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

CAROL SEEFELDT* and UNHAI RHEE AHN**

ABSTRACT

Children’s attitudes toward the elderly in the cultures of Seoul, Korea, those of children of Korean heritage in the United States, and Anglo children in the United States were assessed. Two subtests, the Word Association and Semantic Differential of Children’s Attitudes Toward the Elderly (The CATE) were used to assess attitudes toward the elderly.

The results suggest that children’s attitudes toward the elderly are complex and multi-dimensional. Children of Korean heritage in the United States rated the old more positively on the total score of the SD. These children, as did the Anglo children, rated the old as healthier and cleaner than did children in Seoul. Children of Korean heritage and those in Seoul viewed elders more frequently as right, good and friendly.

* Institute for Child Study, Department of Human Development, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742-1131, U.S.A.
** Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea.

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There were differences between the groups in the ratings of the concept YOUNG PEOPLE as well. Children in Seoul rated the young as cleaner and more wonderful than the other groups, and those of Korean heritage rated young people as happier. The Anglo children in the United States, however, felt more positive than the other groups about their own aging.

These results, although mixed, seem to support the idea that culture can influence children's attitudes toward the elderly. The study can serve to generate hypotheses about the role of culture and the source of children's attitudes.

Introduction

People the world over share the reality 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).

The institution of the school is paramount in the formation of children's attitudes, including those toward the elderly. In school, the attitudes of the general culture are transmitted to children. Attitudes toward age and the elderly are openly taught as well as modeled by significant others (Allport, 1954; Mead, 1979).

It is presumed that the overall negative attitudes toward the old in the United States will be those transmitted in the school (Arluke & Levin, 1984; Harris, 1975; McTavish, 1971). Children in the culture of the United States have been found to view the old with overall negative feelings (Seefeldt, 1984; Seefeldt & Jantz, 1979; Thomas & Yamamoto, 1975).

Some believe that this general negative view of age and the elderly is unique to the modernized Western culture of the United States (Eisdorfer, 1981, p. xv). The assumption is that age and the elderly are valued in eastern cultures, or in stable, primitive societies, and only in western cultures are children exposed to negative attitudes toward age.

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 children's attitudes toward the elderly in the cultures of Korea, of children of Korean heritage living in the United States, and of Anglo children in the United States.

The questions asked were:

What attitudes do children of Korean heritage living in the United States, Anglo children in the United States, and those of children living in Seoul, Korea hold toward their own aging and the elderly? Specifically, the children's knowledge of and contact with elders, their feelings toward their own aging, and attitudes toward the elderly, were explored and compared among the three groups.

Certainly there are many differences between the culture of Seoul, Korea and the mainland United States. In addition, children of Korean heritage in the United States are assumed to find a value system in the school and community that differs from that of children in the United States not of Korean heritage (Choy, 1979; Michaels, 1985).

These differences have been explained in a number of ways. The culture of Korea, unlike that of the United States, is believed responsive to the values associated with age. Longevity, expressed in a set of ten symbols seen in the art of Korea, is believed the greatest of all possessions (Covell, 19823).

"To grow old in Korea has some advantage, for age is represented" (Osgood, 1951, p. 114). Individuals are addressed using the differentiations of "elder" and "younger." The elder males are often called "grandfather" although they are not actually family members (Osgood, 1951, p. 114). The belief in ancestor worship is