

## The Aged and Aging in Contemporary Nigeria: Challenges and Counseling Implications

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper was to portray the social category in the society referred to as the aged, as well as ageing as imperative in the life span of human beings. The aged in Nigeria hardly receive the much needed attention; hence they are mostly relegated to the background. The absence of attention and welfare for the aged aggravate their health physically, mentally and psychologically. Ageing as a life-long process is fraught with problems and challenges, which place the aged at perpetual disadvantage. In addition to deterioration in physical and health condition, variety of illnesses present themselves, graduating to depression and wish for demise. To ameliorate the problems and challenges, counseling implications are drawn to at least ameliorate the challenges and mitigate the effects of ageing. Meanings of aged and ageing are provided, reasons for neglect and efforts of governments and other non-governmental organizations are espoused. Specific counseling approaches such as behavior modification, rational emotive, attitude and psychological trauma management as well as depression coping to address the problems of the aged are also given in this paper.

**Keywords:** Aged, Ageing, Healthy Living Counseling, Ageing Diseases.

### **Introduction**

Ageing is the process of growing old and it is a gradual biological impairment of usual functioning. These changes have a direct impact on the ability of organs such as the heart, kidney and lungs, and biological systems such as reproductive and digestive systems. These affect all the organs as a whole. As a process of growing old, mobility can gradually decrease, and the need for medical interventions may increase, and older habits may need to be modified. Our life expectancy depends on the country we live in, our state of health and soon. Ageing is part of human experience. Each new day that passes, make a person one day older, he/she moves to that stage of life in which most physiological, psychological and social functions decline. However, ageing is influenced by number of factors that include demographic, social policies, economical, cultural

values, feelings, as well as class, gender and race/ethnicity (Osinowo, Moronkala & Egunyomi, 2012; Lindberg and McFarland, 2003).

Udoh (2000) noted that ageing is a process which commences at birth and continues through infancy, childhood, adolescent and adulthood to death. It could also be said to be the continuous wearing away, repair and replacement of body tissue to a stage when repair and replacement activity can no longer cope with the rate of wearing and tear of the body, with the consequent decline in the functions of the body tissue. Research data confirmed that ageing is multifactorial process; everyone does age in the same way or rate. There are differences in hair turning gray, wrinkles, sight hearing impairment and age related diseases. Inelmen and Inelmen (2007) observed that biological ageing varies widely in relation to chronological age. Thus two people of the same chronological age may have biologically very different ages depending on their state of health and the age they feed. Unfortunately despite all these differences, ageing is still defined in biological perspective. Thomas and Blanchard (2009) opined that ageing is the time of sequential deterioration that occurs in most living beings including increase susceptibility to disease and diverse environmental conditions, lose of mobility and agility, and age related physiological changes.

Moody (2006) viewed ageing as multidimensional process of physical, psychological, physiological and social changes some dimension of ageing grow and expand overtime, while others decline. For instance, the reaction time may slow down with age, while knowledge of world events and wisdom may expand. Research showed that, even late in life, potentials exist for physical, mental, psychological and social growth and development. Ageing plays an important part in all human societies. It reflects the biological changes that occur as well as cultural and societal conventions. Ageing has become a global phenomenon receiving recognition by government of developing countries like Nigeria, where it is reflected in the government vital documents of economic and social development strategies. The greatest increase in the number of older people globally is occurring in the development and middle income countries, which one experiencing rapid shifts from high mortality and high fertility to much reduced fertility and greater longevity and Nigeria is not an exception. The National Population Census conducted in (2006) confirmed an increase in the percentage and the number of those aged 60years and above. The ageing population is expected to increase gradually due to life expectancy with significant social and economical implications to the individuals and Nigerian government. Population ageing in Nigeria arises from two related effects.

**Increase Longevity and Decline Infertility Rate.**

An increase in longevity rises the average age of the population by increasing the numbers of surviving older people. A decline in fertility reduces the numbers of babies, and as the effect continues, the number of younger people in general will also reduce. It is the declining fertility that makes a contribution to population ageing in the world. The decline in last half century is responsible for population ageing in the world today. Developing countries are undergoing fast fertility transitions and according to Hoff (2007), these countries will experience a faster population ageing than the developed countries in the future and many are not worried, Nigeria inclusive that their growing older populations are living the extra years of life in poverty and poor health conditions.

**Definition of Aged in Nigeria**

Most countries in the developed world have accepted the chronological age of 65 years as a definition of "Aged" persons, but that does not go well with the situation in Africa. 65 years in Africa and Nigeria is in many ways associated with retirement, when one begins to receive pension benefits. Presently, there is no universal standard to numerically define who is aged, but the United Nations (UN) agreed that, the cut off point for the aged is 60 years and above. Chronologically in Nigeria, a person is declared to be aged, when he is sixty five (65) years or more; however a person at this stage of life may appear very old or younger depending on his life style and the magnitude of insults on his body within the environment.

