



Care of the Elderly for Sustainable Longevity and Transmission of Cultural Heritage to the Young: Implications for Psychology

Okeworo Stephen Nwali

Department of Primary Education
Ebonyi State College of Education, Ikwo
E-mail: okeworostephen1958@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Individuals at any stage of growth and development need proper care to ensure healthy life and functional living. It is on this premise that this paper attempted to examine care of the elderly as against the increasing wave of abuse of old people experienced in this day society. The paper first highlighted the following aspects namely concept of elderly, needs of the elderly, acts of abuse and the possible causes and rationale for caring for elderly persons. The paper at last concluded and stressed the implications of care of the elderly for psychology to include among others, giving relevant agencies orientation on how to provide care for the aged and advice to owners of Old People's Homes to make such places comfortable for the inmates.

INTRODUCTION

Every culture, all over the world, upholds premium regard for the elderly irrespective of their physiological status and absence of abnormalities. It may be proper to assert that the younger generation are ignorant of the reasons why aged people are accorded superlative respect worldwide. However, authorities including the Holy Bible have advanced genuine reasons to prove the need for proper care and attention for the elderly ones. For example, Exodus 20:12 stressed that a person who respects his parents, who are invariably the elderly ones, will be sure of living a longer life. Another reason for taking care of the elderly is anchored in the view that respect given to such people is usually in acknowledgment of the achievements they have recorded in life which include many years of their existence, the children and wealth they have and their accumulated wisdom. It is also believed that respect accorded to the aged is a way of sympathizing for the apparent decline in their health status and physiological conditions. Furthermore, it is understood that people respect the aged following the laid down ethics that a person who pays great respect to the elderly ones shall obtain blessings from them.

As a matter of fact, respect for the aged is subsumed in morality right from time immemorial. However, in this day society, the issue of mistreatment of growing numbers of frail elderly people has become a serious social concern. Put the other way round, the younger generation apparently pays little or no attention in taking proper care of the elderly. As a result of such negative attitude, the issue of abuse of the elderly becomes prevalent. The important thing to note is that mistreatment of the elderly people poses serious psychological threat including decline in health condition and reduced longevity. Consequent upon such pit-fall, the elderly will become less productive in the aspects that call for inculcation of skills, moral values and attitudes which the younger generation needs for optimum advancement of the society. Obviously, the elderly are custodians of knowledge which accrue from their wealth of experiences. As a result of this disposition, the younger generation usually relies on them for dependable knowledge in form of



acquisition of skills, moral values and attitudes which are imperative for functional living and societal growth. It is in realization of this relative impact of the aged people in the direction highlighted that provokes this paper to discuss care of the elderly and ways of addressing the issue of their abuse.

Who are the elderly?

The term elderly is generally used to refer to an aged person or persons. Quirk (2010) explained elderly as people who are old. During the adulthood stage of life which begins roughly from twenty-one years, there is a period called late adulthood stage which is the age bracket occupied by elderly people. Precisely, the period lasts from about sixty-five years and above (Okoye, 1998). There are different views about the factors that influence the biological make up of an individual during late adulthood stage. For example, Lefton (1986) opined that the physiological make up of an individual is a hereditary factor. According to him, being strongly or weakly built is inherited. This means that the physical condition of a person during late adulthood may be as a result of his biological traits. Lefton, in a different view maintained that individuals who are properly cared for in terms of nutrition and medication have more chances of living healthier. In more clear terms, during late adulthood, individuals who are favoured by biological traits, nutritional and medical care, experience minimal cases of change in physical appearance, change in voice, decline in motor activity, loss of appetite, memory decline and so on. The implication therefore is that individuals who are physically and intellectually healthy at their late adulthood due to favourable inborn traits and environmental conditions have chances of living productive life.

Needs of the elderly

In order to live and function well, old people need a lot of things. The needs include:

- (a) **Correct nutrition or diet:** Okoye (1998) maintained that one can neglect one's health under forty and gets away with it, at least to a certain extent, but after forty, one cannot. From that time, according to him, what one eats determines how one lives, looks or functions.
- (b) **Others' company:** The elderly needs the company of other people for purposes of interacting together, obtaining information, having comfort and being lonely free.
- (c) **Exercise:** Old people need modest or simple activities to keep their bodies refreshed and healthy. Such activities include walking some distances leisurely, dancing with no strain, gradual muscle exercise, squirming (stretching the arms, legs and parts of the body).
- (d) **Medical attention:** As the cells and normal functioning of the body deteriorate, the elderly should always be offered good medical care to help keep their bodies in constant repair and normal functioning.
- (e) **Neatness:** Also inevitable for promoting healthy living of the elderly are regular bathing, neat wears and beddings and clean environment. This is necessary to prevent disease germs or contamination that will interfere with their normal health condition.
- (f) **Relaxation:** The elderly needs enough rest, sleep and comfort under conducive environment or facilities like seats, beds, blanket, well-ventilated building, quiet and



warm places especially during cold weather. A situation like that will help to lodge their bodies in favourable condition of health.

- (g) **Mobility support:** The surrounding where there elderly operates should always be free from obstacles that will impede their free movement. Provision of walking sticks is also necessary to aid their movement from place to place.

