Status and Role of the Elderly

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Abstract

Growing old is part of the human life cycle, but societies differ considerably in how old age is defined and how the elderly are perceived and treated. Are they respected, valued, and cared for, or are they denigrated and treated poorly? What may account for these differences? In trying to answer these questions, it is important to consider the widest possible set of societies, ranging from smaller-scale nonindustrial societies to larger industrial and post-industrial societies.

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Figure 1: Dogon men playing checkers in a market in Mali.

The world today is generally experiencing growth in the proportion of the population that is elderly. This trend is part of a long widespread demographic transition beginning in the 18th century with two strands–reduction in mortality and much later a reduction in fertility. While reduction in mortality, largely due to improved medical care and sanitation, at first results in rapid population growth, at later stages the number of births starts falling and population growth slows. Eventually, populations start to decline. Countries considered developed are generally in the later stages of this transition; developing countries are generally in earlier stages. Reductions in mortality mean not only that more children survive to adulthood, but also that people on average have longer life spans. In 2022, approximately 10 percent of people in the world were 65 or older; It is projected that the proportion will be 16 percent in 2050. The world regions with the highest proportions of people 65 or older are Europe and North America (19 percent in 2022); projected to be 25 percent by 2050. Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest proportion of people over 65; 3 percent in 2022 with a projection of 5 percent in 2050 (United

Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2022). Why is the ratio of people that are elderly important? There are two concerns often raised: Will there be enough people to do the necessary productive work? And, how will the elderly be adequately supported?

While the statistics just cited use the arbitrary age of 65 to define the elderly, it is important to understand that chronological age is not necessarily a useful way to define who is elderly from a cross-cultural perspective. First, until the advent of government, hospital, or church records, birth dates were not known, so chronological age was not generally used as a criterion. Second, societies often use other markers. The markers might be social, such as whether a person has grandchildren or great-grandchildren, or, in age-stratified societies, whether they are in the "retired" age-set. Or, societies might rely more on judging the biological aging process, referred to as senescence. Judgments may be made on whether a person is able to perform productive work well, or whether they walk fast or travel long distances, etc. We all know people who are the same age but differ substantially in their physical and mental abilities.

Growing old is part of the human cycle of life, but societies differ considerably on how people perceive and treat the elderly. Are they respected, valued and cared for, or are they denigrated and treated poorly? What may account for these societal or sub-cultural differences? In trying to answer these questions, it is important to consider the widest possible set of societies, ranging from smaller-scale nonindustrial societies to larger industrial and post-industrial societies. A methodological problem in doing so is a typical divide between those who cross-culturally study smaller-scale nonindustrial societies, and those who use countries as their units of analysis. Data for these two types of comparisons generally differ–ethnographic data based on participatory methods provides most of the information for nonindustrial societies; cross-national or cross-country comparisons tend to employ surveys with targeted questions on a few domains of life (Albert and Cattell 1994, 5–9). Putting together findings from these two types of research spanning the worldwide gamut of cultures is challenging.

Defining Old Age

Societies vary in their criteria for defining "old age." Among the most explicit are societies with age-sets, where individuals ceremonially pass from one named age grade to another as a group. For example, should they reach old age, the Afikpo Igbo men of eastern Nigeria (Ottenberg 1965, 16) pass through four grades with defined rights and activities shown in Table 1. Notice that only the senior group is formally retired.

Table 1: A chart of the stages that Afikpo Igbo males pass through until old age (reported by and adapted from Ottenberg (1965) p. 16)

Age grade for Afikpo Igbo males	Approximate age	Village or social group	Activities
Young men	30-50	Village	Village police force
Juniors	55-64	Village group	Executive arm of Afikpo government
Middle	65-83	Village group	Legislation and adjudication
Senior	84+	Village group	Retired with limited advisory powers

People from the United States might be surprised at the high age range for Afikpo Igbo seniors (84 or older) because first, the retirement age in the U.S. is commonly 65 and second, life expectancy for Nigeria in the past was quite low–for example, in 1950 Nigeria's life expectancy was about 32.6.[1] What is different about age-set systems is that there is no ambiguity about the age

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[1]There is also a misconception about what life expectancy statistics convey about aging. A low life expectancy, such as the 32.6 for Nigeria in 1950, does not mean that there are few elderly. This is because life expectancy is calculated by averaging how long all people in a society live. For much of world history and for many societies today, about half of all individuals do not live past their first birthday. Let's say for simplicity that 50% of infants die before their first birthday and those that make it past age one live on average to about 70, then the life expectancy might be around 35. But this average is a very poor predictor of how long adults typically live because high infant mortality will quickly bring down the average. Obviously, there were people among the Afikpo Igbo who lived to be in the junior, middle and senior groups.

class one belongs to. However, it is important to point out that since there is a wide range of ages in each age-set because moving-up ceremonies are generally not held that often, judgments on suitability for a position may still be made on individual characteristics, such as the ability to lead (Albert and Cattell 1994, 74).

