

CHAPTER 5

Culture and the Meaning of a Good Old Age

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For centuries humans have quested for a good old age. In fact, that is what everybody would like. Yet when we connect “good” with “old age,” conceptually something is a little off. Certainly “good” and “old” fall together quite reasonably when the reference is wine, furniture, automobiles or even cheese. When humans are involved, however, good and old are less comfortably combined. Our experience with old people who are frail and experiencing difficulties suggests that “a good old age” might be an oxymoron.

On the other hand, a good old age is not as flagrantly false as is the fountain of youth. Nowhere on earth do people remain eternally young. No drug has yet been discovered to halt aging or even to slow it down, much less to bring about its reversal. Nevertheless, the fountain of youth is enshrined in the myth of Shangri-La. In this exotic place, a select few who choose the contemplative life and ingest a mild narcotic may live for centuries in the isolation of the high Himalayas (see introduction to Part VI). Explorers have supposedly discovered a few longevous populations, but all have since been found wanting.

Since there really is no Shangri-La, then everyone experiences aging and will encounter old age. In this chapter, we explore culture and the meaning of a good old age in seven different communities around the world. Our intent is to link what constitutes a good and a difficult old age to the context in which they are experienced. First, we describe the project which led us to investigate aging in Africa, Europe, North America and Asia. Second, we look at the meanings of a good old age in specific cultural contexts and draw our conclusions.

PROJECT AGE

Project AGE is a cross-cultural research project which takes a team approach to cross-cultural data collection and analysis (see Keith, Fry, Glascock, Ikels, Dickerson-Putman, Harpending and Draper 1994 for a detailed account). As its major goal, the project sought to investigate, through comparable field studies, how different kinds of communities shape the experience of aging and pathways to well-being for their older members (see Table 5.1). In this team project, the codirectors (Fry and Keith) formulated and coordinated the research design. Principal investigators worked in specific communities around the world, adapting that research design in culturally sensitive ways to the local cultures.¹ In 1982 the project began in North America and Hong Kong. By 1986, a second phase of data collection was initiated in Ireland (also see Chapter 18) and in Botswana. Fieldwork was completed and data analysis began in 1988.

Our units of analysis are communities and neighborhoods. Seven research sites were selected on the basis of cultural and structural diversity across these settings. Table 5.1 outlines the differences across the seven communities. They are not intended to be representative of the respective nations. They are, however, strongly influenced by national-level policies and national social structure. Economies range from an international port of trade (Hong Kong) to cattle herding (Herero) and a combination of foraging and farming in a desert habitat (Ju/'hoansi; also see Chapter 2). They represent different settlement patterns with urban apartments and public housing at one extreme and cattle posts or small scattered villages around permanent water holes at the other. Change is ubiquitous, but different in each community. This varies from near instantaneous response to world markets, to longer-term adjustments to suburbanization, out-migration, deindustrialization, and to European colonization.

METHODOLOGY

Because Project AGE involves a cross-cultural research design, it required multiple methods. In each community, participant observation was a continuous activity throughout the project, informing and framing the more targeted data collection strategies. A structured interview was an important component of our research to systematically obtain information on the life course, individual residential and work histories, kinship networks, health status and well-being. A major part of this interview was designed to investigate perceptions of the course of adulthood and changing concerns associated with aging. People were asked to study cards describing realistic people who were of different ages. In each community, somewhat different, community-specific characteristics were used to describe these "persona." Their task was then to place the realistic people

Table 5.1

Project AGE: Communities and Characteristics

African Sites

Ju/'hoansi & Herero

POPULATION: Low & Scattered

Ju/'hoansi- 780 People

Herero - 5000 + with seasonal variation

ECONOMY: Subsistence - No wage

Labor - Minimal technology

Ju/'hoansi - Foraging & Gardening with

craft work & herding for Herero

Herero - Pastoralism (Cattle & Small Animals)

KINSHIP: Familial division of labor

Ju/'hoansi - Bilateral Kindreds &

neolocal residence

Herero - Matrilineal lineages
corporate ownership of cattle

STATE: minimal services and

penetration in the Kalahari

Desert

U.S. Sites

Momence & Swarthmore

POPULATION: Moderate & Nucleated

Momence - 3400 Town & 4000 Hinterland

Swarthmore - 5950 Town

ECONOMY: Wage Labor - Intensive Technology

Momence - Agribusiness;

Light Industry, Service &

Commuting to Chicago

19% Unemployment

Swarthmore - Service,

Commuting to Philadelphia

KINSHIP: Bilateral Kindreds &

Neolocal Residence

Momence - kin proximate

Swarthmore - kin dispersed

STATE: Welfare State - dominates

local economies - state services

for older people

Irish Sites

Clifden & Blessington

POPULATION: Moderate & Nucleated

Clifden - 805 Town & 852 Townlands

Blessington - 1322 Town & 678 Townlands

ECONOMY: Wage Labor

Technologically Intensive

Clifden - Farming, Fishing

Shopkeeping & Tourism -

19% Unemployment

Blessington - Service, Light

Industry, Commuting to Dublin

7% Unemployment

KINSHIP: Bilateral Kindreds &

neolocal residence

Kin usually geographically

proximate, but Clifden high

emigration.

STATE: Welfare State - dominates

local economies - state services

for older people

Asian Site

Hong Kong

POPULATION: High & Nucleated

Hong Kong - 5,000,000

Very Dense

ECONOMY: Wage Labor - Intensive

Technology - Industrial

International Port of

Trade

KINSHIP: Patrilineal Stem

Family; Neolocal Residence;

Extended households for the

old

STATE: - a Colony of the U.K.

Minimal state services for

older people - primarily health

services - state policies dominate

the local economy as well as

international trade

(social personae) into piles representing different age groups or life stages.² Once the sorting task was complete, we then proceeded to use the groupings, defined in the respondent's own terms, to ask questions about each life stage—names of life stage, best things, hardest things, transitions between, and chronological age. In total, between 105 and 210 individuals were interviewed in each community (Ju/'hoansi 105, Herero 170, Clifden 130, Blessington 170, Momence 210, Swarthmore 202, Hong Kong 204).

