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PERCEPTION OF OLD AGE: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CARE AND SUPPORT FOR THE AGED AMONG THE ESAN OF SOUTH-SOUTH NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria's population is ageing rapidly. The combination of increasing longevity and the accompanying change in young caregivers' perception of old age and the aged is having negative impact on care and support for the aged. Yet, there is little or no scholarly work in Nigeria to determine how perception of old age affects elderly care and support. This paper examines how the perception of old age affects care and support for the aged among the Esan people of South-South Nigeria. The study relies on qualitative methods namely; in-depth interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). In all 32 IDIs and 12 FGDs were conducted on the aged and their caregivers in both urban and rural areas. The results show that the traditional care and support for the aged in the study area is diminishing due to the way the younger generation perceives old age and the aged. The change in perception of old age and the aged is linked to Western influence which is gradually eroding the traditional/cultural belief where the aged were seen in positive light. There is need for cultural re-awakening. This may be carried out within the framework of a creative multi-track social policy intervention that would enable families to continue being the main care providers of the aged.

Keywords: The Esan of South-South Nigeria, Perception of Old Age.

Introduction

Like many developing countries in the world, Nigeria is currently witnessing rapid ageing of its population. This growth has brought with it many social, political and economic challenges and those problems associated with health in older ages. This makes old age to be perceived as a "problematic" phase of life. As people live longer and begin to have health challenges, provision of care and support becomes more important.

Literature on family care and support for the aged has consistently found that all societies engaged in some level of intergenerational relationships (Udegbe, 1990). Most of these literatures confirm that throughout the developing world, the family has been the key institution for the aged, their living arrangements as well as a determinant of their well-being (Cowgill, 1986; Albert and Cattel, 1994).

In traditional African societies, intergenerational relationships exist where the younger and older generations live in sustained mutual cooperation and coordination that benefit members of each of these generations (Newman, Ward, Smith, Wilson and McCrea, 1997). The younger generation sees the aged as those who are weak, need care and support from the younger generation. It was not surprising that the old-old were not allowed to engage in hard work.

There were strong relationships between the aged and the young adults. These relationships do not necessarily have to be familial as they cut across families and communities. In these societies, children provide care and support for their aged parents "as a means of repaying the tremendous debts ... owed their parents for producing and caring for them in infancy and childhood (Lamb, 2000:46). Much like the young, the aged tend to require support for instrumental (i.e. functional) tasks such as cooking and shopping, as well as material and psychological support to ensure their survival in old age. When they are no longer capable of

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productive activity and when they begin to suffer from ailments that limit their dexterity and ability to carry out tasks necessary for daily survival, they depend on their children (Oppong, 2006).

Thus, while support comes from a combination of public and private sources in the developed countries, the family tends to be the cornerstone of social support in the developing countries (Zimmer and Dayton, 2003). This is particularly true in countries like Nigeria with weak institutional security mechanisms (Fajemilehin, 2000) and where children help their parents in economic activities and household chores and assist the family in carrying out farming activities (Eke, 2003).

In traditional African society, the aged are perceived to be the mediators between this world and the next, the representatives of the ancestors and creators and the guardians of the cultural traditions. This belief made people cater for them and hold them in high esteem. Africans believe that old age was an ancestral blessings bestowed on those who live righteously. It is thus culturally acceptable that the aged who are unable to fend for themselves must be catered for by the young if they (the young ones) expect to grow old.

Thus, the ability of the aged persons to cope with changes in health, income, social activities depends to a very large extent on care and support they receive from the young family members. It was not amazing that children take care of their aged parents no matter what their perceptions and feelings towards the latter may be. They dare not shirk this duty without running the risk of being socially sanctioned. According to Camaroff (1985), negative perception of an aged parent was regarded as estrangement from the most potent source of effectiveness in everyday life. Among the Esan of south-south Nigeria, it was believed that the spirits of their ancestors were always around them to bless and favour those who take care of their aged parents and punish those who abandon their elderly parents (Okojie, 1994). Thus, in traditional Esan society, old age was perceived as a blessing and those who cater for their aged parents will partake from the blessing.