Glascock and Feinman (1980) examined definitions of old age in a worldwide sample of nonindustrial societies. They found that

- Most nonindustrial societies (about 60 percent) had explicit criteria for old age. They note that this percentage may be an undercount because not all ethnographers paid particular attention to the elderly.

- There are a limited number of ways that old age is defined. By far, the most important criterion is a change in social role (such as change in work patterns, having children who are adults, and for women, reaching menopause). Other criteria such as age or a loss of capabilities were mentioned, but these criteria were much less frequent.

  Why? The authors were surprised at the low use of a change in capabilities (such as senility or invalidism) as criteria for old age. They surmise that perhaps this is because people may be classified as old well before any major change in capabilities (Glascock and Feinman 1980). Certainly the criterion of reaching menopause would probably be before women were 45-55, since that age range is currently the world average (World Health Organization 2022).

Living Arrangements for the Elderly

In nonindustrial societies described in the anthropological record, almost all societies have marital residence patterns in which couples after marriage live *with* or *near* the kin of either the husband or the wife. Choosing residence apart from kin (called neolocal residence) is uncommon. For example, in one worldwide sample, only about 9.5 percent of societies have neolocal residence.[2] Cross-cultural research suggests that neolocality becomes more likely with commercialization and industrialization (see further discussion in Residence and Kinship). And, extended family households (with two or more

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[2]Data from the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample are obtained from the Divale (2004; variable 69); the data are originally from Murdock and Wilson (1972).

families connected by a blood tie) are found in the majority of societies in the anthropological record; this means that the elderly are quite likely to live with others or have kin nearby should assistance be needed.

In apparent contrast to the nonindustrial world, in some parts of the world today a large proportion of elderly, particularly women, live alone. Percentages of elderly people (65 and up) living alone in a country range from a high of 45-50% for women to a low of 5-10%. The percentage for men is generally much lower (a high of 25% and a low of less than 5%). The world regions with the highest percentages of elderly living alone are Europe and North America; Asia and Africa have the lowest percentages (Reher and Requena 2018; Esteve et al. 2020). Here are some of the factors that predict *a high proportion of elderly living alone*

- Greater wealth and a higher overall development score of a country[3] (Reher and Requena 2018; Esteve et al. 2020).

  Why? In wealthier and more developed countries not only do some people have the means to support themselves living alone, but there are usually also more government programs to assist the elderly. Individual choice may also play a role. In some regions, such as Europe and North America, there is also an emphasis on individualism, which may mean that the elderly may prefer to live separately if they are able (Reher and Requena 2018; Esteve et al. 2020).

- While elderly women are generally more likely to live alone than elderly men, the difference between the genders is greater in wealthier countries (Reher and Requena 2018).

  Why? In most countries, women live longer than men and are therefore more likely to be widowed. Being widowed is a major predictor of the elderly living alone. The difference in life expectancy between women and men tends to be greater in more developed countries.

- A lower proportion of extended families in a country (Reher and Requena

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[3]The Human Development Index is created by the United Nations and is a composite measure of health, education, and standard of living–https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI

2018).

Why? Extended family households are commonly three-generation families, making it more likely that the oldest generation will live with younger individuals. But, in countries with fewer extended families, it is more likely that widowed person may live alone.

- The more education a person has, the more likely they will live alone (Reher and Requena 2018)

Roles for the Elderly

In many societies the elderly do not have special roles–they may simply do less work as their strength diminishes. For example, Paulme (1940, 165) says about the Dogon of Mali that "The old people are often content to sleep in the shade, but also do light tasks that do not demand a great expenditure of energy, tasks that they can easily put aside and take up later. . . The old women no longer pound millet, but watch over the cooking and render minor services in the house"

The Dogon elderly do less of some strenuous tasks, but they appear to do some things that younger people do not commonly do. For example, the making of baskets and mats is usually left to the elderly (Paulme 1940, 165). Among the Mbuti hunter-gatherers of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the elderly generally do not join in hunting, but they spend a great deal of time watching children in camp, preparing food and making twine that is used for net hunting (Turnbull 1965).

