Children’s Attitudes Toward the Elderly in Thailand and the United States

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ABSTRACT

Children’s attitudes toward the elderly in Thailand and the United States were examined. A total of 300 children between the ages of 7 and 12, 150 from the urban areas of Thailand and 150 from a middle class area in the United States were randomly selected to serve as the sample. The test, Children’s Attitudes Toward the Elderly (1980), the Word association and Semantic Differential subtests, were used to assess attitudes. Chi square and ANOVA statistics were used to analyze the data.

The results indicated no significant differences in reported knowledge of elders within the family, nor reported interactions with elders. More Thai children, however, reported knowledge of an elder outside of the family than children in the United States. Thai children also felt more negatively about growing old themselves. Young people were rated more positively by the Thais than by children in the United States. The young were rated as more helpful, cleaner, prettier and good by Thais than by Americans. Thais children viewed old people as healthier and more good than children in America, and Americans rated old people as more wonderful and friendly than Thais.

Although the results should be viewed with caution, as in any cross-cultural research, the conclusion can be reached that Thai children view young people more positively than American, and there were few differences between the groups’ ratings of old people.

In contemporary American society there seems to exist a general and pervasive negative attitude toward age and the elderly. Overall, the results of studies exploring attitudes toward the old and aging support the idea that being old in the United States of America is perceived of as less desirable than being young (Bennet, 1976; Harris, 1975; Caspi, 1984).

McTavish (1971), in a review of over 300 research studies, concluded, “Stereotyped views of the elderly are prevalent and are uncovered in various studies. These include the views that old people are generally ill, tired, not sexually interested, mentally slower, forgetful and less able to learn new things, grouchy, withdrawn, feeling sorry for themselves, less likely to participate in activities (except for religion), isolated in the least happy or fortunate time of life, unproductive and deficient in various combinations and with varying emphasis” (p. 90).

Children too, seem to view aging and the elderly negatively. Jantz, Seefeldt, Galper and Serock (1977) found children, as young as three years of age, fearful that they too, would someday become old. Thomas and Yamamoto (1975), studying over 1,000 children in grades 6 through 12, found an overriding impression that school age children share in the general negative attitude toward old age.

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When children between the ages of 3 and 11 were asked how they would feel when they were old, they gave few positive responses (Jantz, Seefeldt, Galper & Serock (1976). These children also tended to give stereotyped responses and express preference for being with and doing things with younger, rather than older people.

Some believe that negative attitudes toward age and the elderly are unique to the United States. A level birth and immigration rate is accompanied by an aging population. The older population, which now numbers about 39 million, is projected to double by the year 2025 (Fowles, 1984).

Not only is our population aging, but it is becoming increasingly age segregated. The young and old segregate themselves through housing patterns and activity selection. Children live far from grandparents, and frequently cannot name an older person outside of their family (Seefeldt, Jantz, Galper & Serock, 1977). Cut off from the elderly, children in our culture are believed less able to accept the aging process as normal and more likely to believe the myths and stereotypes of aging and the elderly (Bronfenbrenner, 1970).

On the other hand, de Beauvoir (1973) describes nations and cultures throughout time and the world that perceived and treated the old in negative ways. The negative attitudes held by people everywhere are believed an attempt by the young to shield themselves from the fact of their own eventual aging and death (Butler & Lewis, 1984). Neugarten, as well, (1974) believes an ambivalence toward age and the elderly is not specific to any one culture, but the result of trying to distance oneself from their own mortality.

Seefeldt (1984) explored the attitudes of children toward elders in the cultures of the mainland United States, Paraguay, the Aleutian Islands and Australia and found support for the idea that there may be a general, universal ambivalence toward age and the elderly. Children in the cultures studied, did hold more positive attitudes toward young people than old, and rated the elderly as passive, often ill, and poor. Arnoff, Leon, & Lorge (1964) also concluded that people in cultures, other than that of the United States, hold negative attitudes toward age and the elderly.

Nevertheless, the belief exists that negative attitudes toward age and the elderly are not prevalent in every culture. People in the far East, for instance, are believed to revere elders and age (Moore, 1974; Osgood, 1951).

This belief has not been documented, however, The purpose of this study was to compare children’s attitudes toward the elderly in Thailand and the United States. The questions were: Are there differences between Thai and American children’s knowledge of the elderly? How do Thai children’s feelings about the elderly compare with those of children in the United States? And how do children’s perceptions about their own aging compare in the United States and Thailand?

Certainly there are many socioeconomic and cultural differences between Thailand and the United States. These differences have been explained in a number of ways (Cogwill, 1968; 1972; Hanks, 1959; Sharp & Hanks, 1978). For example, the American culture is believed youth oriented; Thai culture responsive to values associated with age.

The American family is characterized as a nuclear type, but the Thai family is often extended. Thai society is a kinship system. Whether in the rural or urban areas of Thailand, children frequently live with or ear their grandparents. And although it is becoming more common in the urban areas of Thailand to permit other than a family member to care for an elder, the old are most often cared for by the family. In America, grandparents frequently live far from grandchildren, and others frequently assume responsibility for infirm elders.