Sadly, values associated with old age are changing in modern Esan society. While young family caregivers' perceptions towards the aged are changing, the effectiveness of the traditional caring system is also being compromised because of the ways old age and the aged are perceived by young family members. The change in perception of old age and the aged has been attributed by scholars to the effects of modernization, urbanization and western influence. For instance, the 19th century Christian missionaries gave Africans a new worldview that is not mono-sectional (Schmidt, 2005). The visible world is clearly separated from the invisible world, and after death there are heaven and hell. The spiritual world (God, angels, demons or the devil) can interact with people, but the role of African ancestors is unknown to Christianity and main actor in Christianity is God who gives or destroys life. It is he who blesses or punishes (ibid).

In this flow of thought, there is no room for ancestral curses or visits from living-dead. No wonder the aged are in most cases depicted as a social problem and a burden to society (Krekula, 2007). In some cases, they are seen as those who use up scarce resources (Amosun and Reddy, 1997). Despite these negative perceptions, much remained to be understood about the impacts of family caregivers' attitudes towards the aged and how this affects care and support for them. Furthermore, most studies on the perception of ageing and aged have focused on individual differences in perceptions of ageing mostly in Western cultures (Giles et al. 2003; Hummert, 1990).

There is growing evidence that perceptions of old age or the aged differ across culture (Giles, Noels, Ota, Gallois & Ryan, 2000). It is therefore imperative to identify family caregivers' attitudes and perceptions towards the aged in contemporary society because how the aged are perceived may well affect the way they are treated in the family.

The main objective of this paper therefore is to examine family caregivers' perceptions of old age and aged and the consequences of such perception on care and support for the aged among the Esan of South-South Nigeria. The specific objectives are to

1. examine how old age and the aged are perceived in contemporary Esan;

2. investigate how such perception affect care and support in contemporary Esan society and;
3. identify the nature of changes in care and support for the Aged among the Esan.

The Literature

There are many definitional, conceptual and methodological problems in discussing these issues. However, in this study, elderly people (aged) are taken as those who have attained a minimum age, generally 60 years, although some international data sets and commentaries may prefer to use 55 or 65 years. Also, scholars have dealt variously on diverse ways old age and the aged are perceived in different societies. Much of these studies reveal that perception of old age and the way the aged are perceived or treated varies from society to society (Sijuwade 2009). According to social representations theory (Moscovici, 1984, 1988) the views of old age held within a given culture are a form of shared cultural representation. They constitute systems of ideas, values, and customs related to old age that is treated by members of the society as if they were established reality. Perceptions of old age are multidimensional in nature. It encompasses both positive and negative characteristics (Hummert, 1990), and reflect a mix between accurate depictions of age-related changes and distorted views of older people (Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005). Research on the influence of cultural values and beliefs on old age has been dominated by comparisons between Western and non Western cultures (Giles et al. 2003). This body of work was inspired by the idea that nonwestern societies like the Asians and sub-Saharan Africa are influenced by values of filial piety and the practice of ancestor worship which are thought to promote positive views of ageing and high esteem for older persons (Davis, 1983; Sung 2001). Western societies, in contrast, were thought to be youth-oriented and do hold more negative views about the ageing process and the elderly (Palmore, 1975).

Other studies have shown that though the aged are held in esteem and are perceived as vast storehouses of knowledge and power in some societies, in others, their legitimacy to knowledge and power is questioned (Diop, 1989). Writing about African societies, Amosun and Reddy (1997) stress that in most African societies, old age is perceived as a sign of blessing and the aged are respected and held in high esteem. According to Apt (2000), in African societies, old age is aptly expressed in a number of African languages where the aged is seen as 'the big person'. For example, the Shona people of Zimbabwe refer to aged persons as ancestral spirits (Apt, 2000). In his book, titled *Facing Mount Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta (1965:297) also stresses the African seniority and societal inclusivity of the aged:

As a man grows old, his prestige increases according to the number of age grade he has passed. It is the seniority that makes an elder an almost indispensable in the general life of the community. His presence or advice is sought in all functions. In religious ceremonies, the elder holds supreme authorities. The custom of the people demands that the elder should be given his due respect and honour (Kenyatta, 1965).