Special roles for the elderly also include being authority figures such as the head of a kin group, or a political leader. Among the Chuuk of the Caroline islands of Micronesia (now the Federated States of Micronesia), the rule for succession to the position of lineage head is that it goes to the oldest man of the oldest generation and if there are no male members of that generation left, the position goes to the oldest man of the next oldest generation (Goodenough 1951, 75). However Goodenough tells us that older age can sometimes take precedence over generation if a man in the younger generation is considerably older than the individual in the highest generation. Among the Mam Maya of southwestern Guatemala, the most powerful political leaders are four old men, *Principales del pueblo,* who have previously served well in other pueblo

offices. Together with the oldest and wisest shaman, the *Principales* choose the people to serve for civil and church offices and they are responsible for all important village decisions (Wagley 1941).

Storytelling is a common role for the elderly and stories not only provide entertainment, they also provide knowledge. Biesele (1993, 18) tells us about one San group (Ju/'hoansi), of the Kalahari Desert in southwestern Africa, that

> . . . virtually every old person (among Ju/'hoansi this is every man or woman who carries the appellation *n!a'an,* or old, after his or her name — perhaps forty-five and older) is able and usually willing to tell stories. Of the many old people whom I heard performing there were very few who could not tell the stories of the old time with confidence and vigour.

Biesele further notes that if young people are asked to tell stories, they demur, saying that they don't yet have the knowledge of older people. The Rural Irish elders are described as being "traditional repositories of a saga, folk tale, song, and legend. . . .it is among the old people that folk myth and folk belief are preserved and expressed for the community (Arensberg, Kimball, and Warner 1940, 192).

In the realm of religion, the elderly may lead ceremonies or serve in priestly roles. And, in some societies, the elderly are believed to have magical or mystical powers.

As discussed in the Childhood module, grandparents often play a valuable role in caretaking and upbringing of children. Of interest is that elderly men are more likely to contribute to infant and childcare in societies organized around women, but less likely in societies organized around men. It seems that not all grandparents provide the same benefit for the well-being of children–in particular, judging by survival rates of grandchildren, it appears to be the maternal grandparents that provide the most benefit (Strassmann and Garrard 2011).

Figure 2: Dogon village elder with children.

Status of the Elderly

Much of the research on cultural variation revolves around the concept of status and poses the following research question–What societal or cultural characteristics predict higher or lower status for the elderly? Status is a complex construct that may involve an overall assessment of value, respect, prestige, authority, power, or having more rights (Ember and Ember 2019, 214). Keeping in mind that status is not always measured in the same way, we try to convey an overall picture of the findings from cross-cultural research regarding status. In the subsections below, we discuss a number of predictors of variation in status for the elderly.

There is a myth that the elderly are well-supported and revered in nonindustrial societies compared with industrialized societies, but as we shall see there is considerable variation in both sets of societies and the idea that the past was idyllic for the elderly is just that–a myth (Glascock 1987).

Societal Complexity

If we look at the separate research for nonindustrial societies and for present-day countries (largely industrial and post-industrial societies) and try to visualize the results together, there is a suggestion that the overall pattern predicting status would be shaped like an upside-down U or V—that is, status for the elderly appears to be highest in moderately complex societies, but status for the elderly is much lower in less complex and most complex cases.

If we concentrate on samples composed mostly of nonindustrial societies, which have relatively few politically centralized polities, status for the elderly appears to increase with greater societal complexity (Ishii-Kuntz and Lee 1987; Simmons 1945). More specifically, cross-cultural research finds that *higher status* is predicted by

- Higher degrees of sedentarism characterized by permanent communities (Simmons 1945; Sheehan 1976)

- Higher dependence on herding and agriculture (Balkwell and Balswick 1981; Lee 1984; Simmons 1945)

- More complex government and property rights (particularly higher status for elderly men (Simmons 1945)

Why? A general theory is that if the elderly remain active and make contributions of value, they are more likely to be viewed favorably. One type of value is whether the elderly can contribute substantially to the food supply. The elderly in foraging societies may have more difficulty continuing to be important contributors to the food supply compared with elderly in agricultural societies. After all, foraging often requires considerable travel and may be physically quite demanding. Foraging societies are generally less complex than agrarian societies and contribution to subsistence may partially account for the relationship to complexity. The importance of property usually increases with sedentism (Ember et al. 2020) and ownership or control of property by the aged may give them valuable assets.

