

# Gender differences in expressed satisfaction with care from adult children among older rural Yoruba

Funmi Togonu-Bickersteth\*

Department of Psychology, Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

## Abstract

*This paper examines the role of gender in the types of assistance received and the satisfaction expressed with the assistance by 30 older males and 30 older females in two rural Yoruba communities of Nigeria. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews. Results indicate that both groups receive instrumental and non-instrumental support from adult children and that females are more frequently satisfied with the assistance. Both sexes report greater satisfaction with assistance received from daughters than from sons. Older females' satisfaction with assistance from children was also associated with a positive evaluation of old age, whereas no such association was found for the males. The paper concludes, in accordance with earlier authors, the centrality of adult females in elder care and the important role of supportive adult children to older women's feelings of generativity and ego integrity.*

## Introduction

Studies conducted in various parts of Africa have consistently reported that contrary to the fear that modernization may have weakened children's commitment to caring for older parents, children still remain the bulwark of informal social welfare support to elders. This has been found to be the case in Ghana (Apt & Katila, 1994), Zimbabwe (Adamchak, Wilson, Nyan-guru & Hampson, 1991), Kenya (Cattell, 1990) and Nigeria (Togonu-Bickersteth, 1987a,b, 1988, 1989; Peil, 1991, 1992). This paper examines the subjective evaluation of older Yoruba in rural areas about the assistance which they receive from children and gender differences in the satisfaction expressed with the assistance received.

It has been suggested that an expectation of and a need for support in old age are important contributors to high fertility in West Africa (Caldwell, 1976). Parents are expected to "invest" in their children with the hope that such investments will yield dividends when the parent is old and requires assistance from the children. Hence, disabled children are viewed as "poor investment" and are often neglected by their parents (Togonu-Bickersteth & Odebiyi, 1985), while childlessness in old age has been linked to isolation, ill-health and poverty (Peil, 1995).

However, there is evidence that pressure to "invest" in children's welfare, or to make sacrifices for their wellbeing is greater on females than on males in Yoruba rural communities, even though the children are deemed to "belong" to

the father's clan. This need to sacrifice is inculcated early in the life of females when a young girl is expected to assist her mother in the raising of younger siblings and to serve as her mother's lieutenant in performing the various domestic chores of the household. As an adult married woman, particularly in a polygamous family arrangement typical of the Yoruba, it is expected that she will contribute to the family's corporate economic wellbeing but that her primary responsibility is to make sacrifices for the upbringing of the children. Such sacrifices might include staying in an unhappy marriage relationship, foregoing a potentially fulfilling business or career in order to stay close to home, and selling clothing and jewellery in order to provide funds for school fees, or to meet critical medical expenses of her children. For the Yoruba, no sacrifice is considered too great for a woman to make for her children whereas no such expectation is held for men.

The justification for this cultural expectation, that women should make all the sacrifices, is hinged on the belief that when children reach adulthood and become economically independent, they tend to show preferential treatment to their mothers as compared with their fathers. Many of the people's proverbs and idioms support this expectation. Popular anecdotes also abound which testify to the veracity of this justification. It is therefore reasonable to deduce that old women will have high expectations that their adult children will provide for their care in old age. Reports from developed countries suggest that even in developed societies, older women have higher expectations for help from children than do their male counterparts (Seelbach, 1977; Rossi, 1986). It is further reasonable to assume that among rural Yoruba of Nigeria, where there are as yet no formalized social welfare services for the old and where polygyny is predominant, the expectation for help from children will be higher for women than for men.

However, the current economic downturn in the country with a spiralling cost of living, a high rate of unemployment, and the removal of government subsidies on social and municipal services, may have reduced the capabilities of the adult children to provide remittances to their ageing parents in rural areas. The recent hike in transport fares may also affect the frequency of visits to rural kin (Togonu-Bickersteth, 1995). This situation is likely to affect elderly females more than elderly males.