In our interview, when we focused on the last age group or any age group the respondent had indicated was older (if they had more than one "old age" group), we asked very targeted questions relating to the quality of life of older people. First, we asked each person to think of a real individual living in his or her community who would be in that older age group, and who he or she thought was doing very well for their age. We then recorded information about that individual—age, gender, relationship, last time seen, and most importantly, why they were viewed as doing well. Secondly, we repeated the question, except we wanted an example of an individual who was experiencing difficulties in the same age group. In Africa, the United States and Hong Kong, the responses to our questions are based on older people known to our respondents. In Ireland the questions were changed to "What is good in old age?" and "What is difficult in old age?" The rural Irish were found to be particularly sensitive to being questioned about neighbors. This caused us to alter the questioning here to avoid compromising the people being interviewed in the two Irish communities.

WHAT MAKES FOR A GOOD OLD AGE?

Across our seven sites, there is consistency in the factors that can produce either a good or a difficult old age. Four major issues were mentioned by our respondents as they talked about older people who were experiencing a good or difficult old age, or about the positive and negative aspects of old age: (1) Physical Health and Functioning; (2) Material Security; (3) Family; and (4) Sociality. Consistency, however, does not mean uniformity. Although these concerns were mentioned in each site, we find major differences in the importance and implications of each issue for old age as well as in the specific ways it is manifested. These are clearly linked to the social, economic and political context of each community.

In the sections that follow, we will consider each of the issues, by first hearing what respondents from each site told us about that factor as it influenced either a good or difficult old age. Next, we will examine their relative importance by considering the frequency by which these factors were mentioned as a reason for individuals doing well or poorly. Finally, we will discuss the reasons for similarities and differences in terms of the cultural contexts in which our respondents live.³

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND FUNCTIONING

Rather obvious components of successful aging are health and the physical ability to function as a normal adult. Despite global variation in genetics and lifestyles, in general, aging bodies have more difficulties than young in responding to physical insults and demands. Indeed, respondents at all sites discussed health and functionality as a factor in promoting both a good and a difficult old age (see Figure 5.1).

Physical Factors as Defining a Good Old Age. On the positive side, health and functionality mean having physical capacity to do things. Successful agers are people who have energy, vitality and interest in activities. For Ju/'hoansi and Herero, good physical health means being able to work, being able to see and to be strong.

If he/she still has eyesight and can get food, pick berries, that is good.

Ju/'hoansi

He has strength, cattle, no illness, sour milk, and meat.

Herero

In Ireland, health is seen as declining with age and limiting what activities one can accomplish.

Health. Young is the good life. Takes a lot out of your health in your old age.

Clifden

If you were healthy it would good. You could do what you want.

Blessington

Momence and Swarthmore respondents talked about people who were vigorous and physically able to do many things.

Still does housework, gardens and yard work. Cans, freezes. No health problems.

Momence

Vigorous, still doing volunteer work. She walks, she looks great, she seems younger than she was when working.

Swarthmore

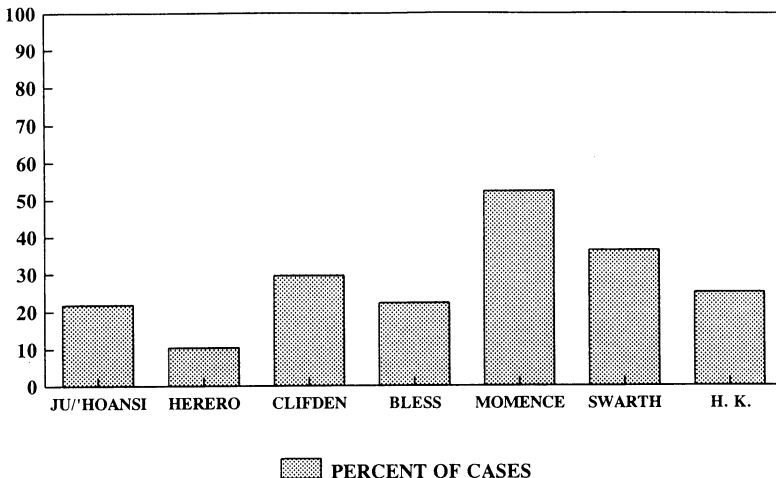
People in Hong Kong also saw good physical health as allowing older individuals to do the things they had always done.

Not physically incapacitated, lots of energy, movement and eating is almost the same as the ordinary young people.

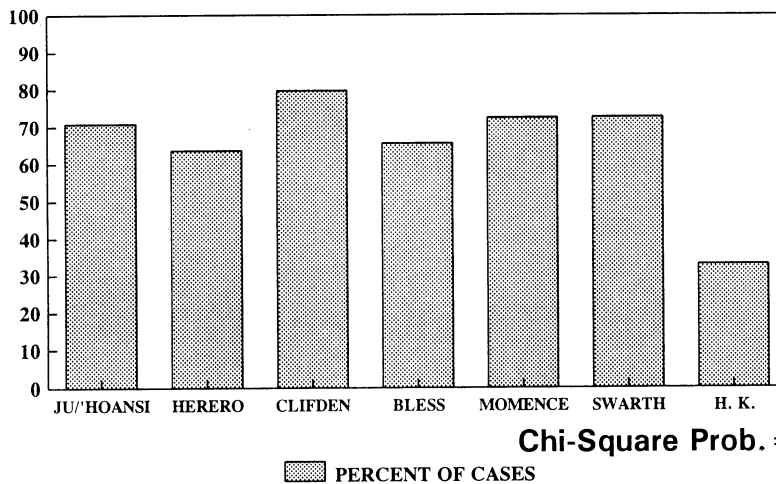
Hong Kong

Figure 5.1
Physical Factors in Defining a Good Old Age

PHYSICAL HEALTH DEFINING A GOOD OLD AGE



PHYSICAL DIFFICULTIES DEFINING A POOR OLD AGE



Chi-Square Prob. = .0000

Physical Factors as Promoting a Difficult Old Age. Physical decline means loss of mobility, frailty and signals a deteriorating quality of life. Full adult status is threatened since one can no longer do what adults usually do in ordinary living. The Ju/'hoansi and Herero tell us that illness, blindness and not being able to walk seriously compromise life because one can no longer work and must just sit.

Not having the ability to walk and if he/she can't see.

Ju/'hoansi

He does nothing, just sits around.

Herero

She can't fetch water, collect wood, go to village meetings, or build a house.

Herero

In Clifden and Blessington, frailty and not being able to get around and do things signal a social death. When one becomes severely disabled, then the support of others is needed.

