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ABSTRACT

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Cross-Cultural Observations  
On Aging

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This paper examined the social function of the elderly in various countries including Nigeria, Thailand, Ireland, Russia, Israel, Japan and the U.S.A. It was determined that the status enjoyed by the elderly of these cultures may have been related to the degree of dependency the younger population expressed toward the elderly. The dependency itself appeared to be the result of how much control, direct or otherwise, the elderly had within their own culture. Variables such as cultural emphasis on productivity, and economic, social, and religious independence of the young from the elderly were believed to be some of the major factors involved in the reduction of the status of the elderly, which is explained as not resulting merely from modernization itself.

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Since Simmons' (1945) study of seventy-one cultures, the study of the aged has periodically centered around how the elderly of a particular culture function with respect to their role(s) within that culture. Cross-cultural theories emerging from such an analysis usually fail to account for the numerous differences found to exist between cultures. It is the purpose of this paper to present a brief cross-cultural examination of the role played by the elderly within a number of various societies through a modification of the findings by Press and McKool Jr. (1972). Press and McKool Jr. found that prestige depended upon four components which they referred to as advisory, contributory, control, and residual. It is felt here that control is the most important factor and that the other three components are just different measures of it; and, therefore, the present paper will focus entirely on the degree of control that the elderly are found to exert within their respective cultures.

Of the least modernized or "primitive" cultures, the one which has been the centre of repeated study is that of the Igbo of Nigeria (Shelton, 1965, 1968, 1972; Arth, 1968). The traditional Igbo have been anthropologically described as patrilocal, with their major form of subsistence being agricultural and subsidiary ones being hunting and gathering. Their socio-structural unit is one of segmentary lineages, with the judicial and political power in the province of the elderly and "members of voluntary title-societies" (Shelton, 1972, p. 31). With regards to the elderly, the functioning and maintenance of traditional Igbo society relies heavily upon the role played by its elderly. In order to understand how such a dependency may exist, one must first examine the dynamic structures of the society.

The religious beliefs of the Igbo, as mentioned by Shelton, revolves around ancestral-worship. Within their cosmology, protection and guidance in coping with stressful events could be elicited from the spirits of the high god (Chukwu), the ancestors (Ndichie), or the village tutelary spirits (Alusi). When a stressful event occurs, the Igbo present sacrifices to the spirit whom they believe is involved. Thus, as in societies such as the vodun of Northern Haiti (Simpson, 1945), the Igbo rely upon certain metaphysical beings for protection and assistance in life events; and, therefore, attribute great power and status to such beings. Of these spirits, the Igbo consider the ndichie (ancestors) "To be ever-present spiritually among their descendents and... are believed to be re-incarnated in the living" (Shelton, 1965, p.21). In accordance with the above, those individuals closest to the ancestors, here the elderly, equally become more revered than those, the young, who are not. Because one turns to one's own paternal ancestor for spiritual guidance and protection, one therefore turns to the elderly for protection and guidance in more mortal matters.

In addition to the above religious sanction, the traditional Igbo elderly also enjoy a high degree of economic power. Prior to assuming the status accorded to the elderly, the role of the young adult is to work for the family, which in turn increases the amount of wealth, property, etc., controlled by the elderly person of that family. Children, according to Shelton, are not considered "human" until they reach adulthood whereby they are gradually given more responsibility within the community (eg., land ownership) by the elderly. Thus not only are the young dependent upon the old, for advice and direction, they are also economically dependent upon the elderly. It must be pointed out that the form of dependency found among the Igbo, as noted by Shelton, is greatly from the negatively connotated one prevalent in North America. Here, in traditional Igbo society, dependency is a dynamic quality of the culture, both in ceremonial and economic terms, and not a hindrance to individual development as it is toted in North

American society. Moreover, Shelton reports that the elderly Igbo do not experience abrupt role changes, i.e., forced retirement is absent. Though Shelton concedes that the Igbo young are presently obtaining some economic independence from the elderly due to modernization, and that companies and agencies do have a retirement age, he also points out that the young are resistant to forced retirement and resist changing the status accorded the elderly. According to Shelton, the resistance to such a change appears to be partly the result of the desire by the young to obtain the same privileges when they become older.