Various reports have pointed to the disadvantaged position of rural females *vis-à-vis* males. In rural areas, although women work longer hours than men, they earn less than 40 %

\* Address correspondence to

Dr Funmi Togonu-Bickersteth, Department of Psychology, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

E-mail: togonub@oauife.edu.ng

of the average rural income: over 72 % of the rural women reported an annual income of below N2 000 (less than \$25,00) (Togonu-Bickersteth, Akinnawo & Akinyele, 1996). A rural woman, through her working life, has limited access to and control of productive resources such as land, credit and technology (WHO, 1996). This gender disparity in economic control becomes even more accentuated as a woman ages and hence has a need to receive assistance from adult children.

This paper emanates from a large, ongoing study whose purpose was to examine the patterns and consequences of social support networks of older Yoruba in south-western Nigeria. The paper reports on an analysis of gender differences in the type of assistance received from adult children by older residents of two rural Yoruba communities in Ondo State. An attempt is also made to understand the role of the parents' and the children's gender in the subjective evaluation of support, and whether there is a relationship between the level of satisfaction with assistance received and the older persons' subjective evaluation of their old age.

## Method

A snowball sampling technique was used to draw a purposive sample of persons aged 60 years and above, 30 males and 30 females (N = 60), who were subsequently interviewed. The study was exploratory and no specific hypotheses were set but the researchers had a hunch that older females would report receiving more assistance from adult children than older males, although as a result of the current economic hardship they would experience lower satisfaction with the assistance than their male counterparts; consequently older females would paint a comparatively negative evaluation of old age than would older males.

The principal data collection technique was in-depth, tape-recorded interviews. Data were collected in July of 1995 by three trained interviewers. A simple interview guide was used to ensure that the relevant topics were discussed, although the elderly respondents were encouraged to talk at length about other issues relevant to them. All interviews took place in the respondents' usual place of residence.

Information was also gathered on the age, sex and marital status of the respondents, as well as the number of children, the occupation and geographical location of each child, and the type of assistance that a child was providing, if at all.

Satisfaction with the level of assistance was directly measured by asking the questions: "How satisfied are you with the care/assistance you are receiving from your sons?" "How satisfied are you with the assistance you are receiving from your daughters?" Subjective evaluation of old age was measured by asking respondents: "In general, how satisfactory would you describe your old age?" – i.e., how "happy" a time is old age for the respondent.

## Sample profile

### *Females*

The mean age of the females was 65.1 years (SD = 7.02). The majority were widowed (53.3 %), while 40 % were married. Two women claimed that they were separated and that they had moved out of their matrimonial homes to their fathers' homes when their husbands took younger wives who made life difficult for them. However, they did not regard themselves as "divorced" as they had not gone to court or returned the dowry to their husband's family, as required by custom.

The mean number of children of the women was 4.5. The household composition of nine respondents was a nuclear family, while 21 women lived in polygynous households, i.e.

households where the husband had more than one wife. The majority of the women were Christian.

Only four women claimed not to be gainfully employed or to engage in income-generating work. Thirteen women, including a 90-year-old woman, were still engaged in farming, one woman did babysitting for a fee, and 12 women were vendors in the rural informal sector.

### *Males*

The mean age of the males was 64.9 years (SD = 13.4). More males than females were in the 65-74-years category, hence the wider dispersion. While the majority of the women were widowed, the majority of the men (93 %) were still married; it is relatively easy for rural Yoruba men to acquire new wives even in old age and they are allowed multiple wives. Only two males, both in their late seventies, were widowed.

Twenty-three men were farmers, one worked as a day-guard, another was a trader, and five no longer engaged in any work.

## Findings

### *Types of assistance received from children*

All thirty female respondents reported that they received various types of instrumental assistance from their adult children. Sixteen received regular monthly financial assistance from at least one child: six received financial gifts from their children occasionally; four received assistance with farm work and domestic chores from children who lived with them or close by; and four received regular financial and material assistance (food, kerosene, multivitamins, etc.) from their children. Interestingly, of the four women who reported receiving material assistance as well as financial assistance, three were older than 70 years, i.e. slightly older than the average. Also common to the four women was their occupation: they were all engaged in petty trading in the rural informal sector. It is probable that money realized from the petty trading was insufficient to meet their needs. In addition to instrumental assistance, 22 women reported that they received other non-material assistance such as advice, love and companionship from their adult children.