On the other hand, if we look at country samples, which are almost all politically centralized and most have some degree of industrialization, the relationship appears to go in the opposite direction. *Higher status for the elderly* is generally found in countries that are

- Less exploitative and less industrialized (Lee 1984; Williams 1972)

- Less urbanized (Williams 1972)

- Lower on a composite measure of economic development, urban population, level of education, and health technology (Rudnev and Vauclair 2022)

  Why? The theory is that with industrialization and the switch to nontraditional ways of making a living, the elderly are less able to participate in production, have less control over resources, and are less useful as sources of information. In addition, younger people typically have more education and more flexibility to move to where job opportunities are. Family structure also becomes weakened and older people may be less likely to receive support from extended families (Cowgill 1974; Albert and Cattell 1994, 177).

But some studies suggest that the relationship in countries may not keep going downward with higher levels of development; there may be some uptick in elderly status in the most developed societies (Palmore and Manton 1974; Vauclair et al. 2015).

The diagram in the figure below graphically illustrates the approximate shape of the relationships just discussed. Note that we have put the upward curve at the end in a dashed line because the evidence is controversial. Rudnev and Vauclair (2022) did not find the upward trend that previous researchers found at the highest levels of complexity, but this may be because their worldwide sample did not have as many countries at the highest levels of development or because status of the elderly was measured differently.
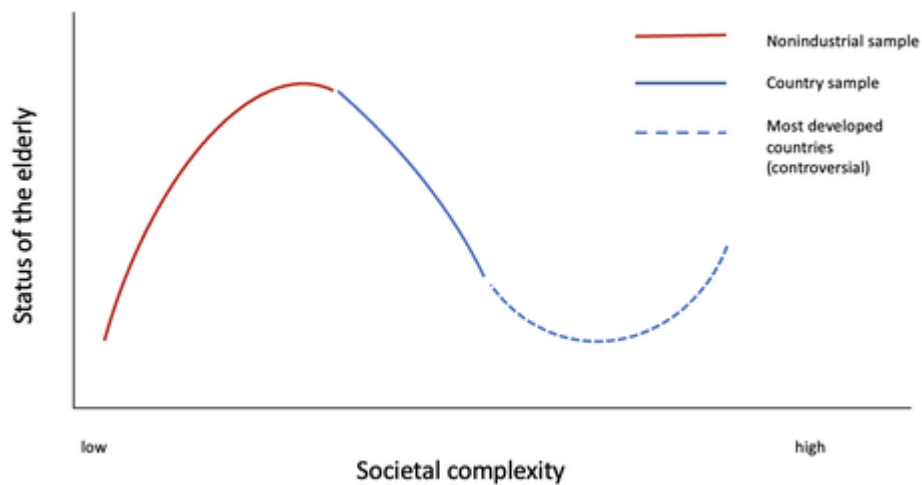

Figure 3: Status of the Elderly by Societal Complexity: A Schematic Diagram

Social and Family Structure

As we discussed above, in most nonindustrial societies, people tend to live with kin or, if not with kin, nearby kin. It would be reasonable to assume that in extended families, at least one of the individuals in the older generation would be the head of the household, and therefore the elderly would exert considerable authority over the behavior of junior family members (Cowgill and Holmes 1972).

- As expected, status of the elderly is generally the lowest where there are nuclear independent families (Lee and Kezis 1979; Balkwell and Balswick 1981).

- But, extended families differ; specifically, it seems that the status of the elderly is highest in societies with small extended families (one family in the older generation and one child's family in the younger generation); but lower where there are large extended families.

  Why? One possible explanation for somewhat lower status with very large extended families is that they are so complex that it is harder for elderly members to exert much control (Lee and Kezis 1979).

The orientation of the society around males or females also appears to predict the status of the elderly and gender differences in status for elderly men and women

- Patrilocal and patrilineal societies tend to have higher status for the elderly in general (Ishii-Kuntz and Lee 1987; Lee and Kezis 1979; Lee 1984)

- Patrilocality predicts higher status for aged males and higher control of property (Lee and Kezis 1979; Simmons 1945)

- In matrilineal societies, aged women tend to enjoy more prestige and have more property rights (Simmons 1945)

Gender Differences

As we noted above, whether societies are oriented around males or females (in marital residence or descent) appears to predict some differences in the treatment and status of elderly men compared with women. Societal orientation around women tends to predict higher status for elderly women. Perhaps the prevalence of patrilocal and/or patrilineal descent over matrilocal and/or matrilineal descent helps explain why, in worldwide samples, elderly men are more likely to be favored in a variety of situations compared to elderly women (Silverman and Maxwell 1978). A common difference in treatment is that elderly men are given preference related to food or drink, such as being served food or drink first, or having place at the head of the table (Silverman and Maxwell 1978).[4] Another indicator of the generally lower status for elderly women is that they are more likely to be accused of witchcraft

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[4]This does not mean that elderly women are fed less. Simmons (1945) indicates that elderly men and women receive equal amounts of food.

than men (Peacey, Campbell, and Mace 2022). One major exception is that aged women are viewed as expert midwives (Simmons 1945). There is also some tentative evidence that women who have reached menopause may have increased freedom and elevated social status than younger women (Griffin 1977).