The results of the above social-economic roles enjoyed by the traditional Igbo elderly are, according to Shelton, an extremely low frequency of psycho-senility and no disengagement among the elderly, as would be hypothesized by Cumming and Henry (1961). As the Igbo male becomes older he receives a place of recognition in his society. He becomes a teacher of Igbo tradition and a living representative of his dead ancestors. In his role of advisor he presides over ceremonial, judicial, and familial matters. And, possibly more important, he becomes one of the major distributors of wealth to the young. Though briefly mentioned, Shelton also states that the elderly Igbo female acquires more dominance in the family setting itself such as in the teaching and disciplining of the young and influence over other matters related to the internal functioning of the household.

The only criticism of Shelton's observations was that of Arth (1968) who stated that stressful events did occur for Igbo elderly (eg. their ultimate confrontation with death), that the young were ambivalent toward the elderly, and that Shelton's use of the word psycho-senility created a definitional problem. But, as noted by Arth himself, the differences between both his and Shelton's observations on Igbo society "may derive partly from the size and complexity of Igbo society and variations in culture which occur within it"; and, therefore, both observations may be totally valid (1968, p.243).

In rural Thailand, as among the Igbo, the aged are honoured and respected. Unlike the Igbo, the Thai elderly do not exert strong economic control over the young. The elderly male slowly relinquishes control (village leadership) to younger members of the community, and takes on an informal advisory role in the village. In the case of the female, her role almost remains static in that she continues to participate in household duties. Although the males' role does change from an active to a more passive one, it must be noted that his role is still one which places others in a dependent position toward him and that such a role is not abruptly different from the one he previously enjoyed. Such "social arrangements" have been found to exist among many other cultures such as the Swazi of South Africa (Kuper, 1966) and the Kanuri of Nigeria (Cohen, 1967). Unfortunately, with regard to the traditional Thai elderly, the literature does not enable one to establish whether or not they have control over the dispersion of power, which, as was evident among the Igbo, might have contributed in maintaining and/or increasing their importance within the community.

Though traditional Thai's do not appear to have an ancestral belief system equivalent to that of the Igbo, "age is still a basic determinant of status in Thailand" (Cowgill, 1968, p. 161). According to Cowgill, the traditional Thai elderly are shown respect through "an elaborate system of etiquette" taught since birth (1968, p.160). The elderly occupy seats of honour, are fed first during meals and are shown respect through adjectives commonly used to describe them.

Moreover, both the elderly male and female are no longer, according to Cowgill, governed by certain societal restrictions (taboos) on dress and speech as are the young. This lessening of rigid social guidelines among the aged may be one source from which prestige emanates, i.e., the young may view old age as a time of freedom from certain taboos and thus see and treat the elderly as a privileged group.

Though, as previously mentioned, the Thai do not appear to embrace a religious belief system comparable with the Igbo, they nevertheless do ascribe some religious power to the elderly. Although the true nature of their religious function has been reported in an ambiguous fashion, Cowgill does state that the Thai believe one must never pass the head of a sleeping elder for in the head resides the soul with an aura emanating "out some distance in front and back of the head itself". and, "intrusion into this space on the part of a thoughtless inferior may do damage to one's very soul" (1968, p.161). This appears to imply the existence of some magical quality found only in the old, but, unfortunately this cannot be substantiated due to the lack of information on the Thai young. However, Cowgill does state that the Thai also believe in a cycle of age, and, though old age begins at sixty, the old person still continues to prefer some type of work (eg. advisory). Their belief that age operates in a continuous rather than discrete fashion may be one reason why opposition to the modernization of Thai values toward aging is found, according to Cowgill, in the difficulty that companies have in enforcing a retirement age. Admittedly, such an opposition may not be a form of social altruism but what Shelton (1972) has referred to as "African Social Security", which is the opposition to reducing the status of the elderly in order to ensure similar status when one himself becomes old.

