of modern living than their female counterparts according to the projection.

Hopeful and cheering as the proposition may be one is still skeptical for more than half the Nigerian elderly are steeped in poverty and illiteracy with little if any of the purchasing power going by present economic realities in the country.

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Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 700 respondents, 350 men each from Lagos and Abuja respectively, in the age groups 55 – 65, 65 – 75; 75 – 85 (120 in each age group). The data was obtained by random selection of senior civil and military pensioners waiting to receive their pension and gratuity for an upward over one year.

Procedure

The 350 respondents in each town were orally interviewed on a number of variables relating to psycho-social status and needs of the elderly in our contemporary Nigerian society. At the conclusion of the interview respondents were handed questionnaires on social attitudes questions to complete without the assistance of the researcher. The questionnaire contained a ten point statements of opinion designed to measure the attitude of the aged toward their plight in contemporary Nigerian society. The major analysis employed percentages and correlational measures on the attitudinal questions. The variables adopted in the study were psycho-social status and the needs of the elderly as shown on tables 1 – 4 respectively.

TABLE 1
The Psycho-social Status and Needs of the Elderly

S/No	Feelings	N 700	Percentage
1	Isolation:		
	Feel very lonely	15	2.44
	Feel moderately lonely	120	16.14
2	Life satisfaction:		
	Feel very satisfied	30	4.50
	Somewhat satisfied	145	21.04
	Not satisfied	94	13.47
3	Generation gap:		
	Feel much distance	166	23.54
	Feel moderate distance	105	15.23
	Feel little distance	25	3.67

Source: United Nations Population Estimate for Nigeria in World Population Prospects, 1995

To root out conjectures in more mundane soil, let us look at the status and needs of the elderly as at present. The elderly suffer psychologically because our society has generally been unsuccessful in finding something important or satisfying for them to do. Roscow (cited in Mctavish, 1971:90) has noted: "It should be clear that the crucial people in the aging problem are not the old, but the younger age groups; for it is the rest of us who determine the status and position of the older person in the social order." The young and the middle aged not only determine the future for the elderly they also determine their own future as they will some day be elderly. When we look at table 1, we observe that our sample feel much distance in other in other words, that a generation gap exists between the young and the elderly.

In our society some decades ago the elderly were respected and viewed as useful to their people to a much greater degree than is the case today. A good proportion of them feel moderately lonely, only somewhat satisfied or not satisfied with life. They experience a good distance between themselves and the younger generations (see table 1). The growth of modern society

have robbed the old aged of their high status in our society. Prior to this modern trend older people were the primary owners of property, land was the most important source of power, and therefore, the elderly controlled much of the economic and political power. Now, people primarily earn their living in the job market and the vast majority of the aged own little land and are viewed as having no salable labour. In our earlier society, the elderly were also valued because of the knowledge they possessed. Their experiences enabled them to supervise planting and harvesting and to pass on knowledge about hunting, housing and crafts. The elderly also played key roles in preserving and transmitting the culture. But the rapid advances of science and technology have tended to limit the value of the technological knowledge of the elderly, and books and other memory-storing devices have made old people less valuable as store houses of culture and records. This is illustrated in Table 1. A majority of the respondents (120) feel moderately (15) feel very lonely, whereas (30) feel very satisfied (145) feel only somewhat satisfied and as high as (95) respondents are not satisfied. The Table too shows that there is considerable generation gap between the elderly and the young. In such a situation it is near impossible for the elderly to play their key roles in preserving and transmitting the culture. Yet, most of them live with their children and have a semblance of authority over the critical issues that concern them (see table 2).

