Korean Children’s Attitudes Toward the Elderly*

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ABSTRACT

Children’s attitudes toward the elderly in Korea were examined. A total of 480 children, 240 in the rural area of the Kyunggi Province and 240 from the urban area of Seoul were randomly selected from kindergarten, second, fourth and sixth grades of elementary schools. The test, Children’s Attitudes Toward the Elderly (The CATE), (1980), the Word Association, Semantic Differential, and parts of the Pictures Series, were used to assess attitudes. Chi-Square and the Hotelling t-test statistics were used to analyze the data.

Korean children, those living in both rural and urban areas, evaluated YOUNG PEOPLE more positively than OLD PEOPLE. On the total score of the Semantic Differential, and on six of the individual items, YOUNG PEOPLE were rated more positively than OLD PEOPLE. The young were rated as more helpful, healthier, cleaner, prettier, happier, and richer than the old. Old people were evaluated as more good and friendlier. There were no differences on the items wonderful/terrible and right/wrong.

The results indicated few differences between rural and urban Korean children’s attitudes toward the elderly. Children in the rural areas of Korea felt more positive about their own aging than the urban children and were able to give an alternative name for elder. They also rated elders as happier and richer than urban children, and young people as friendlier and more right.

People the world over share the fact of growing old. Nevertheless, the experience of aging and being old is believed different in each country for societies create their own meaning of age. Through its institutions, values, and culture, each society defines, for itself, the exact meaning of age and the elderly (de Beauvoir, 1973, p. 24).

It is frequently presumed that age and the elderly are valued in Eastern cultures, or in stable, primitive societies, and that only in “Westernized” or modernized cultures are negative attitudes toward age and the elderly found (Eisdorfer, 1981, p. xv). Modernized cultures, such as that of the United States, are believed to define old age as the least fortunate, unproductive, and deficient time of life. Research supports the premise that in the United States, an overall negative attitude toward the old and aging exists (Arluke & Levin, 1984; Harris, 1975; McEvansh, 1971).

Children share these negative attitudes toward age and the elderly (Seefeldt, 1984; Thomas & Yamamoto, 1975). When children between the ages of 3 and 11 were asked how they would feel when they were old, few gave positive responses. Children in this study also gave stereotyped responses about the old, describing elders as sick, tired, and ugly (Seefeldt & Jantz, 1979).

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Whether negative attitudes toward the elderly are universal to the human experience, or vary by culture, is not clear. The purpose of this study was to explore Korean children's attitudes toward the elderly.

In Korea, it is believed that society considers that age and the elderly are of high value. The old are believed to be respected. Not only are the elderly valued, but they are actually revered. Longevity, expressed in a set of 10 symbols seen in the art of Korea, is believed the greatest of all possessions (Covell, 1982).

"To grow old in Korea has some advantage, for age is respected" (Osgood, 1951, p. 114). Individuals are addressed using the differentiations of "elder" and "younger." The elder males are respectfully called "grandfather," and women once past menopause, "may do much as they please" (Osgood, 1951, p. 114).

Further, in both rural and urban areas of Korea, the extended family is the norm. Even in the urban area of Seoul, children live with their grandparents; if not in the same household, at least near by. The Korean family is based on kinship and interdependence. The family, rather than others, assumes responsibility for the aged.

Thus, Korean children should hold positive attitudes toward the elderly reflecting the general values of the culture. Nevertheless, there is little documentation either to support or reject the idea that Korean children view age and the elderly positively. The purpose of this study was to examine Korean children's attitudes toward the elderly. The questions asked were: 1) Do Korean children hold positive or negative attitudes toward the elderly? and 2) Are there differences between rural and urban Korean children's: a) knowledge of elders; b) contact with elders; c) feelings about growing old themselves; and d) attitudes toward young and old people?

**Method**

A one-group, posttest only method was employed to describe Korean children's attitudes toward old and young people. A two-group, posttest only method was used to compare rural and urban Korean children's attitudes toward the elderly. Chi square and Hotelling t statistics were used to analyze the data.

**Subjects**

The subjects for the study were 480 children randomly selected from two kindergartens and four elementary schools located in Seoul and the rural area of Yangju Kun, Kyunggi Province. Seoul is the capital city of Korea and has a population of over 9,000,000. It is the educational and scientific center of South Korea. The culture is urban and industrialized.

The rural area, Kyunggi Province, is located just north of Seoul. The population of the province is around 74,000. Here people still live in small houses with thatched roofs, clay walls, and paper partitions. Farming, generally done with traditional crude tools, remains the usual occupation.

The children were primarily from middle class backgrounds in both the rural and urban areas. Only 8% of the children in Seoul and 4% from the rural province, were from professional families. The majority of the children in Seoul were from families whose parents were employed as clerical, marketing, and factory workers, or in service-oriented occupations. In the rural areas, the parents of the children were employed in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, or were factory workers.