Can be just like being dead if can't get around.

Clifden

If not able to walk, or had to go to loo (toilet) and couldn't.

Clifden

You can't do things for yourself. Someone has to do things for me.

Blessington

In the U.S. sites, references are to mental as well as physical decline.

She's very crippled up and can't get around on her own and her mind is reverting back to childhood.

Momence

Mind totally gone—no awareness of present—needs full-time care of nurse.

Swarthmore

Hong Kong Chinese see age and illness as linked and as very inconvenient.

Old, sick, her functioning has deteriorated. She is going to die. She is very clumsy.

Hong Kong

Clearly, good health and functioning are an ingredient for successful aging while illness and physical losses promote difficulties. In Figure 5.1 it is apparent that physical difficulties are a major defining feature of a poor old age. With the exception of Hong Kong, over 60 percent of our cases in each site mentioned

health and functionality in giving a reason for a difficult experience of aging.⁴ This is *the* primary reason for a negative old age in these six sites. On the other hand, physical issues are much more modestly represented in definitions of a positive old age. Only in the U.S. sites do we find 30 percent or more of our cases discussing the health status of individuals they see as having a good old age.

To better understand how different social and cultural contexts shape this linkage between health and successful aging, we must turn to the settings in which people live their lives. If deteriorating health can be a threat to adult status, then what tasks must most adults be able to do reasonably well in the context in which they are living? How serious are the consequences of not being able to do that task? What supports are available to compensate for physical inability to carry it out?

The most significant contrasts are between the African sites and those in industrial nations. For Ju/'hoansi and Herero men and women, most of the tasks of daily living require significant stamina (Glascock 1994). With the nearest market town a two-day motor vehicle drive away, food (meat and milk) must be obtained from cattle, in gardens or foraged from the bush (hunting and gathering). In the absence of electricity, gas service or plumbing, firewood and water must be hauled for warmth and cooking. In the dry season, Herero men must lift water by buckets just to keep their herd alive. To visit a relative, they must be prepared to walk several kilometers or ride a donkey there. Roads are dirt tracks and traffic is infrequent and unpredictable. Physical incapacity not only erodes adult status, but it threatens survival itself. In this setting, there is little to compensate for disabilities other than direct personal services supplied by family members. As Rosenberg showed in Chapter 2, when a person experiences limitations on strength and mobility, the relatives, especially children and grandchildren, bring food, water and fuel. Most of the Ju/'hoansi and Herero statements about physical health also referenced food.

On the other hand, people in industrialized nations experience their lives in an abundance of technology and labor-saving devices. Food and commodities are purchased in the marketplace. In the United States, central heating, plumbing and energy services (electricity and gas), are standard features of nearly every dwelling. Daily life in these contexts does not require great stamina and strength, particularly in old age. Adults are expected to work (older people usually are retired), do their marketing and maintain their dwellings (cooking, cleaning and, if necessary, yard work). When physical limitations make those tasks difficult, relatives and friends may offer help or a cleaning or lawn service may be hired. Even when sight, hearing, walking or some basic biological function is threatened, there are compensations in the form of medicine and prostheses (glasses, hearing aids, wheelchairs). Adult status may be tarnished, but people can live a long time with one and even more chronic disabilities.

MATERIAL SECURITY

Wealth along with health set a firm foundation for old age. Indeed, our studies of well-being in old age indicate health and material wealth are the most prominent dimensions of a good old age. In cross-cultural research, however, wealth is far too restrictive a concept to use comparatively. Wealth implies ownership of money and access to resources and commodities. Many peoples of the world, including the Ju/'hoansi, have worked out lifeways that are not based on the accumulation of wealth. Yet the Ju/'hoansi are concerned about certain material things and the comforts they can bring. Consequently, we use a broader construct of "material security" in comparing the seven Project AGE sites. More inclusively, material security refers to subsistence and the assurance that food is available. It also means the satisfaction of basic physical requirements such as shelter, warmth and protection against environmental insults (Figure 5.2).

Material Security Promoting a Good Old Age. Because the economies of each of our sites are quite different, what people perceive as constituting material security is variable. In our African sites, security is very directly defined as food. Ju/'hoansi mention bush food, government-provisioned mealie meal and cattle. Cows, smaller livestock and kin are the Herero's safety net.

If the government helps the old person and there is bush food, the old person has some life.

Ju/'hoansi

She has one hundred cattle, four daughters, three sons, and eats a lot of food.

Herero

In Ireland the welfare state shores up security in old age through pensions and other benefits (see Chapter 18).

Getting the pension and other benefits is really the best thing.

Clifden

Well looked after by government.

Blessington

Our respondents in the United States see pensions, retirement benefits, money and material accumulation as a material basis for a good old age.

Retired, getting good benefits, worked for all of this, has garden tended, three cars, two buildings, has worked hard.

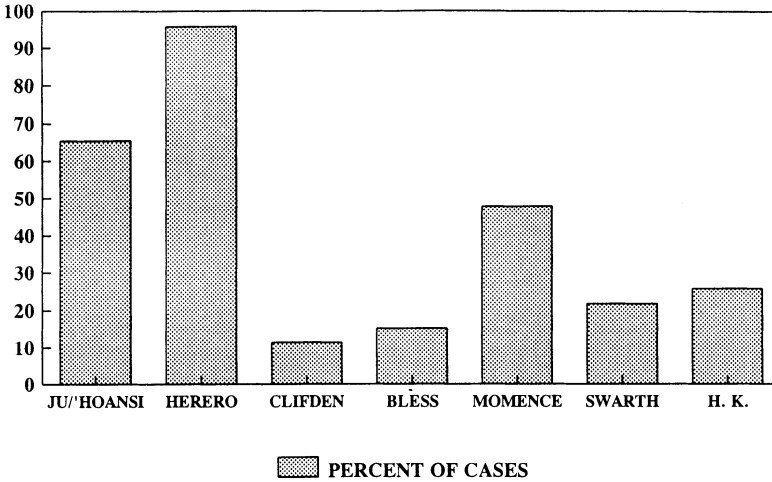
Momence

Always going to bank and putting money in—has good business.

