**Treatment of the Elderly in Different Civilizations Over Time**

Joely Clawson-Keeton

Longwood University

SOCL 331

Professor Sue Carter

April 27, 2022

In today’s society, the elderly make up nearly 10% of the population. That may not sound like a lot, but it is the highest that it has ever been and will only continue growing as healthcare and quality of life improves with advancing technology. It is predicted that by 2050, the elderly will make up 16% of the population. This is a global issue and in order to keep up with the aging population, many countries have had to make changes, such as adding care options and services for the elderly. However, in many societies the elderly tend to be cast aside or forgotten about as soon as they leave the workforce. This led me to wonder how the elderly have been treated in different societies over time and how those same societies treat their elderly population now.

I started my research off with China. Growing up there were many Chinese families where I lived, so I wasn’t surprised to learn about the concept of “filial piety”, which means that the family will care for their elderly family members. This has happened for thousands of years, but in today’s society is encountering some issues. The Chinese elderly population, which consists of 12% of the population, is living much longer than ever before, with both Chinese men and women adding 10 years onto their life expectancy since 1990. This is great, but China has never had such a large elderly population which means that accommodations will have to be made in order to assist the ever growing elderly population. Another issue in China is the One Child policy, which began in 1980 and ended in 2016. The idea was to prevent the population from growing too rapidly, and it succeeded. There were many issues that occurred with the One Child policy, but now there are not enough young people to care for their elderly family members. This leaves many adult children in a family situation known as the 4-2-1 family structure. It is set up with 4 elderly grandparents being cared for by 2 of their children who are adults, who also typically care for 1 child of their own. This leaves the children with 5 people to take care of, not counting themselves, which is economically draining and exhausting for the children. In the rural areas of China, nearly 42% of the elderly population continues to work, which the government supports, seeing as this helps families care for their elders and also helps keep the elderly engaged in society, which has been proven to assist one successfully age. The Chinese government is working on creating long term care insurance and social programs to assist their elderly population, but there is simply not enough care for the Chinese elderly, which needs to change.

I continued my research with the United States. While the United States is a younger country than many of the others I researched, there is more than enough content regarding our views and treatment of the elderly. The elderly were once respected in American culture and viewed as wise and experienced. However, as time went on, the social status of the elderly dropped and Americans became fixated on the concept of youthfulness and beauty. American citizens are so fixated with the idea of maintaining their youth that cosmetic plastic surgeries have become commonplace. Along with this fixation on maintenance of youth and beauty came the presence of ageism in the United States. Ageism is discrimination against the elderly due to their age. This has been seen in the United States by highly qualified individuals not being hired for a job simply because of their age. Similar to China, America’s elderly population is also increasing significantly due to the Baby Boomers, who were born from 1946 to 1964, right after World War 2. This had a positive impact on the American government once the Boomers became old enough to work, but as they have reached their elderly years it is clear that there are simply not enough medical professionals or care facilities to care for all of them. Fortunately, the government has passed legislation to assist the elderly population. The American government created Social Security during the Great Depression, which gives back money that was taxed from when the individual worked. Medicare was also set up to help the elderly. It is also illegal for companies or corporations to deny someone a work opportunity due to their age, so the United States has passed legislation in an attempt to prevent ageism in the workplace. There is also a sense of division among the many generations. Many elderly Americans experienced wars, the Great Depression, and even civil rights movements as they grew up, and America has been changed by technology. Many elderly Americans have opinions on younger Americans' tendencies to “job hop”, or move to different jobs for better pay, which did not happen in the past. Ageism may affect the elderly, but all negative opinions can hurt, and I believe that assuming that many elderly Americans have specific views that appear outdated to younger generations hurts all Americans in the end. While there is still a lot of work to be done in the United States for the elderly, many Americans work hard to care for their elderly family members but may see the rest of the elderly population differently.

Earlier this semester, I completed my clinical rotation at a local nursing home, The Woodland. I was able to care for a new patient every week in the rehabilitation and long-term care floor. As someone who has never spent a lot of time at nursing homes, I made sure to analyze what went on in the Woodland and compared that evidence with information from other nursing students about other clinical rotations at nursing homes. Something that appears to be consistent between the Woodland and other nursing homes is that residents stay in their room for the majority of the day with socialization limited to CNAs or family visits. This surprised me since no one had much socialization, exercise, or even the opportunity to go outdoors when they wanted to. While I am in no way criticizing the care of the Woodland, I believe that in order to help the American elderly population age successfully, socialization in particular needs to be more of a priority. Growing older in a lonely, confined, tiny room is not how aging should occur, so I believe that the American government should pass legislation that provides the elderly with more social opportunities.