**Problems and Challenges of the Aged in Nigeria**

Nigeria, being a developing country among African countries, sees ageing population as a serious challenge. The inability of the government to cope with the regular payment of pensions to the retired workforce, the inadequate social services and health facilities to cater for the need of an ageing population, as well as a predominantly rural agrarian population all pose problems. The threats of food security, social security and national security of Nigerians older people's lives are characterized by growing demand inadequacies in customary family support, social exclusion and non existence of social security which are targeted at them. Thus they continue to be very vulnerable to diseases and poverty. It is estimated that by the year 2025, the population of Nigerians aged 60 years and above, will constitute 6 percent of the entire population. Rapid growth rate of the older population in the coming years, with lower rate among the younger population. The National Population Census of (2006) confirmed an increase in the number of people aged 60 years and above, and the continuous increase is

due like expectancy as a result of medical advancement and economic improvement. This will have significant social and economic implications to the individuals and Nigerian government; however Nigerian government is ignoring these serious and unavoidable challenges by leaving it to few non-governmental organizations and families to cater for the aged. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognized the role of primary health care in the health of older people in all countries and the need for health countries to be accessible and adapted to the need of the older population, and for the health workers to be trained in the diagnosis and management of chronic diseases of old people, i.e. memory loss, urinary incontinence, depression, fall and immobility that often impact people as they age. Yet nothing much has been put in place by the government and non-governmental organization in Nigeria to care for the old people's needs. Nigerian government should act in favour of World Health Organization (WHO) policy frame work on active ageing published (2002) in Madrid which called on policy makers, governments and non-governmental sectors to optimize opportunities for health participation in order to enhance the quality of people as they age. The framework recognizes that active and healthy ageing depends on variety of determinants that concern ageing. Active ageing is defined by World Health Organization (WHO) as a process of optimizing opportunities for health participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age. Active ageing allows people to realize their potentials for physical, social and mental well beings throughout the course of life and to participate in society. It aims to extend healthy life expectancy and quality of life for all people as they age. This interesting policy framework on ageing has remained in draft form in Nigeria thereby causing suffering and pain to the aged.

### **Neglect of the Aged**

It is unfortunate that, the aged are not fully catered for by the government. This is left to few non-governmental organizations that provide care for some few older people. Members of the family as it is in African cultures also care for the elderly if they can afford. Many older people undergo a lot of suffering with no one to provide needed care. No wonder many aged people are seen on the streets of Nigerians cities begging for food to eat not to talk of medical care, shelter, and other basic necessities of life. Even some elderly who had contributed so much to the development of this country during their active years as civil servants are virtually neglected, frustrated, excommunicated and are suffering from a lot of social, psychological, medical and economic problems. Their pensions and gratuity so small to solve their needs, as a result of this some die immediately after retirement. This situation is uncalled for and

seriously lamentable. Traditionally, according to FGN (2004), the extended family system has cared for the Nigerian elderly. Elderly persons expect support from their relatives and friends, but most especially from their children. However, because of urbanization, modernization migration and declining economy, many children are no longer in a position to provide care and support for their aged parents. FGN (2007) recognized that, traditional functions of the family, like care and social support to older family members have gradually decreased in the recent past due to economic problems, migration and influence of foreign culture. Family members are unable to cope effectively with the challenges of daily living and have shift focus to nuclear family at the expense of the elderly who look to younger generation to support and provide them with economic and medical security in old age.

### **Social Policy and the Aged in Nigeria**

According to Huenchuan Schkolnik and Villa (2010), population ageing must not be regarded as a matter that concerns only the current generation of older persons. Nigeria is yet to enact a National Policy on the care and welfare of older persons. It has remained in draft form since March 2003. At the moment, there is no social security scheme policy in old age family members and only for non-governmental organizations provide care for the aged in Nigeria as of now. Despite government recognition of the problems and challenges faced by the aged, coupled with the economic challenges that family members and children of the aged are going through, government is still unwilling to care for the needs of the aged.

### **Counseling Implication for the Aged**

One of the tools that might make positive impact is information services in counseling. Through these services, the guidance counselor may help the aged to acquire knowledge of ageing process and challenges of the aged against old age and be able to help themselves when in problems. For instance, they will be able to handle old age challenges like loss of sight decrease mobility, decrease stamina, cancer risk, cardiovascular diseases, obesity etc. One of the outstanding cause of old age problems and suffering is lack of planning for it even among the working class. This is a challenge to guidance counselors' investment against retirement or old age. Counselor could organize group counseling, seminars, workshops and talk shows for both employees and those not to draw their attention toward preparing for old age in order to alleviate their suffering during old age. Government as a matter of urgency should come up with policies at all levels (federal, state and local governments) on how to translate the World Health Organization (WHO) policy on active ageing

framework publisher in Madrid in (2002), and to establish health care centres and train health workers in diagnosis and management of chronic diseases of the old people. The social policy for the aged which has remained in draft form since 2003 needs to be translated into reality to take care of social and economic problems of the elderly in the country, and to pay gratuity and monthly pension to retirees as when due. To achieve these objectives, the guidance counselors are saddle with the responsibility of championing this Gombe and advising government on policies and decision making for the welfare of the aged, and to prevent the escalation of problems hence it is expected that the number of aged people 60 years and above, according to National Population Census (2006), will continue to increase due to life expectancy with significant social and economical implications for the individuals and Nigerian government. One of the effective tools of increasing longevity among aged is physical exercises guidance counselors can help to through information services like talk shows group counseling etc. and organize or prescribe physical exercises that are mild and moderate for the elderly people according to their need and state of health. Exercise is good for the maintenance of individual's health and well beings as well as reducing the debilitating effects common to ageing. Toshihito and Andrian (1997) state that, as people remain long in physical condition, they will remain more independent of crutches, walker's wheel chairs and human help. Bucher (1990) world renowned expert on heart diseases observed that, Man who showdown at 40 years of age may have heart attack sooner. The showdown of body activities increases the possibility of the hardening of the arteries. Therefore, to stop exercises at old age appears unreasonably. Counselors should encourage the family system to continue taking care of to improve their living conditions. The good African culture of communality should not be eroded by the western culture of individuality. Counselors should advice the government at all levels (federal, states and local governments) to include the ageing courses from primary to tertiary institutions so as to curtail the problems in the society. Guidance counselors have the responsibility to engage the traditional rulers, senior citizens and youths organizations to intensify crusade against mishandling of the aged.

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