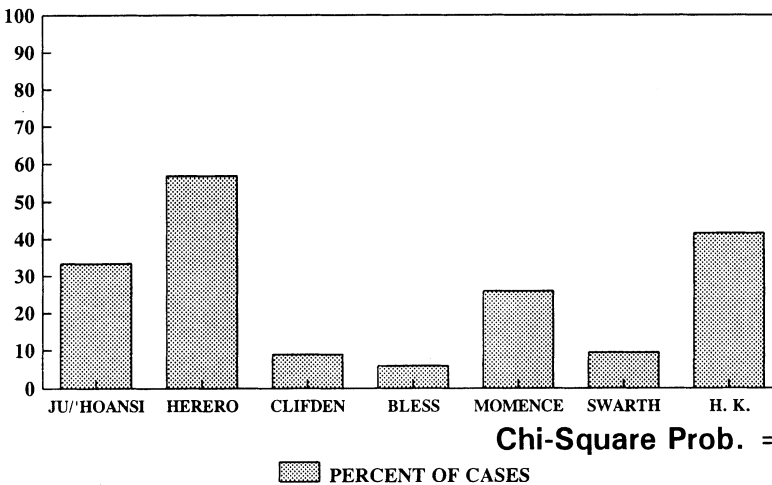
Swarthmore

Figure 5.2
 Material Factors in Defining a Good Old Age

MATERIAL SECURITY DEFINING A GOOD OLD AGE



MATERIAL DIFFICULTIES DEFINING A POOR OLD AGE



Chi-Square Prob. = .0000

Hong Kong respondents are aware of the material effects of social stratification and work.

All our friends are in the older groups. All are well off. I do not know who is financially not well off, unless my maid.

Hong Kong

Material Issues Promoting a Difficult Old Age. Material difficulties can ultimately result in hunger and starvation. Ju/'hoansi and Herero are very direct in seeing the results of resource depletion.

Hunger, thirst, cold.

Ju/'hoansi

All resources used up, hunger.

Herero

In Ireland and the United States the concern is less with food, but is focused on money and maintaining an income once one has retired. In both countries this is through government pensions, Social Security or private pensions and savings.

If you hadn't money to be warm and fed.

Clifden

Not having enough money to manage on their own.

Blessington

Not old enough to draw Social Security and having trouble keeping work, in real trouble.

Momence

Likewise in Hong Kong, material difficulties mean the lack of money. Unlike Ireland and the United States, there is no state-funded old age pension plan. Income is maintained through continuity in work, reliance on children to provide, and if these fail, government welfare.

Their posterity are grown up, but are unable to make a sufficient living. Therefore, their posterity cannot support them. They have to depend on the assistance given by the home for the aged and the government.

Hong Kong

Material security is a rather obvious basis for a good quality of life. However, as we see in Figure 5.2, it is more variable across our sites than was physical health as a component of a good old age. Clearly, for the Herero and Ju/'hoansi,

material security is *the* primary definition of a good old age. In our industrialized sites, we see considerably less emphasis on material issues. Momence is an exception, where almost 50 percent of the older people cited as aging well were doing well for material reasons. In comparison with predominantly middle-class, professional Swarthmore, Momence is far less affluent. Jobs are primarily blue collar and income is more modest. According to the U.S. Census, in 1989 the median income in Momence was around \$25,000 with nearly 40 percent of the households reporting less than \$20,000. Because poverty is a very real possibility, adequate finances are the basis for a good old age. For older people seen as aging well, incomes are stabilized through Social Security and Medicare and expenditures for mortgages and children are much reduced. Consequently, old age can be more financially secure than earlier life stages which were much more prone to uncertainties in getting and keeping blue collar jobs. Poverty is a very real threat when one is unemployed or underemployed.

In undermining old age, material difficulties are most salient among the Herero, Ju/'hoansi, in Hong Kong and Momence. In these four sites, material reasons are the second most prevalent reason given for a problematic old age. Given the Irish Welfare System and the fact that Irish respondents were discussing a generalized life state and not a real person, we would not expect financial concerns to dominate. Also, in more affluent Swarthmore, older people experiencing difficult old ages because of financial problems are comparatively rare.

FAMILY AND KINSHIP

An important part of everyone's safety net is the people they live with, especially family. As with economies, kinship in the seven sites of Project AGE is also variable. The Herero are our only people to have lineages.⁵ Our analysis of Herero herds has revealed that Herero lineages are in all probability matrilineal descent groups in transition to patrilineages. Men are stewards to the herds owned mostly by their sisters and mothers. The Ju/'hoansi kinship system links nuclear families and individuals to a bilateral network of relatives, called a kindred.⁶ Under foraging conditions kindreds were very effective in moving people to scarce resources through extended visits among these kin. In Ireland and the United States, bilateral descent and kindreds are also the norm. Here mobility is high, but the economic role of kindreds is reduced. Hong Kong Chinese, as in China, are noted for the ideal of a patrilineal stem family (see Chapter 24). In this type of family parents cultivate one son who upon marriage will continue to reside with his father and mother, manage a common household and eventually be the principal heir. A filial son and his wife (his parent's daughter-in-law) are expected to look after and provide for the senior generation.

Families as Promoting a Good Old Age. Clearly, families contribute to a good old age. What they contribute, however, differs significantly according to

the roles they play in people's lives. Among the Ju/'hoansi and Herero, families are essential in physical and material support.

God helps that person and the children of that person help him/her.

Ju/'hoansi

She can't milk, fetch water, cook food, fetch firewood. She just waits for her children to do those things.

Herero

In Ireland and the United States, family members play less central roles in providing economic and physical support of their older members. Families in these societies are companions, confidants and people who can be trusted. Home is where intimacy is permitted and kin are enjoyed for their personal growth and individuality.

More time for family—own grown up and gone can concentrate on individuals.

Clifden

Having grandchildren around you.

Blessington

She went through a loss and is holding up fairly well—has lots of grandchildren to keep her busy.

Momence

Because he really enjoys his grandchildren and gets to see them and enjoys them.

Swarthmore

In Hong Kong filial children live with parents and look after their needs. Under these circumstances, an ideal family is based on harmony and respect.

Daughter-in-law shows filial piety to her and she helps in performing housework. Everyone puts forth his strength in the family.

Hong Kong

Families as Promoting a Difficult Old Age. If families provide for a good old age, they can also trigger difficulties. Our respondents tell us problematic aging is mostly found in the absence of a family or the fact that family members do not perform their roles. In our African sites, the absence of or abandonment by children has profound implications for survival.