Researching Japan after the United States was like a fresh breath of air. Japan has the largest elderly population in the world, with around 28.4 % of the population being over the age of 65 in 2020. However, Japan appears to embrace their elderly and put a lot of focus into maintaining health. Japan began prioritizing the health of their citizens after World War 2, when they experienced a atomic bombing in Hiroshima and experienced the harmful effects of radiation. As Japan rebuilt, they began prioritizing infectious disease control and expanding health services. They even set up a 4-step plan to promote successful aging in Japan. This is notable since Japan began this process right after World War 2, and even had an universal medical insurance coverage program in place by 1961, which was the first phase of promoting successful aging in Japan. Phase 2 involved the expansion of social security up until 1980. Phase 3 made preparations for the aging of society up until 2000 and Phase 4 intends on enhancing sustainability by 2025 (Nakatani, 2019). China is trying to create a universal medical insurance coverage program right now, so it is clear that Japan’s prioritization of health care and making health care accessible has played a part in the successful aging of Japanese elders. As Japan’s society began aging more rapidly, the Japanese government began accommodating them in order to allow their elderly to feel more comfortable in society. Some gestures were small, such as businesses making it common to have clean pairs of reading glasses so the elderly can read papers or forms better, whereas some gestures took more work and effort, such as creating a button on the crosswalk for the elderly so they can take their time crossing the streets. The Japanese elderly are even represented in the media in a positive way, with a popular romance show starring two elders falling in love. I believe that positive representation is key and normalizes the process of aging. Many countries will only portray their ideas of beauty in the media, which leaves anyone outside of that norm feeling uncomfortable or unaccepted in society (Reid. 2018). However, while aging may be a kinder experience in Japan than in other countries, health insurance increases significantly as people age. This makes it more difficult for the Japanese elders to pay for their health care, seeing as quality care is expensive, and since the Japanese elderly population lives so long creates even more expenses. Japan needs to work on creating more opportunities for long-term care, especially since they have the largest percentage of elders when compared to any other country, but Japan’s treatment of the elderly far exceeds any other country that I researched.

In the past, African nations have had the utmost respect for their elders. When looking into African nations, I decided to research Nigeria, the largest country in Africa with a population of over 200 million people, with the elderly making up 3.9% of the population with nearly 6 million inhabitants over the age of 65. I was very surprised to learn about all of the ageism and lack of respect for the elderly in Africa after learning about how much respect there was for the elderly in ancient African civilizations. While there were holidays celebrating the elderly in the past, elders are now experiencing the harmful effects of ageism. Elderly women without children are targeted in particular, often being beaten and called witches (Tanyi et al., 2018). The Nigerian government has no policies put in place for the elderly population. There are no specific policies for health care of the elderly, and there is a lack of doctors that specialize in caring for the diseases that come with aging. Despite all of the pressure that has been put on the Nigerian government for decades to create legislation to aid the elderly and promote successful aging, they have never passed any sort of legislation to aid the elders of Nigeria. Interestingly enough, Nigeria once had free health care in the 1980’s, when Nigeria had their oil boom. Everyone had access to health care and quality care, so I was fascinated to see that a government that had once funded health care and aid for their elderly regress into a society that leaves their elders to die. A statement that stood out to me was from an elderly person in Nigeria who broke their arm, and due to the lack of quality healthcare, prayed to die (Tanyi et al., 2018). Until the Nigerian government begins addressing their elderly population and making changes to promote successful aging the Nigerian elders will suffer.

After Nigeria, I decided to research India. Growing up I had a lot of Indian friends, and while they were in the United States, I knew that the family in India often cared for the elders. In my research, I found that there are no government or social programs made to help care for the elderly and that the family usually cares for their elderly relatives. However, with the population of India increasing, so are prices for everything else, which leads to family members having to move to more urban locations to earn a sufficient amount of money and send it to their elderly family members (Goswami et al., 2018). Since the family worked nearby in the past, the elders always had family nearby to take care of them when care was needed. This also provided constant socialization for the elderly, which has been proven to be necessary for successful aging. Since family members are working further away, more elders than ever are alone for the first time. In Northern Virginia, many elderly Indians come and visit their children that have immigrated to the United States but do not want to leave their home and culture behind. As much as they miss their family, I have always seen a strong reluctance from elderly Indians, which I personally have never seen in any other elders from other countries or societies. This doesn’t surprise me, seeing how loyal Indian families are to one another, it makes sense that they are just as loyal to their homeland. However, until the Indian government begins making any sort of change for the elderly, elderly Indians will have to rely on their families, which stalls any potential reform for successful aging in India. The government has the ability to provide resources to assist families or even create social programs to battle the loneliness that is appearing as family members have to relocate to work.

After researching all of the countries and civilizations, I came across an article that claimed that the treatment of the elderly was related to the differences between individualistic and collectivistic societies. Individualistic societies emphasize putting the needs of the individual first whereas collectivistic societies emphasize the needs of the entire society as a group (Ackerman et al., 2020). Interestingly enough, the claims from the article lined up with the findings of my research. America and Nigeria are two individualistic cultures, which means that these specific societies promote the wellbeing and success of the individuals. This also explains the disrespect and ageism towards the elderly that is seen in American and Nigerian society. China and Japan are collectivistic societies and have always prioritized the wellness and success of society as a group, which is why aging is accepted better. This theory cannot represent the entirety of all cultures but provides more insight into the treatment of the elderly.