Somewhat similar to the above two cultures is the way in which the rural Irish elderly maintain control over their function within the community. Streib (1968) states that though Ireland contains some of the traits of a more modern society (eg. an increase in the population of the elderly, industrial modernization etc.), the elderly within the rural, agricultural areas are venerated and respected. One of the major contributing factors believed responsible for such a social relation is the fact that the rural Irish elderly hold economic power over their family. As in other agricultural societies, authority and power is dependent upon control of land. Simplistically speaking, those who own land have authority and prestige over those who do not. According to Streib (1968), the elderly father exerts authority over his son by controlling the family wealth. Instead of wages the son receives "spending money" from the father and, possibly more important, it is the elderly father who decides whether or not the son will inherit the land; and, it is through this form of economic control that the elderly may ensure the son's dependence upon the elderly father. Moreover, the intense mother-son relationship, which Streib states is one of the most important reasons why Irish males marry late, further intensifies the dependency of the son toward the family. Thus, as with the Igbo, the Irish elderly provide a role for themselves through economic control. Unfortunately it is unclear as to whether or not such a relationship may create a situation of tension or ambivalence between the young and elderly (eg. the young resenting their being "forced" to show respect toward the elderly); and, therefore, as pointed out by Shelton in the case of the Igbo, such a lack of information further complicates any generalization made about the factors involved in the understanding of the role the aged play within a particular society.

Apart from the above dilemma, Streib has reported that respect toward the rural Irish elderly manifests itself through general etiquette. For example, in a group situation the young never interrupt the elderly unless they (the young) are explicitly asked to contribute to the conversation. Moreover, community matters

usually fall into the province of the elderly rather than the young, who are considered to be too immature and inexperienced. Undoubtedly, such social interaction, which itself is probably the result of the elderly's economic control, acts as a reinforcing agent in maintaining the role of the elderly within the community.

In addition, the doctrines of the Roman Catholic church may also serve as a reinforcer, ensuring the dominant role played by the elderly and the respect accorded to them. Somewhat similar to the previously mentioned concept of ancestor-worship is one of the tenants adhered to by devout Catholics, which is, "honour thy father and mother". Through the internalization of such a religious moral the young adult, or child, feels morally obligated to pay respect to his parents, transgression of which may lead to guilt feelings or social criticism of the young person. Further reinforcing this religiously oriented respect toward the elderly is the fact that the Catholic clergy themselves function on a seniority system whereby a priest usually does not obtain a parish until he is near sixty years of age. Thus even in the church the authority and/or father figure presented to the community is that of an older male.

As noted by Streib, the portrait of aging in Ireland, apart from one factor mentioned earlier, is complicated by the fact that the young are emigrating from the farms and Ireland itself; and, therefore, the active role played by the rural elderly may be of a forced rather than natural nature. In addition to the economic freedom of the young which usually follows modernization, Streib has also reported that attitudes toward the old appear to be dependent on socio-economic status and thus casts doubt on the reliability of such studies that do not control for such a variable. Nevertheless, it is evident that the rural Irish elderly do enjoy a status not usually found in modernized countries, and that such a status appears to be the result of factors which make the young dependent upon the elderly.

In Russia, McKain (1967, 1972) has reported that "older people are respected as individuals" and are "encouraged to live active and useful lives" (1967, p.41). Though they appear to lack direct economic control and strong religious support, the Russian elderly, as portrayed by McKain, are almost guaranteed a positive social role. According to McKain, the Russian government provides free health programmes, clinics, and pensions which, though low, "are supplemented with a variety of fringe benefits" for the elderly (1967, p.41). Moreover, when unable to care for themselves the elderly are domiciled with their children in apartments, which, according to McKain, are near courtyards, playgrounds, and theatres. Favoured with an inexpensive and convenient public transport system, the elderly are able to attend free concerts and public lectures.