If no child or no relatives feed her/him.

Ju/'hoansi

No daughters, no wife, no cattle.

Herero

In the United States and Ireland, family difficulties stem from loss of spouses and difficulties with children. Either social relationships are strained or children are not successfully launched into adulthood and return home.

If your family doesn't want you.

Blessington

Kids all moved back home and grandchildren too. He shouldn't have to have children home. No privacy. He should be man of house and not to have kids home.

Momence

His wife died and he was very close to her, it shattered him.

Swarthmore

For Hong Kong Chinese it is the failure to bear a son that foreshadows a difficult time in old age. With no daughter-in-law, there will be no one to look after an older person. Also, children who are not filial make for a trying old age.

Her children are not filial to her. Her children cannot get along with her. For example, when it rains, she tells her son to carry an umbrella, but her son rebukes her and says he does not like to carry an umbrella.

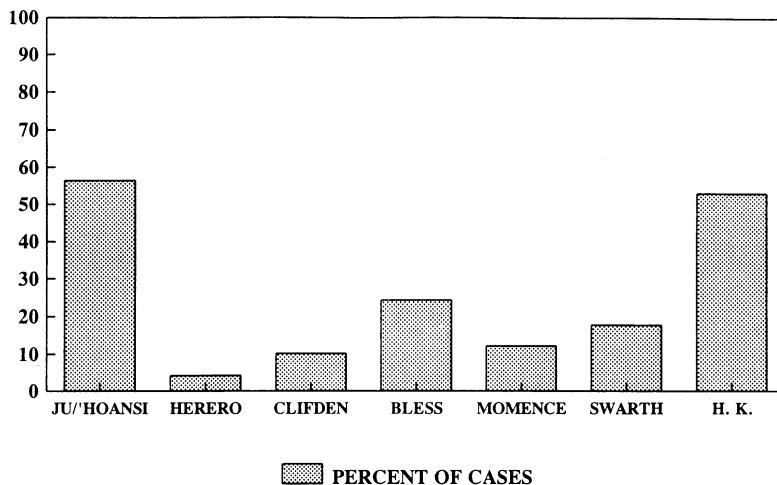
Hong Kong

In comparing the prevalence of family issues in promoting either a good or difficult old age, from Figure 5.3, it is apparent that respondents in Hong Kong and the Ju/'hoansi mention it the most. In Hong Kong, family issues are mentioned the most frequently for both good and difficult aging. The Ju/'hoansi mention family nearly as often as material security issues for good aging and physical problems for poor aging. Herero see family problems characterizing about 30 percent of the people seen as enduring a poor old age, while our respondents in Blessington see family as promoting positive aging in 24 percent of the cases.

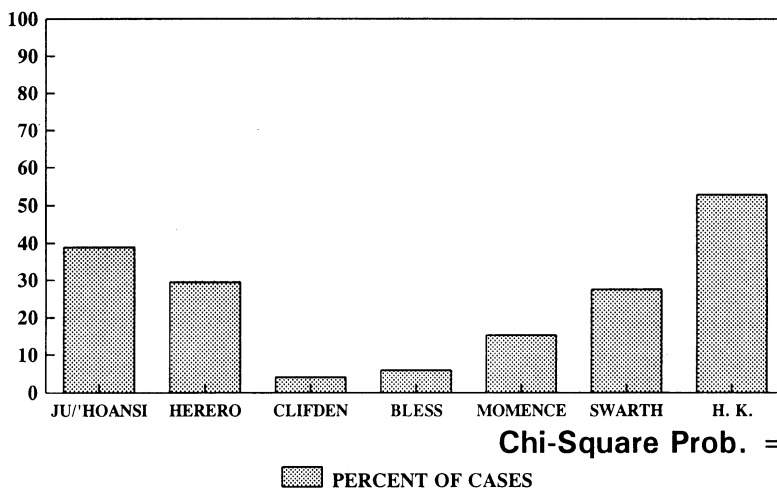
Why do Ju/'hoansi, Hong Kong and, to a lesser extent, Herero respondents see family issues as central to aging well? Conversely, why are families not as dominant in our answers from Ireland and the United States? Everyone has kin, but lives in highly variable families. Culturally, we define who are kin and what relationships we expect to have with them. The Ju/'hoansi see their kin as a flexible family that has figured out how to live and work together. Family members work jointly and share with each other. In a different way, Herero lineages link generations. Cattle ownership ties fathers, sons, wives, mothers, daughters into economic interdependence. Herero relatives are expected to work for each other and especially the senior generation. Under very different circumstances in Hong Kong, the patrilineal stem families have adapted to an urban industrial

Figure 5.3
Family Factors as Defining a Good Old Age

FAMILY DEFINING A GOOD OLD AGE



FAMILY DIFFICULTIES DEFINING A POOR OLD AGE



Chi-Square Prob. = .0012

economy. Parents invest in their children's futures through education. If children's prospects are improved and they are successful, then the chances of a comfortable old age are increased. A son is expected to be filial and, with the help of his wife, to meet the needs of aging parents.

In the United States and Ireland, family members do not usually work with and for each other. Extended, multiple-generation families do not typically share living quarters, but live in autonomous households. Although family members may support each other economically, they do not and are not expected to do so on a long-term basis. Relatives are not co-workers contributing to and relying on a common "family fund." Instead, relatives are important people for their personalities, sociality and common origins. Kin are valued for their trust and the intimacy possible within the family (Fry 1994). Thus, in Swarthmore, Momence, Blessington and Clifden we find that families play different roles in the lives of older people as compared to Botswana or Hong Kong. Consequently, when a frail elder is in need of caregiving, a family crisis arises. Schedules, jobs, finances and living arrangements must be renegotiated.

SOCIALITY

Physical health, material security and family relationships can be seen as a three-legged stool upon which successful aging is assured. Remove one leg and it all falls down. Our respondents in Ireland, the United States and Hong Kong informed us of another leg to the stool which we identify as "sociality." The sources and content of sociality are very different within each site.⁷ Yet in Figure 5.4, it is apparent that sociality is a major reason for aging well in Clifden, Blessington and Swarthmore, and a near second for Momence (after physical health) and for Hong Kong (after family). In our African sites, sociality as a reason for a good old age is almost never mentioned. Sociality refers to qualities which facilitate interaction between an ego and an alter. A very important component of sociality involves affect. Factors such as sentiments, emotion, mood factors and perceptions of qualities that make a social relationship enjoyable or difficult are at the core of sociality. As with the other three factors, sociality is associated with both successful and difficult aging.