After doing my research, I can say that I am not surprised to see that most countries have less respect for their elderly in today’s world as compared to in the past. I was surprised to learn about collectivistic and individualistic cultures and would feel comfortable predicting that as more time goes on, more societies will become more individualistic and emphasize the success of the individual as compared to the success of society as a group. This would lead to ageism becoming more common in society and less respect for the elderly population over time. I was genuinely surprised to see all that Japan has done for the wellbeing of their entire population regarding healthcare services, and even more impressed by how they are allowing the elderly to remain as present as they would like in society. It is evident that Japan still has a way to go in providing medical care, but for a country with such a large elderly population it is clear that the work put into successful aging has paid off. While researching China, I was surprised to learn about the extent that Chinese families go to when caring for their elderly parents or family members. The fact that filial piety still plays such a big role in China and Japan thousands of years later shows the dedication and love that goes into the care of Japanese and Chinese elders. China has had a huge growth in the amount of their elderly population and is making so much progress in creating more care for the elderly and creating a long term care health insurance plan. I anticipate that many Chinese citizens will have a difficult time caring for their elders as the population of the elderly grows while the population of caregivers or family members remains low due to the one child policy. The 4-2-1 family structure is common right now, and with many Chinese couples opting just to have one child today, it seems like that structure will stay for a while and create economic issues for caregivers. The Chinese elders are in good hands, and with more government assistance and programs hopefully being put in place for the elderly, the Chinese elderly population will thrive. The United States may have many policies put in place in order to assist the elderly, but many of these policies are very old, such as Social Security, which has been set up since the 1930’s. In order to assist the growing elderly population, the United States will need to prioritize helping the population successfully age, which will save them money and space in nursing homes or care facilities. The lack of respect for the elderly and ageism will remain an issue that will require more than policy changes or government assistance, but hopefully over time the United States will once again treat their elderly population with the respect that they have earned. Nigeria really stood out to me, as I was surprised that a culture could go from having the utmost respect for their elderly, even having a holiday for them, and then cast them out of society. Nigeria has the smallest percentage of their elderly population, with only 3% and I believe that the lack of medical professionals who know how to treat diseases that occur with aging is a part of that. What surprised me the most about Nigeria is how their government enables ageism by completely ignoring the elderly population by having no legislation made to aid them in any way. I was very surprised to learn that India’s government has no legislation passed for their elderly. I was also surprised to see how many Indians are having to work far from home and leave their elders behind, just to financially support them.

This project made me realize just how important the family is for any culture regarding caring for the elderly. The fact that I had never heard of the lack of legislation for Indian and Nigerian elders amazes me, but makes me realize that families have been caring for them as well as they can. While every culture had something different, I was amazed to see similarities between most countries. The elderly have begun experiencing loneliness more than ever in the 20th century, which is due to the increasing cost of healthcare, as well as the elderly population increasing. People have never lived as long as they are living currently, due to technology, and with these advancements come new difficulties for everyone. Personally, I believe that if the elderly had more advocates than themselves or their family, or even the support of a society that celebrates their achievements, they would remain more present in society. I think that people forget that everyone will age someday, and if we don’t want to be treated the way that the elderly are treated currently, then we will have to be the ones who improve the quality of care, advocate for change, or introduce legislation to aid successful aging. We are coming to a point in society in which there will be too many elders to be cared for by just the family, so if we want to make life easier for all of us in the future, change has to be made, if not for others than for ourselves and our future children.

**References**

Ackerman, L. S., & Chopik, W. J. (2020, September 2). *Cross-Cultural Comparisons in Implicit and Explicit Age Bias*. Sage Journals. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0146167220950070?ai=2b4&mi=ehikzz&af=R

Berger, R. (2017). Aging in America: Ageism and general attitudes toward growing old and the elderly. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, *05*(08), 183–198. https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2017.58015

Goswami, S., & Deshmukh, P. R. (2018). *How "elderly staying alone" cope up with their age and deteriorating health: A qualitative exploration from rural wardha, Central India*. Indian journal of palliative care. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6199841/

Han, Y., He, Y., Lyu, J., Yu, C., Bian, M., & Lee, L. (2020). Aging in China: Perspectives on Public Health. *Global Health Journal*, *4*(1), 11–17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.glohj.2020.01.002

Nakatani, H. (2019, October 31). *Population aging in Japan: Policy transformation, sustainable development goals, Universal Health Coverage, and social determinates of health*. Global health & medicine. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7731274/

Reid, T. R. (2018, May 17). *Japanese culture, longevity and the aging population*. AARP. https://www.aarp.org/health/healthy-living/info-2018/japan-elderly-aging-society.html

Tanyi, P. L., Andre, P., & Mbah, P. (2018, December 31). *Care of the elderly in Nigeria: Implications for policy*. Taylor & Francis Online. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311886.2018.1555201