Among the thirty men, two (a 60-year-old retired teacher turned farmer with seven children and a retired civil servant turned farmer) did not receive any form of assistance from their children.

Among the twenty-eight men who received assistance, the predominant form of assistance was instrumental. Two reported receiving assistance with farm work and domestic chores, 13 received regular monthly financial assistance, five received occasional cash gifts from their children, and another five received both financial and material assistance. It is again noteworthy that four of the five males who received financial and material assistance had changed their occupation from farming to another occupation, e.g. welding, nightguard, blacksmithing. It thus appears that for older persons in rural Yoruba communities, regardless of gender, non-engagement in the primary economic activity of the rural area, i.e. farming, is a disadvantage in terms of economic survival. Older individuals who engage in non-farming activities appear to be more dependent on assistance from their children than those who engage in farming. Fifteen men also reported receiving cognitive and/or emotional assistance from their children.

Thus, there are no clear indications that females receive different types of assistance than males from their adult children. Both groups receive instrumental, cognitive and emotional support from adult children. This finding is con-

trary to our hunch that females will be favoured above males in the receipt of assistance from children.

#### Satisfaction with assistance from children

Of the thirty females, 12 (40%) reported that they were "very satisfied" with the assistance received from daughters, while the remainder, 60%, were "satisfied." None was dissatisfied. Among the thirty males, nine (30%) were very satisfied, 20 (66,7%) were satisfied and one was not satisfied. Regarding assistance received from sons, eight out of the 23 females (34,8%) who had sons reported that they were very satisfied with the assistance, while 14 (61%) were satisfied. Only one female reported dissatisfaction with assistance from her sons.

All thirty males had sons. Eight (26,7%) reported that they were very satisfied with the assistance received from sons, 20 (66,7%) were satisfied and two were dissatisfied with the assistance. See Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Gender and satisfaction with assistance from sons and daughters: frequencies

Level of satisfaction	Satisfaction with assistance from sons			Satisfaction with assistance from daughters		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
Very satisfied	8	8	16	9	12	21
Satisfied	20	14	34	20	18	38
Not satisfied	2	1	3	1	—	1
TOTAL	30	23	53*	30	30	60

\* Seven female respondents had no sons.

Thus, it appears that while there is a generally high level of satisfaction with assistance from children, assistance from daughters was rated higher than assistance from sons. It was also noted that older females perceived the assistance more positively than males.

#### Subjective evaluation of old age

A relationship was also investigated between a subjective evaluation of the assistance received from the children and the older men's and women's evaluation of old age.

In general, the sample perceived old age positively. This finding is supported by the fact that only three respondents, all males, described old age as "not a happy period"; 46,7% described old age as "fairly happy" and 48,3% described it as "very happy."

Regarding gender differences in the subjective evaluation of old age, the majority of the females (66,7%) described their old age as "very happy," compared to only 30% of the males. The results of the respondents' subjective evaluation of old age are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
Subjective evaluation of old age by gender: frequencies

Evaluation of old age	Males	Females	Total
A very happy period	9	20	29
A fairly happy period	18	10	28
Not a happy period	3	—	3
TOTAL	30	30	60

#### Relationship between satisfaction with assistance and evaluation of old age

The data indicate that there is a relationship between satisfaction with assistance received from daughters and the perception of old age of the older females. Specifically, eleven of the 12 women (91,7%) who reported that they were very satisfied with the assistance that they received from their daughters, also described their old age as "very happy." This finding contrasts with the situation for the males where no such relationship is evident. A similar relationship was found between satisfaction with assistance received from sons and the subjective evaluation of old age of the older females. Again, 75% of the females who reported that they were very satisfied with assistance from sons also reported that their old age was "very happy." In contrast, only 37,5% of the males who reported being very satisfied with assistance from their sons described their old age as very happy.

An association between satisfaction with assistance from children and subjective evaluation of old age among older females was further internally validated when we scrutinized data on the respondents who were very satisfied with the assistance they received from both sons and daughters. This category comprised seven females and six males. All seven females described their old age as very happy whereas only three of the six men described their old age in a similar manner.