The belief that an aged was a mediator between this world and the next gave added prestige to the aged persons by conferring on them the role of witch doctors or priests (Hooyman and Kiyat, 2002). In his study of the Xhosa people in Southern Africa, Sagner (2001) also found that in the Xhosa worldview, the aged are regarded as the representatives of the ancestors and as creators and guardians of the cultural traditions. The Xhosa view ageing as a process, which leads to an increase in experience, wisdom and perfection of adulthood. Sagner (2001) thus, argues that this ideological emphasis on age and seniority was bolstered by the Xhosa religious worldview. He explains that only ritual elders, that is, the genealogically senior males of the respective descent group and senior men (and sometimes, women) could approach the ancestors. This implies that estrangement from the aged implies estrangement from the most potent source of effectiveness in everyday life (Comaroff, 1985). Among the Xhosa people, there are removal of restrictions from women who had reached middle age experience in an often gender typed society. As Brown (1992) has observed, when women reach middle and old age, their status and power are approximately the same as men.

Studies have indicated that not all perceptions of the aged are positive. Research into perception of old age and the aged has traditionally been based on the assumption that negative

attitudes and perceptions are widespread (Butler, 1969) with numerous studies reporting negative views of the aged and old age (e.g. Allan & Johnson, 2009). For instance, the ancient civilizations in Greece and Rome left art and writings that provide a good portrait of their experience and perception of old age and aged persons (Thane, 2005; Minois, 1989). Then few people reached what would now be called old age, as 80 percent died before what would now be considered the middle age. The older citizens of ancient Greece and Rome were highly respected for their wisdom, and councils of elders helped rule Greek and Roman society.

However, respect for the aged in Greece declined during the fifth century B.C., as old age came to be depicted as a period of declining mental and physical ability and youth extolled as the ideal time of life. Reflecting this new view, Greek mythology from that time painted a negative portrait of the aged and contrasted the youthfulness of the gods with the frailties of ageing humans. In one myth Ethos, the goddess of dawn, fell in love with a human named Tithonus. When he became old and weak, she left him and turned him into a grasshopper! This change in the view of the aged was reversed about two centuries later, when old age in ancient Greece reacquired its respect and influence, and ancient Rome followed suit (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011).

Many of these negative perceptions tend to be reported by younger age groups (Woolf 2006; Cottle & Glover 2007). Brown (1999) in his study in Ghana also stresses that even the aged themselves have general negative views of being old. The aged in Brown's study articulate their perception of growing old as a period characterized by hardships and misery, social ostracism, inadequate care, ill health, pain and weakness, and a burden on others. Hence, they generally perceive old age as a period of redundancy, pain and social exclusion. It is a time when sex drives highly diminish, menopausal, andropausa set in, and fertility is naturally controlled. According to Hooyman and Kiyak (2002), although positive attitudes toward the young-old were widespread, non-supportive or death-threatening behaviour was shown toward those who survived beyond an "intact" stage of life in Roman and Greek cultures. They explain that the stage of old-old age was often-referred to in Roman and Greek cultures as "sleeping period". It was not surprising that those who were no longer able to contribute to common welfare and look after themselves were seen as "useless", "over-age" and "already dead" and were sometimes treated brutally. Those who outlived their usefulness were regarded as heavy burden in societies that existed close to the edge of subsistence, particularly those in harsh climate with little agriculture, or with no system of social stratification (Barker, 1997; Glascock, 1997). It was not unusual that in Sophocles' tragedies, which existed during the middle of the fifth century, old age was depicted as distasteful, a time of decline in physical and mental functioning. Sophocles describes youth as the only period of life characterized by true happiness. That was why, in Euripides' plays, older people were described as wise and weak. In his play *As You Like It*, Shakespeare's perception of old age was also that of decline and uselessness. This may reflect the attitude of the sixteenth-century Europe that the aged were a burden to a community struggling with food shortages and high death rates among its infants and young soldiers.

Examples of death-hasting behaviour in historic period abound in the literature. For example, Hooyman and Kiyak (2002) observe that in some rural areas of ancient Japan, the aged were carried into the mountains and left there to die. It was usual for aged Eskimos to walk off into the snow when famine and disease placed great burdens on the tribe. Ritual sacrifice was used to kill the oldest member perceived to be a burden among the Ojibwa Indians of Lake Winnipeg and Siriono of the Bolivian rain forest. Elsewhere in Africa, Diop (1989) found that among certain people of the Cameroon, old age was perceived as a sign of misfortune. He states that a king who is old or too weak becomes a burden on his kingdom and is ritually slain and replaced by a younger person whose strength will be beneficial to the entire kingdom. In some cases, the aged who were seen as possessing some strange supernatural powers, which they used in causing ills and misfortune in their community were ostracized (HelpAge International, 2000). It was also not uncommon, that an aged who was highly susceptible to being accused of witches and witchcraft and of causing draught in most developing countries, were also banished from the society (Help Age, 2002).

