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## PERSPECTIVES ON ELDER BIAS AND ABANDONMENT IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR GERONTOLOGICAL COUNSELLING

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### **Abstract**

*This research is concerned with the perspectives on elder bias and abandonment in Nigeria. It noted that elderly care is an important traditional culture of the people. It further analyzed the causes of the decline in elderly care in Nigeria which were attributed to the erosion of the Nigerian culture by foreign cultures, modernization and urbanization as well as economic and social problems. The perspectives of the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba on the care-giving role of the elderly was ascertained through interviews and discussion with the people, who agreed that elderly care has reduced in the last few years although it is still part of the culture which cannot be relegated to the background. The need to restore the culture of care giving was emphasized especially due to the adverse effects and consequences of elderly neglect which includes sickness, destitution and even death. Finally, some recommendations were made which included the call for traditional chiefs to uphold and emphasize elderly care among their subjects, training of gerontological nurses and counsellors by the government, integrating gerontological study in the school curriculum, funding existing elderly care homes with the collaboration of private agencies amongst others.*

**Keywords:** Elder, bias, ethnic perspective, culture, policy, Gerontological counselling

### **1.1 Introduction**

The way aging is perceived these days in Nigeria is different from what it was some decades ago. Africans generally are very respectful and responsible people who took care of their elderly persons irrespective of whether they were related biologically or not. This is as a result of their culture as well as the age-long tradition which encourages participatory activity such as care-giving within the family and community. A care giver is an individual who has the responsibility for care of a protected person as a result of family relationship or who has assumed the

responsibility for care of the person voluntarily by contract or as a result of the ties of friendship (Hamp, 2001). In other words, a person could assume the position of a care giver to his/her relative, volunteer to become one and be paid for it or take up the responsibility towards a friend. Thus, families in Africa should be seen as doing what the custom dictates in order to maintain a firm family relationship, thereby becoming ‘one’s brother’s keeper’. The traditional family system has created such a strong bond within families, making younger family members to revere the elderly, especially in Nigeria.

However, there has been a noticeable negative shift in the care-giving culture of the Nigerian people as it pertains to the elderly, and the traditional functions of the family in terms of support to older family members have decreased in recent times. (Aboderin 2004; Ajomale, 2007). It is a problem in Africa due to the economic, security, health, disability and living conditions in old age, especially where most elderly people have become weak and incapacitated. It is also a policy concern throughout the world, of which there is no documented evidence that Nigeria has any of such policies to the best of the researcher’s knowledge. This is apart from a few NGOs, churches and public-spirited individuals who are moved by the plight of the elderly to organize welfare packages for them during certain celebrations. For example, policies which were introduced as a result of growing ageing populations in Africa were the UN Madrid International Plan for Action on Ageing (UN, 2002), the development of an African Union Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing (AU/HAI, 2003), amongst others. Almost all mainstream poverty reduction policies or targets were said to have wholly failed to consider older people, but rather focused on younger adults, children and youth (Ogwumike, 2001; McIntyre, 2004). Moreover, a growth in the number of the elderly has brought about increase in their needs to the extent that they suffer a lot of hardships (Ajomale, 2007).

The institution of the aged is a very important area in which governments, families and donor agencies should focus on, especially in Nigeria; and even though aging is a natural occurrence it could be associated with good health or bad health (Porchia, 2012). Aging is characterized by loss of independence, emotional stress and physical problems. The process of modernization and urbanization are beginning to erode the traditional social welfare system of Africa and the extended family (Mba, 2007). Furthermore, Literature has shown that the neglect of the aged has turned many of them to destitute simply because of the laxity on the part of government and families. According to the United Nations (2005) half of all older people in West Africa at present reside in Nigeria, with a rising statistics of the elderly from 6.4 million today, to 25.5 million by 2050. This statistics shows that the number would rise systematically and if care is not taken, it could constitute a continental pandemic. This is the reason why the elderly should be given better attention as it is due to the youths and children in Nigeria.

Ogwumike and Aboderin (2005) posits that the concentration of older people among the ‘poorest of the poor’ poses a threat to their material, physical and emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, the situation is magnified by visible evidence of increasing destitution and begging amongst older people in countries like Nigeria and Ghana. (Ogwumike & Aboderin, 2005). There is also the

aspect of charitable community-based initiatives to respond to these (Ayisanbola, 2004). This trend is fast gaining grounds in Nigeria, especially where one sees the destitute on major roads begging alms in a group, with their organizers all adorned in similar aprons bearing the inscription of their organization. Unfortunately, successive governments have made attempts to ban such organizations without a penalty to the offenders and this menace has remained. Experience has shown that most of these so called NGOs deceive the masses using the physically challenged destitute to collect money from vehicle owners on major roads which they converted to their personal use because they were unable to get jobs.