➤ Thus through McKain's descriptions it appears that the Russian elderly are able to remain in a highly socially interactive and familiar environment. Whether or not such a situation may produce tension between the young and old is unobtainable from the present information. Furthermore, very little is known about the social predicament of the elderly who have no children nor of those elderly who, for either physical or mental reasons, must remain in institutions. Unfortunately, the same could be said of all the cultures being presented here.

Respect toward the Russian elderly is demonstrated in the etiquette of the general public such as giving the elderly a seat on the bus, making certain they don't have to stand in line, and the general ascription of "grandfather" and "grandmother" given to all elderly people. Moreover, McKain reports that school books contain the theme "of how young children help their elders" and that the code of ethics adopted by trade unions contain, among other admonitions, the phrase, "respect old age in the street, in the home and in the family" (1967, p.41).

The elderly, both in the rural and urban areas, are generally able to fulfill two roles. First, since it is usually the case that both the mother and father of a family works, McKain reports that either the grandparents or some other elderly person performs a variety of household duties such as the preparation of meals, shopping, and baby sitting. Secondly, the elderly person, as was the case among the Igbo and Thai, is highly regarded for his wisdom in family conversation and decision making. As stated by McKain, "the advice and counsel of an older person" is eagerly sought after by most families (1967, p.41). Furthermore, those elderly living in rural areas, which McKain estimates include one-half of the Russian elderly, are able to perform some agricultural work. Unfortunately, little is known about male-female differences among the elderly in the above mentioned functions.

Thus, though the Russian elderly do not have direct, overt control over other members of their society, they are still found to enjoy a favourable status and a relatively high level of respect. They function as part of the society by providing a service to the young, i.e., the young are dependent upon the elderly for maintaining the family and providing counselling and advice. Through various social programmes and services, the elderly person remains in the mainstream of the society. This frequency of contact, in its positive framework (concerts, etc.), possibly plays an important role in fostering the positive feelings that the Russians express toward their elderly. Unfortunately, as in all ethnographic reports on aging, one must be careful of such interpretations, due to the lack of appropriate information on the respective culture.

Information on the social role of the aged in Israel does not readily permit one to examine some of the factors that may contribute to the maintenance and/or establishment of such a role. Recent studies (eg. Wehl, 1970) have usually stressed the demographic characteristics of the Israeli aged. Of what is available in the literature suggests that Israel is a composite of two ethnic groups: those of Western-European origin and those of Eastern-Islamic origin (Wehl, 1970), each holding their own unique beliefs toward aging and the aged. Thus Wehl noted that the aged of "Oriental" origin tended to be "family-centered", whereas those of "Western" origin were more "peer-oriented, although for both groups relations with peers were of considerable importance" (1970, p.149). Apart from the above and other intervening variables as the high immigration of individuals without financial nor familial assistance into Israel (Margulec, 1965), the following brief discussion will center on the elderly in the kibbutz.

According to Feder (1972), the concept of the kibbutz was the result of the "Zionist movement which sought to rejuvenate the Jewish people and recreate its national life in a normal homeland" (p. 212). Founded upon the Zionist belief and cooperation, the kibbutz became the basis from which the agricultural nation of Israel grew. Though the kibbutz offered and does offer what Wershow (1969) has called a womb-like atmosphere, the main purpose of the kibbutz was production for the state; and, therefore, its members emphasized the Protestant work ethic, as has been noted by Feder (1972) and Wershow (1973). This emphasis on the work ethic, in return, is believed to be one of the major factors in the rather low status which the authors believe is accorded to the elderly person residing in the kibbutz.