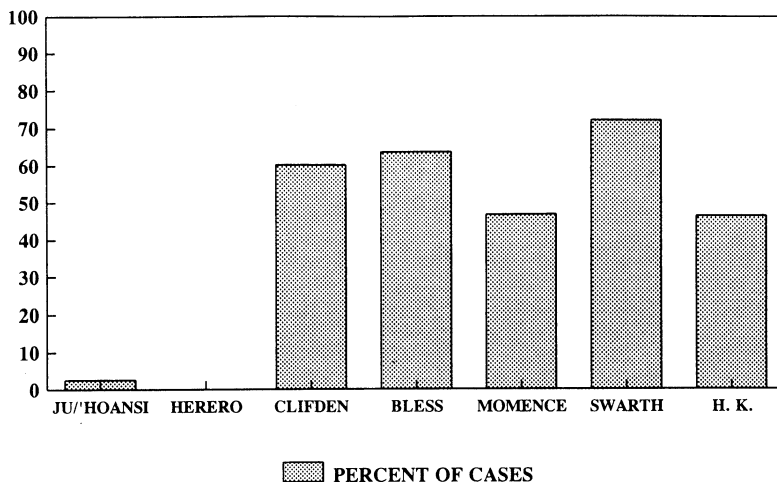
Sociality as a Quality of a Good Old Age. What qualities are socially positive? In Ireland responses to our questions about what is good about old age included contentment, peace, relaxation, toleration, reflection and the freedom to do what you want to do as the prevalent themes. Our Irish respondents are talking about old age as a life stage and not referring to real persons, as in the other sites. Consequently, the qualities mentioned are referring to generalized states older people normatively can look forward to that make this time of life attractive.

Able to look back at your successes, no longer anxious about future.

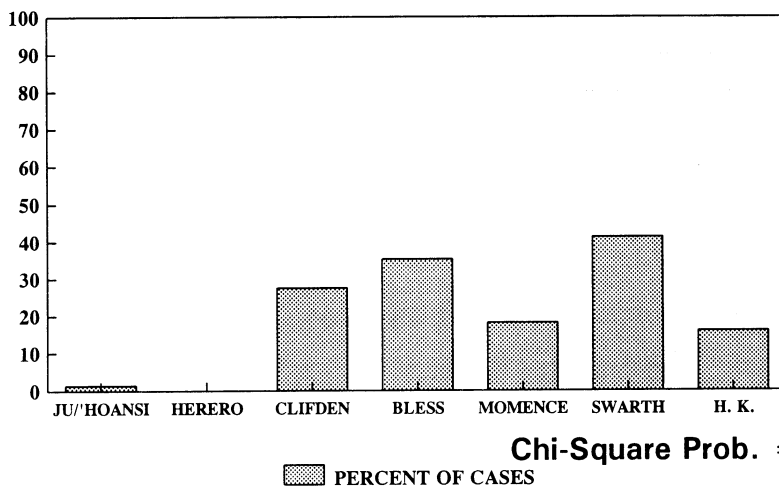
Clifden

Figure 5.4
 Sociality Factors in Defining a Good Old Age

SOCIALITY DEFINING A GOOD OLD AGE



SOCIALITY DEFINING A POOR OLD AGE



Chi-Square Prob. = .0005

Contentment—You're not worried about living and not concerned about dying.

Blessington

Having leisure time and being able to look back on a fruitful life with satisfaction.

Blessington

In the United States and Hong Kong, our respondents told us about real people. Both in Momence and Swarthmore the dominant theme is being "active." Active implies social involvement, visibility and vitality. Along with being active, respondents talked about pleasant personalities, a concern for others and the freedom to do what they want.

Always on the go, never sits around, doesn't let self whither up.

Momence

She's such a wonderful woman, open, vital. She's such fun to be with.

Swarthmore

She finds things to do and is not preoccupied with herself.

Swarthmore

Our Hong Kong respondents told us a different story. Here the themes focused on open-mindedness, toleration of others, not imposing one's opinion on others and not being too nagging. In multiple-generation households toleration is advantageous.

Not too nagging (annoying). Loves her grandchildren. She does not express much opinion of young people. Maybe this is good.

Hong Kong

Sociality as Characteristic of a Difficult Old Age. Sociality has a negative component as well. In Ireland, loneliness and bitterness are potential social downsides of old age.

Become cranky.

Clifden

Loneliness, especially at night.

Blessington

For the real people who are having an affectively difficult old age in the United States, they are inactive, self-centered, disturbed and have bad dispositions and are complainers. They are difficult people who let others know about it.

Not getting out and feeling sorry for self.

Momence

Outspoken and people don't agree with his views.

Momence

She doesn't even go to vote because she's not up to it. She stopped driving.
She stays at home and watches TV.

Swarthmore

The opposite of open-minded is to be a nag. In Hong Kong, people also negatively referenced not knowing how to be a human being. This means being unable to overcome narrow personal interests and take responsibility for others (Ikels 1989).

Don't know how to be a human being.

Hong Kong

Nagging.

Hong Kong

The most striking feature in Figure 5.4 is the observation that social qualities are nearly absent from the African sites while quite prominent for Ireland, United States and Hong Kong. Does this mean that Ju/'hoansi and Herero hide their emotions and social issues in evaluating others? Certainly, the biography of Nisa, a Ju/'hoansi woman (Shostak 1981), and Chapter 2 in this volume are strong evidence to the contrary. The reason people in more complex societies use socially affective criteria in explaining how a person is doing in old age is because of societal scale and the relaxed constraints of kinship. In a small-scale society, the social world is very different. Life is lived in a public arena and is dominated by kin. There is comparatively little social and economic life beyond families. In these small-scale and subsistence-based societies, temperamental variations (good and bad) are well-known, but are not highly significant. Given the structural nature of society, people have to make a go of their relations with kin. Kin may be pleasant and cooperative or just downright mean. The realities of kin-based cooperation outweigh temperament. Old Ju/'hoansi and Herero get the same kind of treatment, despite their interpersonal style, unless they are too far away from an accepted norm. Older, even incapacitated Ju/'hoansi effectively use complaining to remind others that they are still here and to mobilize kin to meet their immediate needs (Chapter 2 this volume). Yet not one Ju/'hoansi respondent in our sample complained about the complainer. Instead they were sympathetic and pointed out the cause and consequences of the difficulty.