## **1.2 Concept of aging, bias and abandonment**

Aging is the process of growing old, resulting in reduction in strength, sexual activity, among others. According to the Encyclopedia Americana, it is the accumulation of changes in a person overtime, a multi-dimensional process of physical, psychological and social change. The persons within the ages of sixty years and above are referred to as 'elderly' (Porchia, 2012). The elderly may have limitations in physical and mental abilities such that they are unable to engage in activities that require exertion of energy for a long time; and this included the regular circular and other jobs that they engaged in. Thus, they are dependent on their children and other relatives for financial, moral and emotional or psychological support as the case may be.

'Bias' is a partiality that prevents objective consideration of an issue or situation (Jaksic, 2003). Furthermore, he noted that the elderly face bias, stereotyping, etc. In his own views, Birnbaum (2003) believes that the elderly are often not respected because people are scared of aging. 'Elderly bias' is an attitudinal issue in which a service provider or a family member who is a care giver becomes unresponsive to an older person's concerns. The shocking aspect is that many medical care providers will unconsciously exhibit the same attitude towards their older patients (Jensen Law Office, 2005). Day (2011) found that people's reaction to aging creates a bias which could make the elderly themselves think that they are no longer useful and this discourages them from keeping healthy and active. Furthermore, evidence of the bias towards older Americans are seen in films or TV where they are depicted as weak, indecisive, bumbling or even comic (Day, 2011).

'Abandonment' connotes neglect and negative treatment of an individual either despitefully or without regard to his/her personal feelings of worth. It also means that an individual could be biased towards the elderly for him or her to be treated with neglect. This could probably be related to the activities of the elderly at this stage of life. These include childish dispositions, unhealthy lifestyles, dirtiness, use of verbal intimidation, eavesdropping, cursing and such related attitudes displayed by the elderly persons.

## **1.3 Theoretical Framework**

The premise on which this research on aging is hinged, is the theory of disengagement. Disengagement connotes retiring from an activity which an individual was used to. In this sense,

aging represents reduction in strength to do work especially, energetically. According to Novak (2009), there are current issues that occur with aging, and it relates to disengagement on one hand or activity on the other. Thus, the theory of disengagement comes to play during aging. The theory maintains that when individuals become older, some experience health challenges which calls for care-givers' intervention. These problems could involve feeding, bathing, dressing, transporting, etc (Porchia, 2012). It is also believed that aging makes some individuals to disengage themselves from society (Novak, 2009). In essence, disengagement theory sees decreases in interaction as the outcome of mutual withdrawal of society and the older person (Novak, 2009). This is to say that the aged individual could disengage from active service voluntarily as a result of poor health or inability to cope with the stress involved with the work or could be disengaged from the same service by his/her employer due to inactivity or the attainment of the prescribed age of retirement. In this regard, some people may be skeptical of being disengaged by the government, especially when they neither have any other means of livelihood nor children who can cater for their needs adequately at old age. Furthermore, retirement as a result of old age is presumably a reward for many years of dedication and hard work, but the underlying philosophy is more likely based on the idea that workers are no longer productive or useful. This could probably be the reason why some of them swear to an affidavit, reducing their age so as to remain in active service for a longer period. This calls for education, preparatory to disengagement since it involves a lot of psychological, financial and health challenges requiring adjustment to a new lifestyle.

#### **1.4 Consequences of Elder Bias**

When elder bias persists, it could result to an abuse of the rights and privileges of the individual. An abuse for example includes physical abuse, neglect, financial abuse, abandonment, isolation, abduction or other treatment with resulting physical harm or mental suffering (Hamp, 2001). For example, statistics of elder abuse in South Africa shows that 64.3% of men and 60.3% of women had experienced elder abuse, with physical abuse more common among men while emotional, financial and sexual abuses were common among women (Bigala & Ayiga, 2014). Although there is no comparable data to show the magnitude of elder abuse in Nigeria, stories of cases that were reported by individuals abound in the news and print media. Similarly, Cadmus and Owoaje (2012) remarked that elder abuse is increasing in Sub-Saharan Africa. A study among 681 urban and rural people in Nigeria found that the elderly had an eroded ability to engage in physical activities and 54% reported visual impairment. Bakare, Ojofeitimi & Akiyemi (2004) found that the dietary intake of many old people consisted of cheap starchy foods, minor vegetables, etc. Emotional abuse for example is described as the willful or reckless infliction of emotional or mental anguish or the use of physical or chemical restraint, medication or isolation as punishment or as a substitute for treatment or care of any protected person (Hamp, 2001). In the same vein, some elderly people suffer neglect, that is failure of a care giver to provide food, shelter, clothing, etc (Hamp, 2001).