Geographical Location of Esan

Esan is located in Edo State in South-South Nigeria. Its people are called Esan, an Edo word meaning “they have fled”. The Esan people live about 80 kilometers north east of Benin, the state capital. Thanks to this proximity and the fact that they share a basic cultural substratum, they are regarded as neighbours of Bini (Bradbury, 1973:48). Esan people are predominantly found in five Local Government Areas (LGAs) namely: Esan West, Esan Central, Esan Southeast, Esan Northeast and Igueben. These LGAs consist of over thirty major towns and several villages that share common cultures and social systems. *The Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette* (2007) put the population of Esan at 587,898 comprising 300,729 (51.2%) males and 287,129 (48.8%) females and is estimated to reach 605,535 by 2020 at three percent growth rate.

Esan borders Owan on the northwest and Etsako on the northeast; with Orhionmwon and Ika on the southwest; and Aniocha and Oshimili on the south and southeast.

The entire social structure in Esan is based on kinship, which extends to those who can be traced by blood on both the paternal and maternal sides, and kinship by marriage extends to the most distant kinsfolk of the spouse.

Map of Edo State showing the study area

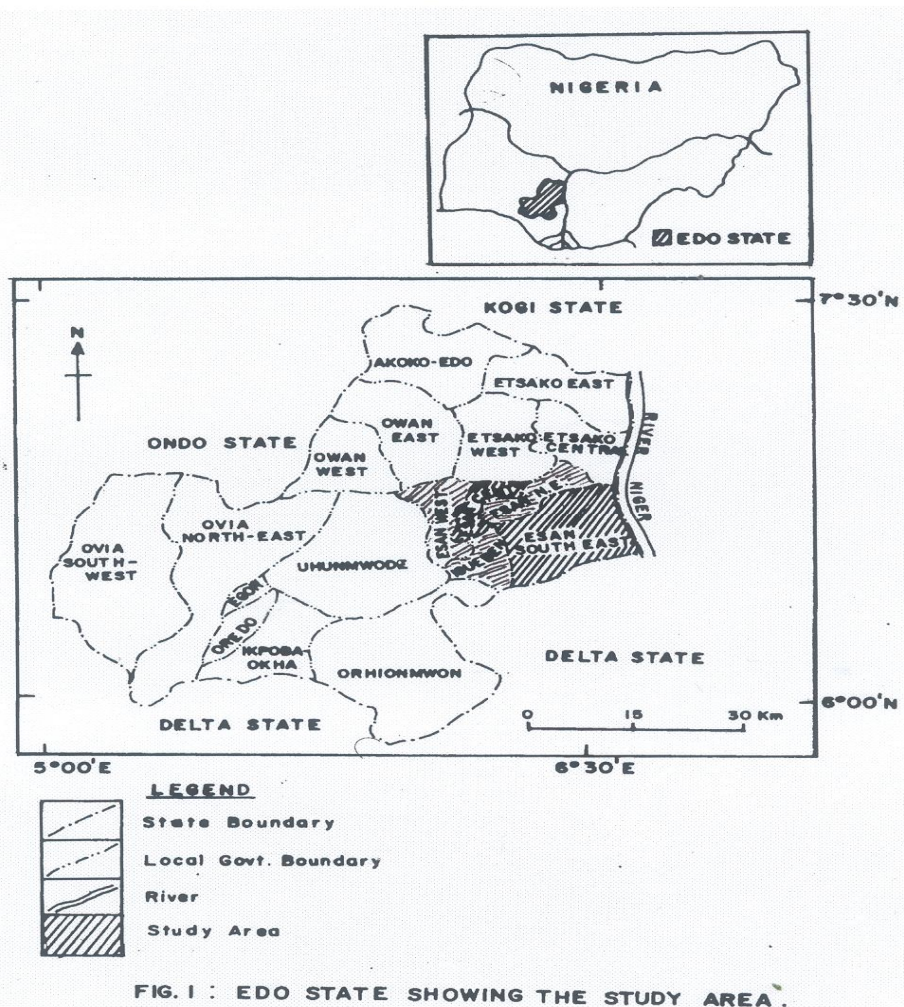


FIG. 1 : EDO STATE SHOWING THE STUDY AREA.