In comparison, the lives of people in complex societies are less dominated by kin. The social world beyond kinship is characterized by a tremendous variety of organizations, institutions and social roles. In fact, the majority of people in one's social world are not relatives. The economic role a family plays in people's lives is diminished. Kinship, especially beyond the household, is less restrictive.

Families see their relatives as persons with personalities to be enjoyed, tolerated or avoided. Relatives and acquaintances don't have to put up with one's eccentricities, no matter what. Consequently, people in these more complex societies encounter situations in which personal qualities of temperament, style, affect or sentiment figure more prominently in defining interpersonal relationships. Thus, respondents in Ireland and the United States told us about the social qualities that made an older person attractive or trying.

Hong Kong, however, demands special comment. Here certain kin are important economically, especially the stem families. Sons not chosen to live with their parents form their own nuclear families. Daughters join their husbands' families. Within the stem family it can be difficult to maintain harmonious relationships under crowded living conditions and multigenerational households. Sociality is fostered through open-mindedness, and tolerance makes life more pleasant. Pushing one's own interests at the expense of others and nagging make domestic life more difficult.

VARIATIONS ON A GOOD OLD AGE

Have we found an answer? Is a good old age possible? If it is, what is it? Good and old are not by definition an oxymoron. In each Project AGE site, individuals were able to point out people who were having a pretty good time in their senior years. Yes, we have found answers, but not a singular solution.

Africa. For the Ju'hoansi the most important ingredient is food, material security, especially followed by kin who work together and have the physical strength to provide for each other. Threatening this good old age is declining strength and illness which, when combined with a lack of or an uncooperative family, results in hunger and starvation. Herero also find their answer in material security—cattle. Inability to work compromises continued care of cattle which results in fewer cows, milk, goats and a difficult time in old age.

Ireland. Old age is good, since it is a time of contentment, reduced responsibility and freedom to do what you want with good health and government pensions. The biggest threats are declining health, potential loneliness and needing someone to look after you.

United States. Being vital, active and involved with others are the signs of a good old age. Good health and comfortable pensions do not hurt either. Health problems can erode success in one's elder years, bringing a social withdrawal and a more self-centered old age.

Hong Kong. Family and social qualities which show tolerance and open-mindedness are the most important for a comfortable old age. Families provide for the material necessities of life. Threats come from difficulties within the family which result in material compromises.

Diversity in the meaning of goodness in aging is exactly what we should anticipate from disparate cultural contexts. We now return to the contexts in which old age is experienced to interpret their significance for our understanding

of aging. Although Project AGE sites are located in vastly different culture areas with major differences in economics, political integration and kinship, we find systematic variation in the scale of the society in which each community is located. Hong Kong is clearly the greatest in scale followed by Swarthmore, Momence, Blessington, Clifden, Herero and finally Ju/'hoansi at the smallest in scale.

Scale is not to be confused with modernization (see Part III). Increases in scale see community size grow along with an increase in interdependency between people of different kin groups and with other social units. At the core of this process is the evolution of hierarchical political institutions and centralization of power in a state. States function to maintain order, stimulate capital wealth and to reduce risks associated with production for their citizens. States promote a political economy which can be predatory on local economies through taxes and tribute. Bureaucracy becomes the trademark of the state. Markets rationalize and penetrate local economies, becoming the safety net where most of the essentials for life are purchased.

Is an increase in scale and state formation bad for older people? Within the past half century we have seen vast increases in scale marked by envisioned global villages linked to a global economy. Yet, life is lived at a local level. As seen in the Project AGE communities, globalization of change and marked increase in scale are not experienced uniformly. Consequently, for successful aging we find a mix of good and bad features. To further understand this we consider economic, social and political issues.

Economics and Material Culture. Increases in wealth and reduction in subsistence risks would appear to benefit all people. Certainly, the Ju/'hoansi and Herero see material issues as central in determining whether old age will be good or bad. In industrial economies material concerns diminish as factors perceived as shaping the quality of old age. However, the case of Momence reminds us that wealth is not uniformly distributed. For those at the edge of poverty, one mistake and material resources become a major problem, especially in retirement. On the other hand, material culture and labor-saving devices have the potential of improving the quality of life for people who have access to them.

Family and Kin. Families are the safety net for older people in need of caregiving (Draper and Keith 1992; Keith 1992; Troll 1986). Observers have been rather alarmed by the changes in families in the industrialized world. Fertility has declined, resulting in smaller households and fewer relatives to do the work of family. Furthermore, families no longer have the same kind of control over their members as we see in the tribal world. Kindreds whose members work for wages are not as economically interdependent as lineages herding cattle and relying on the family fund. Fewer kin who are bonded in a more volunteeristic way would appear not to favor a supportive old age (Nydegger 1983).

Are the changes in kinship really detrimental to older people? In Africa and Hong Kong, families are dominant institutions in people's lives. Your kinship network is your safety net. By comparison, in Ireland and the United States,

respondents talk about the *quality* of family relationships. With smaller kindreds, it is possible to invest in these people as individuals. As people become more individuated, sociality becomes more central in maintaining social relationships. Here smaller, individuated kinship networks bound together by affect are not seen as contributing to a bad old age. The low frequency with which the quality of family relations is mentioned for either a good or bad old age is striking for Ireland and the United States. Kin are not the safety net. Instead most needs (goods and services) are purchased in the market. With increased wealth and state-backed income maintenance programs, the need for a family fund declines. Thus, the changes in kinship do not result in a problematic old age except, potentially, in the last year of life. With declines in physical health and inability to purchase what is required, the smaller and more fragile kindred can be placed in the role of caregivers. Once that happens, the unthinkable has happened and the older person “becomes a burden to her/his family.”