TABLE 2
Familial and Social Status of the Aged

Social Status	N 700	Percentage
Living status:		
Living alone	30	2.65
Living with family and children	260	37.04
Living with wife only	65	9.52
Family authority:		
Self	185	26.98
Self and wife	75	11.11
(none financial) children	85	12.70

Source: United Nations Population Estimate for Nigeria in World Population Prospects, 1995

Even though most of them live with their children and have a semblance of authority over the critical issues that concern them (see Table 2). As Papalia and Olds (1981:536) summarize our society's treatment of the elderly accurately thus:

Our society does not allow many of our elderly to experience their last years positively. We don't respect old people for their wisdom and experience, but instead dismiss their ideas as outdated and irrelevant. We don't allow them to use their abilities productively; but force them into retirement when they are still eager and able to work. We don't sustain them financially; but allow them to waste away in a state of poverty that crushes the spirit.

This further explains why a substantial proportion of these respondents (see Table 3) require supplemented income, being productive and hence their self esteem restored.

The needs of the elderly (N = 700) indicate that a good proportion of them seek supplemental income (see table 3). Equally was there a need to work and occupy oneself. Also, interestingly, there was a strong need to improve one's health as well as to settle their children comfortably. To make a long story short, the contemporary condition of the elderly in Nigeria, though not down right deplorable, is not at the same time any thing to be happy about. The future trends, judged by the current condition, is not any better either. Nevertheless, the developments in the science of gerontology over the past decades hold much in promise and it is these considerations that should enable us to hope for a happy future for the senior citizens of our country. What are these emerging trends? What good things can we think of? What justifiable aspirations can we hold? And more important what should we be doing to ensure; an age of health and happiness for our elderly.

TABLE 3

Needs of the Aged (Sample Survey (N = 700 men)

Needs	N 700	Percentage saying yes
Need for supplemental income	142	20.29
Need for improved social status	59	8.42
Need to work and occupy	112	16.09
Need for better companionship	39	5.69
Need to improve health	139	19.88
Need to know about future	112	16.07
Need to settle children	97	13.86

Source: United Nations Population Estimate for Nigeria in World Population Prospects, 1995

An offshoot of Cogill's modernization theory (Cogwill, 1974) would have us believe that a modernized Nigeria would come under the burden of a disabled, deprived and dependent aged segment of the population. It would also mean a declining familial and off-spring responsibility and an increasing social and state responsibility in the care of the elderly. But, it need not all be that bad. The affectional ties between parents and children and the compulsions of reciprocity of rearing and caring obligations between them, coupled with the ritualistic off-spring obligations to perform the last rites for the parent may have far outweigh the disruptive influences that modernization may spell. Also, it is not proper to compare the future of the Nigerian elderly with that of the prevailing status of the aged in the West. The elderly in the West generally desire to be independent of their children. The march of science in the branches of Geriatric nutrition, health and exercise physiology is churning up an optimization formula that promises a far better status and slower aging in individuals. Drugs like hydergine and a whole gamut of neurotransmitter optimizers have opened newer vistas of improvement in geriatric brain function. The discovery in the last few decades of several factors that hasten physical aging, have stirred up research programmes for their physical manipulations to man's advantage. To crown all these, is the increasing tempo of biomedical gerontological research aimed at increasing longevity, which one would expect would throw up more useful knowledge in the control of age related disease and debility, if necessary even through genetic intervention and repair. The controls of the processes of aging are being more clearly understood and this would mean possibilities of safe intervention to delay the onset of aging if not to stop the process altogether.

Similarly, there is an increasing interest in portions and plant extracts from the science of ayurveda, and aloe vera preparations that have been listed to slow down the deleterious process of aging. While their effects are yet to be proven under

strict experimental control, yet there seem to be possibilities of some break-through in the coming decades.

Coming to the psychological characteristics of the elderly in this century, one would expect him to be cognitively more agile and able than his twentieth century counterpart. The studies of Baltes and Schale (1974 & 1976), Horn & Donaldson (1976) and several others have consistently shown that much of the cognitive deterioration generally reported in the elderly may be due to their assessment by tests unsuitable for the elderly. It is a common observation to-day that our children are taking greater cognitive loads, appear more able and live in a more enriched environment. Hence the elderly are not to be judged by these standards of the young. Further, the observed low IQ of the elderly may be due to methodological artifacts, lack of sufficient intellectual exercise resulting in disuse and decay of mental functions. Horn & Cattell's distinction (1967) between crystallized and fluid intelligence and the findings that these two ages differently have given us hope and avenues to maximize the use of crystalline intelligence and slow down the deterioration of fluid intelligence. The interventions have substantially improved the performance of the elderly. The net observation is that the deterioration noticed in the elderly is far slower than apparent and given an appropriate environment their performance would be far better than what existed in the twentieth century Ramamurti et al; (1992).