As a result of the way that the elderly are perceived and because of their fear of deterioration of their bodies, and due to low income, some of them in America fight old age through cosmetic surgery, use of supplements, aggressive weight loss programmes, etc (Day, 2011). The case in Nigeria is not much different as the interview with most elderly people in Nigeria showed that other forms by which old age was fought in Nigeria included dying of the hair and the use of supplements.

## **2.0 The Nigeria Value System and Ethnic Perspectives on care of the Elderly**

The neglect and abandonment of the elderly should be a cause for concern among Nigerians who are interested in preserving the age-old culture of care-giving. The care of the elderly or aged family members are important for several reasons. First, the elderly are noted to give wise counsel and proffer solutions to problems within families and the communities when the need arises. Second, the elderly have been observed to be protective of family inheritance such that it cannot pass from one family to another without their express approval. It is due to this reason that families can inherit their entitlements in terms of land and other community possessions, which they pass on to their lineage. Therefore, it becomes unthinkable for younger family members to overlook or neglect this set of people who have been able to protect what rightly belongs to them, since inheritance is a parameter for family sustenance and development in Nigeria. Moreover, Education Portal (2003- 2015) revealed that the older persons represent their families in the council of elders meeting, where decisions concerning the communities are taken. They also regulate and promote the general interest of citizens. Similarly, the elders play leadership roles in the society and are seen as repositories of wisdom (Education Portal, 2003-2015).

Aging is not a new phenomenon all over the world but some countries have adopted various ways of discharging their responsibilities towards the elderly. This to a large extent may be dictated by culture, religion, ethnicity or family orientation in many cases. Unfortunately, when the elderly in the society are neglected, they become impoverished and a social distance is created between family members, making some elderly people to become beggars, cleaners, security guards, load carriers, etc (Education Portal, 2003-2015). The Hausa in Northern Nigeria have a close relationship with their aged persons as is expected by the culture of the Nigerian people. The perspective of the Hausa on aging has not been documented as far as the researcher is concerned. Therefore, the evidence in this research were from an interview and discussions which the researcher had with a selected audience. It was found that based on their socio-economic status, the upper class were more responsive to the needs of their aged as opposed to the lower class because they have the capacity to provide for them more adequately. Although most of the lower class desire to take adequate care of their elderly, they were unable to do so due to financial constraints. Therefore, it is not surprising that most of the elderly resort to begging alms. Even though they have children, some are seen in the hospitals unaccompanied and may end up asking doctors to reduce the quantity of drugs meant for their treatment simply because they cannot afford to buy all of the prescribed drugs. However, the Hausa ethnic group

still have a lot of respect for the elderly. This can be deduced by the pet names the elderly female is called, such as ‘inna’ for mother, ‘kaka’ meaning grandmother while the elderly male is referred to as ‘baba’.

On the contrary, they also noted that in spite of their efforts to cater for the elderly, some of them still derive unexplained satisfaction from street begging. The Hausa believe that just as in all other aspects of their lives, changes are seen today, which signifies a clear deviation from the norm, due to educational, social or political pursuits of the people. The Igbo of Eastern Nigeria had a slightly different view from those of the Hausa. They believed that their elderly or aged parents should be catered for no matter their socio-economic level or financial status. However, there is no document to show that a study of this nature has been conducted amongst the Igbo except for the interviews that the researcher had with some of them. They were of the opinion that any Igbo man or woman who flouted the caring culture towards the aged was ‘wicked’. They also observed that although cases of elderly neglect was rare among the Igbo, there could still be some exceptional cases, such as in a situation in which the elderly had no children or had lost all of them through supernatural means. As a matter of fact, the Igbo were of the view that one of the reasons for sending their young children to the village to live with their aged parents was to assist them by running errands as well as giving a helping hand on their farms. Similarly, just like their Hausa counterparts, they referred to an elderly man as ‘dede’ or ‘dada’ referring to an elderly woman. To this extent, the igbo man or woman becomes ashamed if his/her parents were seen wearing tattered clothes because it is a reflection of how responsible or irresponsible the children are towards their parents. In confirmation, it was reported that social support traditionally given to older persons still exists in the sense that daughters and daughter in-laws usually come to the rescue of older people (Education Portal, 2003-2015).