Perception of Old age and Aged in Traditional Esan Society

Traditionally, the Esan concept of age was functional rather than chronological. A person is considered an adult or an old person by virtue of his abilities and activities, not because he had attained a certain age. Failing physical strength or other incapacities, which precluded active and continued participation in normal activities, would result in a person being classified as old.

Among the Esan, the aged occupied a special place in the heart of Esan families and communities. Like every other African society, old age in Esan had a sacred status. An older person was seen as drawing closer to the spiritual dimension, and therefore more in touch with the source of knowledge, greatness and discernment. He was seen as a representative of the ancestors who holds the "okpor" (family staff). He communed with the ancestors and informed members of his family who was to be blessed or warn them against any danger. His decision in the family is final and no other member of the family has any right to question his decision or authority. He commanded a lot of respects. He is addressed as the "owanlen" (the wise one). Under this situation, everybody aspires to grow old. An aged person in Esan lived in a household that was typically a three-generational unit including at least one married adult child with his or her spouse and offspring. These units varied in size. An average household had eight to fourteen residents. Thus, exchange of support and services between parents and adult children are pervasive. Age was linked with authority as age and rank were respected and obeyed. Within the household, age rather than relationship gives disciplinary authority. The newest baby born into such a household is subject to every individual in it, and his position improves with age until a younger child appears upon the scene (Okojie, 1994).

Retirement, in the western sense, was a nonexistent concept in traditional Esan. Work was neither demanded nor discouraged from those who wished and were able to assist with household tasks. An aged person believed that continued participation in some work helped them maintain strength. Their activities had always been valued contributions to their household and village. Their role as advisors to the family was an important function of both aged men and women as they were always consulted when there were decisions to be made concerning the family.

Traditional Care and Support

Before western civilization began to make its in-roads into the lives of the people, it did not require too much exertion to provide food, shelter and clothing. Food was obtained with minimum effort from the farms. Family life was corporate, integrated and well regulated. While the little ones were given every legitimate indulgence, the sturdy members of the family were also there to cater for their aged parents or grandparents as the case might be. Traditionally, it was expected that children would cater for their old parents by housing them, feeding them and providing for their other needs. Shelter was easily provided by erecting mud walls and covering them with thatch or certain kinds of leaves for a roof (Okojie, 1994). Friends and relatives, particularly, members of the extended families usually helped in building or providing shelter for their aged relatives. It was also one of the obligatory duties of son-in-law to help build the house of father-in-law and usually help repair the roof thereof. Preparation of favourite food, assistance with bathing, giving a back rub, or bringing a coal from the fire to light a pipe (ukoko or obodo) were typical of the traditional behaviour patterns toward the aged (Okojie, 1994). Children are the responsibility of the entire community. When primary caregivers are not available, the community creates a system for caring for the aged and children. In the traditional Esan culture, children were nurtured by every adult even those that were not their own children, for it is believed that in future they would look after them. The duty to one's parents is traditionally enshrined in the culture and children make an effort to look after their aged parents. The high rate of infant and under-five mortality gives impetus to many couples to have as many children as possible to ensure that they survive to adulthood to cater for them in their old age. An average Esan man or woman would comment that old age was a good time of life, when one received better food and better care. It was a time when one was less constrained to maintain a dignified image on ceremonial and social occasions. People could look forward to growing old. In general, old age is when one was treated with great

respect, for seniority in age is an integral part of Esan culture. Those below treated those above with deference and respect. Children did not talk loudly in the presence of elders; neither did they speak rudely with their parents. The family setting is a close-knit social structure, which emphasizes and ensures care and support for each member, their security as well as meeting their individual needs. The extended family is designed as a social and transnational milieu for every stage of life, including old age. The family is closely involved in the decisions and actions affecting an individual's life styles and life chances. Generally, emphasis is placed on obedience to parents and respect for the aged is considered a virtue. Within the extended family, the aged played very prominent roles, which place them in a unique position. They knew family history and preserved the family's custom and ancestral values. It was their responsibility to transmit the society's customs and skills to younger generations. They settled disputes, ensured proper conduct among the family members, and were treated as repositories of experience and wisdom. They also controlled family land and properties and ensured that members had access to them when needed. The general situation that prevailed at that time and care and support the aged enjoyed made people to aspire to old age (Fajemilehin, 2000). Even when they had no surviving children, they were sure other members of the extended family would give necessary support to alleviate their suffering (Fajemilehin, 2000). Privileges are graded according to age and, in general, the aged are accorded more privileges than the young.