Although Feder points out that the two main reasons for unity among Jewish people is family cohesion and religion, the doctrines of which contain moral-religious guidelines for respecting one's parents, it is nevertheless felt that with the emphasis placed upon work productivity, the aged person in the kibbutz is delegated only a secondary role. In accordance with this, Wershow (1973) has reported that

the kibbutz elderly eventually faced retirement from their primary occupations, taking on secondary roles (eg. "mundane agricultural work") while the younger members assumed their previously held positions. Wershow (1969) has also noted that many elderly people felt that the kibbutz should be operated by the young and therefore refrained from any active participation. It is believed that such an attitude is a form of rationalization by the elderly as to why they must retire from primary functions within the kibbutz, i.e., due to the emphasis on work and youth in the kibbutz, the elderly themselves believe that it is socially right for the young to take over the primary roles in the kibbutz. Moreover, although Israel provides its elderly with some of the best social-health facilities available, Wershow (1973) has reported that the elderly within his sample were lonely and socially isolated, i.e., they did not visit either family or friends. Although Wershow believes that the isolation and loneliness of the elderly is the result of their 'individual stubbornness', it is believed by the authors that the above situation is due more directly to the fact that the work ethic adopted by the kibbutz members immediately creates a distinction between high contributors (those holding primary roles within the kibbutz) and low contributors (those with secondary roles). With the generally declining health of the elderly, the elderly are believed or believe themselves - so it is assumed here - to be incapable of performing vital roles within the kibbutz. To be more blunt, the young are no longer dependent upon the elderly for their position within the kibbutz and it is possible that the only indirect source of control the elderly may have over the young is through religious teachings (eg. honour thy father and mother). In addition, Wershow (1969) himself has pointed out that ~~the~~ intergenerational conflict does exist in the kibbutz. As an example, Wershow has commented on the fact that he himself had found distrust expressed by the elderly in the ability or motivation of the young to continue the ideals of the kibbutz. Thus although Wershow has indicated that the elderly socially disengage from various functions within the kibbutz, it appears that a certain degree of tension does occur between the elderly of retirement age and the young.

Thus, from what is available in the literature, it appears that even though the kibbutz offers security to its members, the role that the elderly play within the community takes on a secondary rather than primary function. With the only apparent source of control over the young being religious, the kibbutz elderly comparatively do not enjoy the level of status accorded to the earlier traditional cultures mentioned in this paper. Unfortunately, as mentioned previously, the lack of appropriate information on attitudes toward the kibbutz elderly and Israeli elderly in general, greatly restricts the generalizability of the above observations.

Old age in Japan, according to Palmore (1975), is viewed "by most Japanese as a source of prestige and honor" (p. 64). There exists for the Japanese elderly, referred to as the "Honourable Ones", a high degree of respect and integration within the family, workforce, and community. Apart from rules of etiquette that give them precedence in serving order, seating etc., the elderly, many of whom are reported to be living with their children, also exert authority over many family and household matters. Within the household they perform certain functions such as shopping, housekeeping, child care, and, in the case of the elderly male, acting as an advisor over the affairs of the family. Palmore also states that a large majority of the elderly remain active in their respective communities via nation-wide government-supported clubs, religious organizations, and a variety of neighbourhood clubs. In addition the Japanese government provides the elderly with free annual medical examinations, a "good minimum income", and, apart from other programmes, has initiated a national "Respect for Elders' Day" (Palmore, 1975, p.65). Moreover, Palmore reports that some Japanese cities provide programmes whereby individuals visit daily those elderly living alone, checking their physical well-being and

providing general assistance in household and personal chores. Finally, unlike in western countries, the sixty-first birthday in Japan is seen "as an occasion to honor the elders and to express affection for them" (Palmore, 1975, p.65).