The Yoruba in Western Nigeria perceive aging as a gradual journey to the grave and retirement from hard labour (Ajala, 2006). Some of the findings of Ajala (2006) were hinged on economic down turn which was observed as one of the factors influencing the perception of the Yoruba on ageing, with some of the economic realities including unemployment, high cost of living, as well as large scale corruption in the public service. Perhaps, this may also be the reason why many aged Nigerians died as soon as they retired from active service. Experience has shown that the stress involved in getting their retirement benefits from the government, makes them vulnerable to respiratory illnesses, tiredness, loss of gait and in extreme cases death results. Moreover, some of them suffered from malnutrition, loss of sight, hypertension and diabetes (Ajala, 2006). Specifically, 73% of the Yoruba families were unable to support their aged people (Ajala, 2006). This figure is quite alarming and an indication that the issue requires urgent attention. According to Ajomale (2007), cases of elder abuse occur daily in Nigeria, even though abuse of older persons are considered to be a taboo, which makes it difficult to report cases to the law enforcement agencies.. This is also compounded by lack of law on elder abuse. Similarly, Aboderin (2004) noted that such elder abuse has led to deprivation and poverty. Finally, those who make contributions towards the elderly are the NGOs, African Gerontological Society

(AGES), Nigeria, the Catholic Church, the Sorophornist Society, only to mention a few (Ajomale, 2007). He disputes the notion that investments in one's children serves as social security in old age. This may be related to the negligence to duty towards the elderly in recent times in Nigeria. On the contrary, some children regard the elderly as witches who may tamper with the destinies of younger members of the family, especially when mysterious deaths of younger family members occurred every year due to sicknesses or accidents. This of course is the usual pattern of attribution of events of the people, which pervades other ethnic groups as a result of their belief in supernatural causes of death, witchcraft, superstition as well as other negative events. In buttressing this view point, Mba (2007) observed that older women are often branded as witches and are blamed for every calamity that happens in their communities, including the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The culture of the Nigerian people as far as the elderly is concerned is indeed not as encouraging as it was and several factors have been attributed to it, ranging from economic, erosion of the people's culture by foreign culture only to mention a few (Aboderin, 2004; Ajala, 2006; Ajomale, 2007). In as much as literature has proven that there is a decline in care giving towards the elderly, none of the ethnic groups interviewed admitted that the elderly were either abandoned or taken to the old people's home for care. They were also unaware of the existence of old people's homes. There are usually adverse implications for breaking a cultural norm that is prescribed for families. For instance, the children of the elderly are required by custom to be responsible for their aged parents' upkeep, and this care extends to shelter, food, medication and protection from external forces, or strangers who may try to usurp their privileged positions to intimidate or disrespect the aged. The elderly holds the staff of office of individual families, and when advancing age limits their ability to pronounce judgment or perform their normal responsibilities, one of their children would step into their shoes to uphold the traditions of the people. Thus, a son who was next in line by age in the family was appointed as required by tradition to carry on with his father's traditional functions. It is almost impossible for children to abandon their aged parents to be catered for by strangers because society frowns at it and regard any child who does that as irresponsible or an infidel. Moreover, the old tradition of settling disputes within families using the round table conference, where the defaulter was pronounced guilty and charged a penalty to appease the neglected still exists. The fines imposed by law on the guilty included a live goat, drinks and physical cash.

### **3.1 Aging Policy and the Role of the Nigerian Society**

Although Nigeria is said to have an interest in the aged group, it may only be paying lip service as there has not been any known policy addressing this group. It is a problem for retirees to obtain their severance benefits, let alone the aged who were not workers to be entitled to any form of allowances for their upkeep. The aged are reported to suffer a lot of hardship in an increasingly hostile, competitive and intolerant society. It is worse to the extent that there is no consideration for the aged in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This calls for great concern since Nigeria may not stand any chance of being among the

20 world economies by the year 2020. Unfortunately, the more it postponed its agenda for the MDGs, the more unrealistic projections were made. In accordance with this thinking, halving the rate of poverty and hunger by 2015, (which is the current year of this research), with little or no consideration of older people would affect the success of the well conceived programme (Education Portal, 2003-2015). This is a matter of sociological and counselling concern because Nigeria is estimated to have the highest number of older population in Africa and the ninth in the world (United Nations, 2005). More still, Nigeria may have more than 6% of its population made up of older people aged 60 years and above by the year 2025 (United Nations Population Division, 2005) The table below shows Nigeria's projected age population by the year 2025.