Abuse of the elderly

The elderly by the virtue of their biological condition supposed to enjoy proper care of those that are concerned particularly younger relations. However, on the contrary, many people are usually in the habit of abandoning or mistreating the elderly. A situation like that becomes an abuse. Put differently, abuse of the elderly may include any form of act involving denying an aged person the rights or cares that are crucial for his healthy and happy living. Hill in Papalia (1990) maintained that although help flows back and forth between the generations, older parents are likely to receive aid from both middle aged children and grand children than to give it. According to Papalia (1990), abuse of the elderly may exist in the form of neglect as in the withholding of food, shelter, clothing, medical care or other assets. He added that it can also involve psychological torments in the form of tongue lashings or threats of violence or abandonment. He further stressed that it can appear as actual violence in the beating or other inhumane treatments. Really, it is not easy to mention all the various dimensions in which the elderly can be abused. This idea is in line with the findings of the study carried out by Eastman and reported in Papalia (1990) which revealed the estimate of the number of cases of abuse of the elderly all over the world to range from 60,000 to 1,000,000. In the African traditional society including Igbo land, abuse of the elderly is an act that is viewed unethical. It is generally believed that a person who goes contrary to the ethic of caring for the elderly is liable to suffer serious repercussion. Cases abound where elderly parents have cursed their children for refusing to take good care of them. Such curses were usually in the form of, 'It will never be well with you,' 'Your own children will mistreat you worse' and so on.

Possible Causes of Abuse of the Elderly

Abuse of the elderly has been a serious social issue in recent times. Following the development, people have tried to express different views about the factors that are responsible. Among the factors identified are:

- (a) **Ignorance:** Some people are ignorant of the need or how to take proper care of their dependent elderly ones. As a result, the issue of abuse arises.
- (b) **Empty nest:** At a certain stage in the family, children grow up and leave home to start or establish their own living. In such a case, the elderly parents remain alone in the family and receive little or no care at all which therefore translates to abuse.
- (c) **Divorce:** Abuse of the elderly may also arise as a result of divorce or separation of the aged couple. When this happens, each partner loses the company and care of the other. Sometimes, where the partner who is more influential draws their children towards him or herself, the other partner remains alone, uncared for and hence becomes abused.
- (d) **Death of a partner:** Just like divorce, death of a partner can lead to the abuse of the living colleague mostly in a situation where there is no other person to offer him care.



- (e) **Influence of Western culture and civilization:** With the advent of Western culture, the young generation leaves home to settle in urban areas to pursue their means of livelihood such as trading, reading or doing white collar jobs. Some leave for the purpose of enjoying social amenities which are lacking in their localities. Further still, there are those who invest their resources on modern facilities like costly wears, handsets, sound system, television set and other gadgets on the expense of care for their elderly ones. Situations like these lead to abuse of the elderly.

Rationale for caring for the elderly

Admittedly, aged people need care for various reasons. For example:

- (a) Good care offered to the elderly will help to boost their physical, social, emotional and mental well-being which they need to enhance their longevity.
- (b) Caring for the elderly will help to strengthen them to inculcate desirable skills, moral values and attitudes to the young generation for functional living in the society.
- (c) Elderly persons help in promoting organized and peaceful society by using their wealth of experiences to address crucial issues and conflicts. It is usually said that the mouths of the elderly may be twisted but their words are not twisted.
- (d) Aged people are the cultural base of the society. Therefore, care and attention offered them will help to sustain the cultural heritage of the society.

CONCLUSION

Discussions by this paper have revealed that the elderly play significant roles towards the advancement of their society especially in knowledge transmission to the younger generation. The attitude whereby children or the younger generation see the responsibility of taking care of their aged persons as a problem or burden to be dodged from therefore need to be properly addressed.

Implications for Psychology

It is well understood that elderly people, with their unique and peculiar stage of life are usually mistreated by close relations. In view of the abuse, intervention of psychologists becomes imperative in checking the ugly trend. Psychologists by the virtue of their discipline are more relevant when it comes to showing concern to the elderly particularly in terms of rendering counselling services that are essential to the acts of abuse. Their services therefore include:

- (a) Giving children or young generation proper orientation to desist from mistreatment of the elderly people.
- (b) Sensitizing parents on how to take good care of their children when they are still young so that children will reciprocate same relationship to them at their old age.
- (c) Children usually leave home when they have grown up in search of their means of livelihood. Psychologists should therefore sensitize relations and other close persons on how to make adequate arrangements on how to care well for the aged parents when they are not at home.
- (d) Couples need orientation from psychologists on the need to avoid situations that may lead them to divorce. Where divorce happens to occur, parents should not divide their



children or resort to the act of one parent denying the other their company or relationship. This is necessary in order that the children will be disposed to cater for both of them at their old ages without bias.

- (e) When one of the couple dies, their children and other relations need psychological guides from relevant authorities on how to take care of the living partner.
- (f) Government and private organizations who run Old People's Homes need proper orientation from psychologists on how to equip such centres so that the aged persons who are kept there should always have physical, social, emotional and intellectual comfort that will make them to always feel at home.

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