Figure 4: The elderly often are skilled craftspersons. The Turkish woman on the left is making clay pots; the Indian man is a wood-worker.
Photo on left by Korhan Erdol from Pexels; Photo on right by Kunal Lakhotia from Pexels.

Valued Roles and Knowledge-Holders

In many societies, especially those without written records, the elderly are repositories of knowledge. For example, Simmons (1945, 133–34) says about the Hopi elderly:

> The aged among the Hopi were the repositories of countless legends, traditions, migratory accounts and stories of exploits in hunting and warfare. Often they alone knew the old land boundaries, the sites of distant shrines, and the complicated rituals associated

with hunting and salt expeditions. Aged women were the best technicians in pottery and basketry, and old men were skilled instructors in weaving and the tanning of hides. . . The aged were sought out for dream interpretations, were special advisors in sickness, misfortune, and sorrow, and were in constant demand in large and small gatherings as storytellers, song leaders, instructors in games and dancing, participants in prayer-smoking ceremonies, and public narrators of past events.

Cross-cultural research suggests the following

- Respect for the elderly is correlated with their engagement in socially-valued activities, and is associated with the social value of their activity (McArdle and Yeracaris 1981; Simmons 1945; Glascock and Feinman 1981)

    - A corollary to this is that in many societies the "productive" elderly are well-supported, whereas those deemed "decrepit" are not (Glascock and Feinman 1981)

- Higher status is predicted by the elderly having important knowledge or information to impart (such as being priests, shamans, or teachers–Simmons (1945); Maxwell and Silverman (1970))

- The elderly are less likely to be useful as sources of information in urbanized and industrialized societies (Williams 1972)

    Why? Urbanization and industrialization demand new skills and new ways of living. This means that the knowledge that the elders have will not be considered as useful.

Death Hastening Practices

Scholars studying the treatment of the elderly have all noted the existence of customs in some societies that either hasten the death of elderly persons, such as withholding food or water or abandonment, or most directly by active killing. Different researchers define death-hastening practices somewhat differently, but the estimated presence of such practices in nonindustrial societies range from about 21 percent in one cross-cultural sample to about 50 percent Glascock (1990). These customs occur in all world regions. The question is: What accounts for societal variation in such behavior?

Figure 5: Elderly Women on Street Corner in Biertan, Romania.
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One of the earliest systematic studies of aging by Simmons (1945) postulated that death-hastening practices are most likely in societies that are nomadic due to the difficulty of traveling with individuals who are not that physically able, or where the climate is harsh or the food supply is irregular. However, later research (Maxwell and Silverman 1989) does not support the importance of nomadism, harsh climate, or an irregular food supply. Death-hastening behavior is *more* likely in societies that

- Depend on foraging, fishing, pastoralism, and hunting as important means of subsistence (Glascock 1987; Maxwell and Silverman 1989; Simmons 1945)

  Why? While degree of nomadism is not clearly associated with lower status for the elderly, being sem-nomadic is. Semi-nomadic groups are likely to move with more equipment and possessions, which may make moving the elderly more difficult.

- Lack social stratification as well as high gods (Glascock 1987; Maxwell and Silverman 1989)

  Why? Stratified societies, with more inequalities in wealth are also likely to have individual property rights and therefore the elderly may have more control over allocation to their children and other relatives. Elders may be able to levy power through the threat of disinheritance or preference in inheritance (Albert and Cattell 1994, 156; citing Amoss and Harrell 1981). High gods are more likely found when there is increased political hierarchy, consistent with death-hastening behavior being more likely to be found when there are lower levels of complexity.

- Lack social rigidity (Maxwell and Silverman 1989)

  Why? Societies with high social rigidity usually have tight social groups that might tend to value all members of the group.