#### Discussion

Given that common sense suggests that behaviour which falls below expectation cannot at the same time be viewed as satisfactory, our finding regarding the generally high level of satisfaction with assistance from children may on the surface appear discordant with earlier findings that the assistance given to parents tends to fall short of their expectations (Caldwell, 1976; Peil, 1992). However, a careful review of the tape recordings provided some cultural background against which to understand what the older respondents were saying.

To start, the question "How satisfied are you with the care and assistance that you are receiving from your sons/daughters?" was one which invariably evoked unusually long pauses from the respondents, which indicated the sensitive, complex nature of the question.

Second, there was a general reluctance of the respondents to say anything negative about the care which their children provided, even where interviewers noted obvious signs of inadequacy of assistance, or witnessed rather negative behaviour directed towards a respondent by his/her children. This reluctance may reflect the Yoruba belief that *Ki i se gbogbo aso l'a sa si orun*, translated which means that one does not wash one's dirty linen in public. Another Yoruba idiom or saying also counsels parents against complaining about their children to outsiders: *A ki i rojo omo eni fun ara ita, ki a ma ba rojo re fun ka*. (It is not wise to complain about your child to an outsider for you might be complaining to his/her covert enemy who will use whatever you say as a weapon to hurt the child.) The second injunction is one which is adhered to in small rural communities where primary relations still predominate and where there is pervasive suspicion about witchcraft and therefore a need to watch what one says.

This reluctance to "report" children may indeed not be peculiar to Yoruba. It has been reported that in former Yugoslavia where a law was passed legally requiring filial support of older parents, few elderly people reported their children when they failed to support them (Smolic-Krkovic, 1977).

A third relevant observation pertains to how the respondents interpreted the notion of satisfaction with assistance. The majority may have stated that they were satisfied, not because they were receiving all the assistance they might expect from their sons and daughters but because they had lowered their expectations as they knew their children were trying their best in a rather unfavourable economy. As one woman succinctly put it:

*I am very satisfied because my son [a teacher] has not received his salary for the last three months so I know it is not easy for him. He is trying so I have to be very satisfied because things are hard for him and his family.*

This interpretation is further supported by the types of suggestions which the respondents proffered as to how government could improve the quality of life of older persons. The majority suggested that government should ensure that workers receive salaries on time, or that workers' salaries are increased so that adult children can fulfil their filial obligations without too much difficulty.

If the type of assistance appeared unaffected by the recipient's gender, the perceived satisfaction with assistance was affected by the gender of the providers. There was a higher level of satisfaction with assistance from daughters than from sons. A number of reasons may be deduced from the interview data. Some of the older persons perceived their daughters as showing more love in the manner in which they fulfil their filial obligations. One male informant noted:

*My daughters count me as important, they really care for me from their heart, I don't have to force them to do things for me. They tend to know what I need. Even if they can't provide all of it, they make sure they do their best.*

*My son is always in a hurry when he visits. He seems so busy with other things. He sends money and food, sometimes just through his driver ...*

*When people hurt me, it is to my daughter I will confide and she will listen to me patiently and often advise me about what to do. My daughter values my advice ... she takes to them.*

Thus, sons and daughters may be equally economically supportive of their parents to the best of their means, but it is daughters who appear to do so in manners which, in addition, fulfil the socio-emotional needs of their parents and this may explain the reported higher level of satisfaction with assistance from daughters. This finding supports earlier studies which affirm the centrality of females in old-age care (Allen & Pickett, 1987; Hess & Waring, 1978).

A linkage between older women's satisfaction with assistance and positive evaluation of old age is not surprising in terms of what is known about the role of children in the welfare of old women in most African societies. According to Peil (1995: 30) "the worst-off elderly are those living without children." Hence, for an older woman to have living children who are very supportive of her, who give her the assistance that she can describe as "very satisfactory," will no doubt engender positive subjective feelings in the woman.

For an old rural Yoruba man, children are important but he also has his farmland, his large household and companions of the opposite sex. For an old rural Yoruba woman, adult children are an important source of revenue and companionship, and provide evidence of her permanent contribution to

the family name – an important factor to her feelings of generativity and ego integrity in old age.

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