Contacts with the European and Change

Esan contact with the European began with the Missionary Society which introduced Christianity that has remained the dominant religion ever since. The church was also involved with promoting education, translating and printing the Bible in English and establishing schools. The first schools were "pastor's schools" in which children were taught reading, writing, and arithmetic.

The majority of changes had been material items adopted from European culture, but the acceptance of Christianity and the introduction of formal education had been the most significant elements of change through the mid-1950s. With the introduction of Churches and formal education, the extended family system which was the social verve and social security has given way to nuclear family. It is not surprising that there is little or no respect for age and for values that were held sacrosanct as the younger ones now find it difficult to greet the elderly ones not to talk of catering for them. Like what operates in Europe and America, single parenthood is now an emerging phenomenon. Unlike in the past, people no longer communalize, as nobody wants to be his or her brother's keeper.

Since early 1980s, there have been increased opportunities for wage employment, agricultural improvements, consolidation of school, and so on. Modern era began in Esan actually began during the Second Republic of the civilian government of late Professor Ambrose Alli. His first-priority projects included establishment of Bendel State University (now Ambrose Alli University) located at Ekpoma, expansion of electric power facilities, construction of modern roads and modern markets in the urban area. This led to rural exodus and the displacement of large segments of the population. Health and sanitation standards were also important aspects of the rehabilitation campaign, with major efforts directed toward eradication of diseases. Another health measure introduced was a family planning programme, which was embraced by the inhabitants. This has consequently led to the reduction in the number of childbirth ever born and the number of caregivers.

The most dramatic changes, however, were in the economic sphere. The establishment of banks, hospitals, schools and industries provided employment for young school leavers. By the time this study was conducted, these and other changes were evident. A large number of young school leavers, were working primarily in the wage-labour market. With the increased availability of wage employment opportunities, fewer people engage in agricultural activities in the rural areas leading to exodus of people from rural areas. Imports of food had become increasingly important as they had demands for other products such as automobiles, television sets, clothing, and so on. A few specialty shops selling ready-made clothing, shoes, or sports

equipment have been opened in recent years especially in the urban areas. There are now a variety of recreational activities on which the Esans can spend their money (for example, movie theatres, night clubs and tennis courts). These and many other have attracted young people to towns and cities. These kinds of changes, along with urbanization and rural-urban migration, have been suggested as those most likely to negatively affect perception of old age and the way the aged will be cater for in modern Esan society.

Methods

This study adopted qualitative technique. Data were collected through In-depth Interviews (IDI), and Focus Group Discussion (FGD).

In-depth interviews were carried out among the aged men and women (aged 60 years or older) and caregivers aged between 20 and 59 years. This method enabled the researcher obtain firsthand and detailed information on how the two age groups provide care and support and their perception of old age. The method also provided an opportunity to get information on limiting filial obligation of children to their aged parents. In all, 32 in-depth interviews were conducted.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted using an interview schedule and the interviewees' responses were recorded. Where an interviewee's permission was obtained, a tape recorder was used. The elicited information was audio taped and later transcribed for detailed analysis. Unstructured interview was conducted and interviewees were encouraged to express their views freely and as elaborately as time allowed. The use of in-depth interview method also enabled the researcher to record non-verbal displays for a meaningful interpretation.