- Have bilateral descent rather than unilineal descent (Maxwell and Silverman 1989)

  Why? Unilineal descent epitomizes the importance of ancestors, who are founders of groups. By extension, the elderly, who will be ancestors soon, are a central part of the social system (Albert and Cattell 1994; Maxwell and Silverman 1989). Unilineal groups

are also characterized as corporate groups where all members are considered equal for some purposes (for example, if there is a feud or fighting between different unilineal groups and one kin group member is killed, revenge may be taken against any member of the offending kin group. A corollary finding is that the status of elders is higher where there is ancestor worship (Ishii-Kuntz and Lee 1987).

It is important to recognize that death-hastening behavior is not always antithetical to supportive behavior. This is because most societies with death-hastening practices often distinguish between the elderly who are "intact" versus those who are "decrepit." Death-hastening is often reserved for those who are deemed decrepit whereas the elderly deemed intact may be supported. (Glascock 1982, 1987; Glascock and Feinman 1981). Moreover, researchers point out that close family members almost always make the death-hastening decision with the knowledge and agreement of the targeted elderly person. A close relative carries out the effective practice that leads to death (such as abandonment) or a direct execution (Glascock and Feinman 1981). In broader terms, some argue that abandonment should not necessarily be viewed as an indicator of low status at all because an elderly person may wish to end their suffering (Lee 1984).

Overall, non-industrial societies are more likely to have death-hastening behavior than industrial and post-industrial societies (Glascock 1982, 1987; Glascock and Feinman 1981), perhaps in large part because many countries now allocate resources to care for the elderly.

Government-Supported Programs for the Elderly

Many countries in the world today now have programs to help the elderly, including stipends such as social security, health-care programs for seniors, and state-supported nursing facilities. Some researchers have studied attitudes towards government spending on the elderly to try to understand what predicts differing attitudes. It is generally assumed that willingness to pay for elderly care reflects more favorable attitudes.

Peterson and Ralston (2017, 737) used data from individuals in 55 countries

Figure 6: An elderly man drinks coffee at a nursing home in Norway.

who agreed or disagreed with the statements: "older people get more than their fair share from the government" and "older people are a burden on society". They found some of their results surprising. First, contrary to popular opinion that the status of the elderly is higher in Asian countries, they find that in Asian (and also Middle Eastern and North African) countries individuals are more likely to say that the elderly get more than their fair share than other regions.[5] Second, people in democratic countries are more likely to say that the elderly are a burden. Third, in countries with higher expenditures on social security and a higher proportion of elderly, people are less likely to say that the elderly are a burden or that they get more than their fair share. These findings might seem to be surprising if one assumes competition between groups of people regarding government funding. But, we might argue that government expenditure on support for the elderly actually decreases the burden that younger people face when their parents age.

What We Don't Know

While we know a considerable amount about social predictors of the status and roles of the elderly cross-culturally, we know very little about other aspects of the lives of the elderly. Here is some of what we don't know about global variation:

- How do the elderly perceive their status, the practices of their societies or countries, and the biological processes of aging?

- How do the elderly spend their time? Are there commonalities in the activities they pursue or is there substantial variation? How much work do they do?

- Most research has relied on correlational data based on variables measured at the same time period for each society or country– we know relatively little about longitudinal changes. For example, when wage labor and markets become more important in nonindustrial societies, when and how does the status of the elderly change?

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[5]This finding is in line with North and Fiske (2015) meta-analysis where they found individuals from Eastern cultures to have more negative attitudes toward the elderly compared to Western cultures.

Exercises Using eHRAF World Cultures

Explore some texts and do some comparisons using the eHRAF World Cultures database. These exercises can be done individually or as part of classroom assignments. See the Teaching eHRAF Exercise on Status and Role of the Elderly for suggestions.

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- ***Dogon village elder with children.***

  Original Caption: "Dogon Village Elder with Children. The village elder is surrounded by children. He keeps a watchful eye on the visitors. Dogon Village, Mali."

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  Original Caption: "Elderly man drinking coffee at Fosnes Nursing Home in Norway at Christmas Time."

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Acknowledgements

Glossary

Matrilineal descent The rule of descent that affiliates individuals with kin of both sexes related to them through women; at birth an individual affiliates with their mother's kin group.

Patrilineal descent The rule of descent that affiliates individuals with kin of both sexes related to them through men; at birth an individual affiliates with their fathers's kin group.

Patrilocal residence A pattern of marital residence where couples typically live *with or near* the husband's parents. Some anthropologists use two

different terms for such residence patterns–*patrilocal* when there is also patrilineal descent and *virilocal* when patrilineal descent is absent.

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