Politics of Old Age. To answer how beneficial or detrimental states are for older people, we need to know if any of the political economy is directed toward the welfare of its older citizens (e.g., Chapter 11 this volume). Through our Project AGE communities we can see the effects of four states and their policies in the daily life of people (see Chapter 18 this volume for an expanded analysis). Botswana is a fairly young African nation with a youthful population. In the isolated Kalahari desert the effects of state policies are manifested in free health clinics, veterinary services, food distribution, a primary school and government wells. Older people are not targeted as a special group in need of attention. On the other hand, Ireland and the United States have followed the path of most of the industrial democracies of Europe and North America. Welfare states, such as the United States and Ireland, recognize that if any significant part of the population is denied access to the market, the state and especially the economy do not benefit. Income transfer programs such as state pensions or Social Security guarantee that older people who are no longer working can still purchase their necessities. State-managed insurance programs such as Medicare or a free public health service for older people gives access to another part of the market. In the United States the Older Americans Act has established an “aging enterprise,” a network of services such as senior centers, congregate meals and meals on wheels (Estes 1993).

Hong Kong is a colony established to facilitate trade and generate wealth. The Hong Kong government has largely avoided income transfer programs for older people. This is based on assumptions about the Chinese stem family and the support it ideally gives to the parental generation (Ikels 1993). Only health care is state supported and is provided to all citizens regardless of age.

Our evaluation of the effects of increases in societal scale is mixed. In state-level societies, all citizens potentially benefit from increases in wealth and risk reduction. On the other hand, states are associated with marked social stratification and some people are better off than others. An increase in scale can bring

about profound changes in a community as development occurs and outsiders move in and new linkages are made (See Chapter 18 this volume for what happened in Blessington). Even in states where a significant part of the political economy is targeted for older people, there are costs. When age becomes the basis for entitlement, “old” becomes a bureaucratic category. Stereotyping the old as poor, disabled and dependent masks the variability and potential of most older adults. Within Project AGE sites, it is in the largest-scale communities (suburban and urban) where older adults are most likely to become socially invisible.

COMMUNITY CONTEXTS AND SUCCESSFUL AGING

Where should I live in old age? Project AGE anthropologists are often asked this question as are other researchers who have investigated aging and diverse cultural contexts. From Sun City to ethnic enclaves to exotic cultures, we have been in search of Shangri-La. Unfortunately, there is no Shangri-La. It would be ill-advised to recommend one or even two of the Project AGE communities as a haven in old age. Likewise a ranking of the anthropologically best retirement spots of the world is not recommended except as a real estate promotion in the Sunday paper.

In our cross-cultural study, we heard from respondents in each community that there are strengths and positive aspects for all residents. For all sites, health and functionality are the singular factor promoting unsuccessful aging. Health problems and disabilities detract from a good old age and can have profound consequences for quality of life. Sociality, making an older person socially attractive, is seen as promoting successful aging in large-scale societies. Here people are viewed as individual personalities and their social fields are much more fluid and filled with choices. In small-scale societies, people are seen as members of collectivities (kin groups) with whom they live, work and give and receive support. Under these circumstances being a nice, socially attractive personality is not seen as a factor in a relationship or successful aging.

On the other hand, all cultural contexts have their weaknesses as well. Where the Ju/'hoansi have little wealth and simple technology, compensation exists in the form of personal support from family and kin. In marked contrast, in Swarthmore, where wealth and technology are quite adequate, kin support is less available and less acceptable because of mobility and values placed on independence. Shangri-La is only a myth. All we have are human communities that are variable in environment, economics, social life, values and the nation-state of which they are a part. Our best advice about selecting a place in which to grow old is to choose the community you now call “home.” Live in it for a long time and invest in its social relationships. Your investment will pay off in an old age in which you are perceived and supported in individual terms, not as an “old person.”

NOTES

The research upon which this chapter is based was supported by grant #AG 03110 from the National Institute on Aging. The authors acknowledge the work of Joanne Adams, Rebecca Morrow-Nye and Edwina Jones, all graduate students at Loyola University, who were involved in the complex task of managing the textual responses on which this chapter is based, and in reading the text to assure comparability in the themes used to describe successful aging.

1. Project members met on a regular basis to discuss research design and problems of analysis. Also, the project co-directors visited each community while the research was in process.

2. For instance, a respondent might place a persona describing a man as working, married with two preschool grandchildren, and active in the chamber of commerce in a "Late Middle Age" group. In contrast, the same respondent might place another persona describing a man as retired, widowed with great-grandchildren and living in a nursing home in a "Late Old Age" group.

3. In responding to our questions, a respondent could and often did name more than one factor which contributed to a good or poor old age. Analysis of the data subsequently permitted the respondents' answers to be placed in more than one category. In Tables 5.1 and 5.2, the bar graph represents the percent of respondents who mentioned the respective factors.

4. For people in Hong Kong, family factors are far more important in promoting a good old age and can be responsible for a poor old age. Health and functionality are also important in a good old age, but health and mobility problems also mean that family (a daughter-in-law) becomes a caregiver.

5. In the past the Herero have been identified as double unilineal (tracing descent through both male and female linkages).

6. Kindreds are a way of reckoning who your relatives are and to whom one owes support and can expect support from on the basis of kinship. Kindreds are a sibling-centered circle of kin defined by descent and bounded by a degree of collaterality as calculated by the distance of a cousin. Rarely does a kindred extend beyond a fourth or fifth cousin. Within this circle of kin are lineal kin (parents, children and extensions thereof) and collateral kin (siblings, uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces). Kindreds are associated with bilateral descent.

7. Because sociality is a composite dimension consisting of five subthemes, a comment must be made about the meaning of sociality. Such themes as having social qualities that make a person easy to get along with: social connectedness (loneliness in the negative); states of mind; or being an active, outgoing person are clearly dimensions of sociality. Also included are responses which describe a person as having leisure time, the ability to do what they want, and who have accomplished something. The reasoning behind this is that individuals who are perceived as leisured, confident and enjoying life are socially positive and are endowed with socially positive characteristics. In the negative, people who are not leisured are pressured and potentially stressed.

Across the five sites in which sociality appears as a reason in defining a positive or negative old age, we find differences in the frequencies in which the subthemes are mentioned. In Ireland, with more normative answers, sociality defines a good old age primarily as leisure and states of mind (82–83 percent of the response category). In the

United States, being active, leisure and states of mind define between 85 and 92 percent of sociality. In Hong Kong, 82 percent of sociality consists of social qualities and states of mind. In defining a negative old age, in Ireland between 77 and 88 percent of sociality is loneliness. For the United States 80 percent of negative sociality is defined in terms of loneliness and states of mind. Finally, in Hong Kong, social qualities form a core of this category (39 percent), followed by states of mind and loneliness.