Broadly speaking, the highly dynamic role enjoyed by the Japanese elderly, as portrayed by Palmore, may be viewed as being the result of, apart from their active role within the family, the strong religious beliefs of the Japanese and the potential political power of the elderly. Somewhat similar to the Igbo, the Japanese, along with their emphasis on Confucian ideology, practice ancestor-worship. According to Palmore, both the Confucian teachings and ancestral-worship resulted in the "principle of filial piety", which emphasized respect and duty (1975, p.64). The introjection of such religious creeds may have contributed to the development and/or maintenance of the reported highly positive role(s) enjoyed by the Japanese elderly.

As mentioned earlier, a possible second contributing factor to the type of social role that the Japanese elderly appear to have is their degree of political influence. First, as in all modern nations, the elderly present a considerable source of votes for the aspiring or incumbent politician. Unlike other modern nations, the Japanese elderly present themselves as a more collective front toward the various political parties. Secondly, and possibly more important, the Japanese elderly, due to their status, are capable of influencing family and friends as for whom or what they might vote for. Needless to say, such a source of voting power and influence is highly attractive to the politician and would be one social group to whom he would direct his energies in pleasing. Though not discussed here, Palmore also states that another factor which might be involved in the positive status given the elderly is that in Japan "age grading is one of the more important [cultural] dimensions [in] determining who is above or below" (1975, p. 64).

Thus from the preceding it appears that the Japanese elderly, through factors such as political, familial, and religious influence, are able to make others dependent upon them. Within the family the elderly assume authority over other family members, making the younger ones dependent upon the elderly for advice and counselling. Through religious beliefs and etiquette, the elderly are accorded respect by both family and non-family members. In addition, the political power of the elderly ensures a certain degree of control, through politicians, within the community. Unfortunately, Palmore's presentation of aging in Japan, as is the case with most cultural reports, cannot be truly substantiated due to the sparseness of such information and of its possible conflicting nature. For example, Plath (1972) has stated that analysis of early Japanese literature revealed that the elderly were viewed in a negative fashion. Moreover, Tachibana (1966) has commented that although the elderly have been highly respected, the recent reformation of traditional life within Japan has deteriorated the status of the aged. It is interesting to note that the government programmes which Tachibana reported were being implemented to rectify the above trend are those which Palmore has stated to be partly responsible for assuring the positive role enjoyed by the elderly. Unfortunately, if a relationship does exist in the above two statements it cannot be assessed with the present information.

Attempts made in understanding the role of the aged in the United States of America, hereafter referred to as North America, has usually centered around how different racial groups (eg. Messer, 1968; Wylie, 1971) or ethnic groups (eg. Simos, 1970; Crouch, 1972) feel about aging and the aged themselves. The

research has overwhelmingly indicated that the aged within North American society are usually seen and treated in a negative fashion (eg. Maus, 1973; Weinberger and Millham, 1975).

The major beliefs operant in North America is productivity and independence. Through a long learning process the adult has introjected the belief that the only worthwhile citizen is the productive one, whose success in terms of power and prestige is reflected in his level of income. Because the society emphasizes productivity, it must therefore be future oriented and thus place a great emphasis on youth. Such a society, in order to function, must instill within its young the belief that only their strength and "fresh blood" can mold and maintain their society. Once an individual becomes old, once he no longer can perform with or is believed to be incapable of performing with those his junior, he is seen as less productive and therefore useless (Berwick, 1967). No longer does he belong to the positive category of youth, but, instead, begins to be shunted away from the mainstream of life by the very social mechanisms which he himself helped establish. Thus Sloane and Franck (1970) have reported that the well-adapted older person is viewed as one who does not reflect his true age, i.e. he acts younger than he actually is.

At retirement the older person is abruptly forced to accept a new role within the community. Unlike a majority of females, the male loses his occupational role and consequently his status within the community. Moreover, according to Scott (1967), the basic family unit in North America is unable to care for its aging parents. In accordance with this Hawkinson (1966) reported that only half of his sample of adult children would lend financial assistance to their aged parents. Nor, according to Kalish (1967), would the elderly parent feel his family obligated to take care of him, as was found to occur with elderly Mexican-Americans (Crouch, 1972).