### **3.2 Implications for Gerontological Counselling**

Gerontology is the study of the physical, psychological and societal changes that occur as people age (Hoff, 2007). Gerontological or geriatric counselling is an important area in counselling education that has been relegated to the background in Nigeria. This is because apart from learning the theoretical aspect of assisting the elderly to become better adjusted, there is no practical demonstration of the methods by which assistance can be rendered to the elderly. This is probably because Nigeria has not realized the important role of counselling in moderating the effects of the impact of aging on families. The care of the elderly is as important as the care of babies. This is because old age has so many phases and depending on individual circumstances and the provisions available to them, the extent and quality of care differs from one individual to another. The care of the elderly is important to the extent that the developed countries have laws that govern it. To this end, countries such as the United Kingdom and United States of America have a proportion of their budget allocated for their care and maintenance. It is unfortunate that most developing countries of which Nigeria is one have neglected this important social care.

Aging is a natural phenomenon which should not be seen as a problem or a cause for anxiety by families if the right approach is applied..Therefore, gerontological counselling should be embraced in order to assist and encourage families who are facing difficulties arising from a new phase of life. Some of the associated problems can be handled by well informed and trained counsellors. Gerontological counsellors are trained to assist elderly patients in coping with mental and emotional health issues associated with aging in order to improve their overall health and quality of life. More so, the geriatric counsellor assists the elderly to experience cognitive and physical changes (Hoff, 2007). Aside from their cognitive malady, most are said to suffer health challenges such as dementia, depression including all forms of stressors. Thus, gerontological counsellors may be employed to work in the care homes already established in Nigeria where there could be some elderly who were either displaced or picked up from the streets. Other places where the services of a gerontological counsellor may be required includes the hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centres, etc (Education Portal, 2003-2015). Since older people are observed to constitute the poorest group in Nigeria (Ajomale, 2007), their care should not be trivialized. This is because social services abound that can be utilized to achieve success in the care towards the elderly. Therefore, part of our millennium development goals and

vision 20-20-20 should include providing social amenities for them and reversing any negative behavioural disposition of family members towards the aged and elderly in Nigeria

### **3.3 Conclusion**

Aging is probably the most interesting aspect of life with its attendant challenges, from difficulty in feeding the elderly, lack of appetite, childish behaviours to pretences and blames traded by such aged people. Sometimes, it is deliberate but in most cases, the elderly are much less in tune with reality and have begun to revert to childish behaviours. Therefore, families are encouraged to seek help from trained gerontological nurses and counsellors capable of taking care of old people as the case is in the developed parts of the world. Aging is really not a disease, but there are coping strategies for the care of the aged for which the Nigerian people need information. However, the culture of the people does not encourage them to send their aged parents away from their homes. The traditions of the Nigerian people is the most single constant index that has remained for long even when other aspects of their lives have changed to some extent. It is against this backdrop that the present research advocates for the preservation of customs and traditions of the Nigerian people that are positive in nature, and those that have the tendency of uniting families rather than separating them.

### **3.4 Recommendations**

The following recommendations are proffered as the way forward:

1. The chiefs of towns and villages in Nigeria should encourage their subjects to embrace and cater for the aged amongst them and in so doing, bring about the restoration of the value system of the Nigerian people.
2. The government should intervene by making policies guiding the care of the aged as well as allocate funds for their care. To this end, every household with aged family members from a specific age bracket should be allocated a stipend so that they can take care of the aged adequately.
3. Gerontology studies should be integrated into the school curriculum from the secondary to the tertiary level of the educational system to teach people about the peculiar problems and needs of the elderly.
4. The government should train more nurses and counsellors in gerontological care and counselling to enable them assist families who are going through crises as a result of the challenges posed by aging.
5. The counselling Association of Nigeria should make a case for the study of Geriatric counselling by encouraging the government to consider training more counsellors in this area and creating public awareness and sensitization on home care of the elderly in Nigeria.

6. Government should collaborate with private organizations such as the Catholic Church and other NGOs to develop already existing homes and provide the essential materials required to run the centres.

7. The elderly people should form an organization, and use that platform to press for government recognition of their needs and fair treatment from families in Nigeria.

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