Evidence is plentiful that the scientific and technological changes with an accent on computerization and automation is bound to bring significant changes in the lifestyles of people. The question naturally arises as to how well the elderly are going to adapt to these changes. While it would be difficult, by present knowledge, to teach an old man new tricks, yet, with the research on retraining procedures coupled with the greater capabilities of the future elderly, the task of adaptation may not be as difficult. In fact, if education and training have a futuristic emphasis with an accent on adaptability, the elderly would survive the technological onslaught.

On the social front, technology and modernization would reduce the scope for existing social interactional and familial roles and affectional ties. One might fear, that as a result, human relationships may become more mechanical and mundane. But in as much as these changes are expected, it is always possible to weave into this new rubric, adequate safeguards to optimize humanistic values in day-to-day living of man, so that the elderly may get a square deal. The eye has to be on use of media, school education and rearing practices to inculcate into the children, youth and caregivers, respect and regard for the elderly. The fact that all of us are going to age and today's children would be tomorrow's elderly, is a fact should be clearly imparted, so that aging would become a personalized concept for children and they would handle their aging parents and the elderly more humanely.

There is need to treat elderly more as a resource than as a liability. Senior Citizen's Organizations would be there all over the place. In as much as their members would be substantial, their bargaining power as vote banks would be considerable, thereby ensuring a better deal for themselves especially in a democratic setting like what we are experimenting now in Nigeria. The elderly, with the knowledge and resources that they possess, could use these to the benefit of the community, so as to make themselves a valuable commodity in the social set up. Therefore much thought and action needs to be devoted to the treatment of the elderly as a resource to the family and community in contemporary Nigerian society.

The study of markers of successful aging (Ramamurti, 1989) has brought out a whole set of variables (see table 4) that are predictive of happiness and contentment among the elderly. The manipulation of these variables and ensuring their maximization as part of the behavioural repertoire of the elderly would ensure a happy aging.

TABLE 4

Correlates of Successful Aging Among Aged Men

S/No.	Variable	Correlation
1	Self perceived physical and mental health	0.38**
2	Externality	0.18*
3	Functional ability	0.33*
4	Intergenerational amity	0.21*
5	Flexibility	0.18*
6	Positive self-concept	0.41*
7	Religiosity	0.20*
8	Activity level	0.20*
9	Economic level	0.18*
10	Perception of social supports	0.24*

* P < 0.05 ** P < 0.01

Similarly we should give serious thought to strategies, both long and short term (see table 5) to handle the future problem of the elderly. Such planning is necessary and an essential exercise, that government social institutions and NGOs should give priority so that we would not be caught napping when the problems raise their ugly head.

TABLE 5

Intervention Strategies

Short Term Strategies	Long Term Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - counseling the aged - keeping mind occupied - promotion of social interaction - participation in community welfare - self-concept improvement - management of health and disease - management of financial resources - accepting life as it comes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - counseling for the preparation for old age (pre-retirement counseling) - development of cognitive process to meet the challenges of old age - developing a flexible outlook - health education - incentives for child responsibility for aged parents - development of hobbies - development of alternative income sources in old age - using curricular education media to promote respect and reverence of the elderly - saving habit development - using media to promote positive attitude towards the elderly

In conclusion the future for the elderly in this 21st century in Nigeria could appear to be both apprehensive as well as comfortable and hopeful. Much would, of course, depend on what we do now and how we plan and execute our programmes for the elderly. As optimists we would say that the balance of negative and positive aspects would favour more the positive aspects. It is possible, with appropriate measures and schemes, to ensure a happy, purposeful life for the elderly in our country in this century.

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