Throughout his life the elderly person in North America, as previously mentioned, has been taught to be independent (Kalish, 1967; Cowgill, 1972). Thus when he is forced to become dependent upon someone due to diminishing health or finances, the older person may experience anxiety or guilt feelings. This in turn may be used by the elderly to manipulate their young, through guilt, into giving them (the elderly) certain concessions (Kahana and Levin, 1971). It would appear that in an attempt to reduce direct interaction of the older person with his family, North American society has constructed social agencies to take over such a function; and, eventually, the older person expects aid from these agencies rather than his own family (eg. Crouch, 1972).

With the loss of his primary occupational role and family ties, the elderly North American does not appear to enjoy the status accorded to the elderly in most of the previously mentioned cultures. Due to the high industrialization prevalent in North America, the young are no longer economically dependent upon the elderly. Without traditional or strong religious beliefs, nor any productive function either in the community or family, the elderly person becomes an outsider in his own society. In effect, he himself becomes dependent upon outside agencies for providing him with some role to perform. Thus Merowitz (1975) found that retired soldiers residing in an army retirement community were able to maintain some continuity with respect to roles, personal relationships, and routines. Though such an example may be inappropriate, it nevertheless demonstrates the fact that individuals are highly dependent upon non-familial organizations for maintaining some type of social role (e.g. the government's categorization of an individual as a old age pensioner).

Unfortunately, dependency upon outside organizations probably aids in the maintenance of the negative image of the North American elderly. The thought of handouts or assistance, as stated earlier, may lead to a negative image because of the anxiety and guilt feelings arising from such a dependency. Moreover, the young adult may harbour negative feelings toward the elderly because of viewing them as a cause of increased taxation or as obstacles to personal progress. In all, aging itself may be seen as a negative process by the younger person, as was the case with Jewish-American adults who saw their elderly parents as reminders of what awaited them (the young adult) (Simos, 1970).

Thus, though one must be cognizant of the lack of information and the fact that cultures are dynamic and not static, it appears that the status enjoyed by the elderly is highly dependent upon the amount or degree of control they exert over others. Where the control is either direct, as in the economic control of the traditional Igbo and Irish elderly, or an interplay of indirect variables such as religion and etiquette, the elderly are found to have a more favourable social status than in countries where either only a few or none of the above variables are found to operate in any systematic form (eg. North America in general). This assertion, in return, suggests that theories such as disengagement and modernization fail in their generalizability for they themselves are only indirect measures, and incomplete ones at that, of the variables which make the young dependent upon the old. Thus many recent researchers have noted the inadequacy of both disengagement (Bultena and Oyler, 1971; Kastenbaum, 1969; Maddox, 1970) and modernization theory (Bengston and Smith, 1968; Bengston et al., 1975). Indeed, within the limited scope of the present paper one can see that modernization theory is unable to explain why a highly industrialized nation as Japan do the Japanese elderly enjoy a much higher degree of prestige and status than the North American elderly.

Summarizing, it appears that the level of prestige and status enjoyed by the elderly occupies a dependent-independent continuum. Where factors, either direct or indirect, make members of the community dependent upon the elderly, the elderly enjoy a relatively positive role within that community. As these factors become virtually nonexistent or too few, the young become independent of the old, causing the old to hold a more negative than positive role, or status. From this it would appear that the status of the elderly may be improved by either creating a new role for them or maintaining an old one, which would make others somewhat dependent upon them. Unfortunately, such is not the case. For example, in North America the elderly must be allowed a degree of independence (financial etc.) along with a productive role within the community. As is quite evident from the above, understanding the function of the elderly within a society along the dependency-independency guideline postulated here must be tempered with a knowledge of the socio-economic structures of the society itself. Until this is accomplished and until more is known about the specific attitudes held about aging within a particular culture, and about the male - female roles operant within a society, which is mainly excluded from the literature surveyed, such observations as presented here can only remain speculations.

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