A total number of twelve FGDs consisting of eight groups were conducted. These include aged men (60 years or older, retired; with formal education); aged men (60 years or older without formal education and never worked in the formal sector); aged women (60 years or older, retired with formal education), aged women (60 years or older without formal education and never worked with formal sector) male caregivers (20-39 years); male caregivers (40-59 years); female caregivers (20-39 years old) and female caregivers (40-49 years old). Six FGDs were conducted in the urban area (i.e. 2 with male retirees with formal education, 2 with aged women with formal education, 1 with male caregivers (20 -39 years old) and 1 with female caregivers (aged 20 - 39 years old). Also, 6 FGDs were carried out in the rural comprising 2 for aged men (60 years or older without formal education and who have not worked in the formal sector); 2 for aged women (60 years or older without formal education and who have not never worked in the formal sector); 1 for male caregivers 40-59 years and female caregivers (40-49 years old). Each group consists of between 6-10 participants all of whom possessed similar socio-demographic characteristics. Participants in each focus group were of the same sex (male and female); age category: early adulthood (20-39 years), young- old (40-59 years), middle old (60-75) and old-old (75 years or older), educational background (literate and non-literate) and occupational statuses of participants were stratified according to pension from formal sector and those who had never worked in the formal sector. The FGD sessions were held at a time that was convenient for the participants and in a very conducive atmosphere. The FGDs were conducted in the evenings between the hours of four and 6 o'clock when most participants were less busy. The discussions were held in the village or town halls in each of the selected wards. Participants were made to sit round a table in order to have good discussion. A study guide was prepared, which was used for the group discussion. During the discussion, it was ensured that participants were not restricted to their answers. Each discussion lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. It was also ensured that no single participant dominated any of the discussions. The researcher personally moderated the discussions given that he speaks Esan language fluently. All information was tape recorded and later transcribed for further analysis.

At the end of the fieldwork, all the IDIs and FGDs that were tape-recorded translated from Esan dialect to English language. They were later edited to ensure that all the interview schedules were completed and contained accurate information. Data were analyzed using ethnographic technique. The data were presented and analyzed in "context" by grouping and

sorting out comments and responses derived from the qualitative data. Verbatim quotations of relevant statements were done.

Discussion of Findings

During the fieldwork, interviewees were requested to respond to the general question on their perception of old age, ageing and the aged with a view to exploring their perceptions of the aged and to understand how these impede, or reinforce care and support for the aged in the study area.

The results showed that a male in-depth interviewee described old age as “ a gradual journey to grave”. On old age, an overwhelming number of the in-depth interviewees (30) described old age as appearance of wrinkles and “scaly kin, grey hairs, poor vision, impaired hearing and stooping while walking”.

The other two described old age as “a period of declining health and energy”, a description associated with retirement from hard labour as inactivity sets in. Female in-depth interviewees aged 55 years elaborated more on this by saying:

Old age is a period when a man is supposed to retire from hard labour and depend on his children for food and medical care. That is why everybody prays that he/she is blessed with good children.

This remark suggests that one important element of ageing/old age is the attachment to one's biological children or grandchildren. A female FGD participant aged 68 (rural) explained:

That is why every couple would go to any lengths to have children to lean on in the evening of their life.

Another female participant aged 72 (rural) elaborated more on the importance of children as old age security as follows:

The whole essence of having children is to have somebody to look after you when you are old and to ensure you are given a proper burial when you die.

Although this view was shared by the majority (28) of the in-depth interviewees and FGD participants, it was also found that the aged, particularly those 90 years or over, who are unable to support themselves, are seen as “burden” on their family members. It was found that in some cases, such aged persons were more likely to be abandoned or ignored until they die. This position was captured by a male focus group discussant aged 68 (urban):

When a man gets to a stage that he has to be carried to the toilet, bathed by his children or requires people to carry him whenever he wants to go out or loses some senses, he does not only become useless but also becomes a load (burden) on his family members. Such a person will no longer be relevant to his or her family and society at large.

Another FGD participant aged 72 years, added:

It is better to allow such a person to die instead of allowing him to be suffering. Even the aged person will not be happy to see himself in that condition. It is better to allow him to go and join his ancestors and rest because he has lived beyond his usefulness.

According to a female focus group discussant aged 70 (urban):

Because of this, the “over-aged” are sometimes purposely abandoned by his children to hasten his death. This may occur when his children are getting older and fear that they may die before their aged parent. In this way, the aged are seen as a burden on the children. It does not speak well on the over-aged when their own children who were supposed to bury them die before them.

The above indicates that though old age is perceived as a blessing, the aged who outlived their usefulness are seen as a burden or useless to the family. At that age old age is seen as a bad omen. So it is not surprising that the Esan generally pray for an aged person, “omon la re su wa” meaning “may your own children give you a befitting burial” instead of an aged person burying his or her own children. This makes an average Esan aged man or woman wish to die before his or her children so that they could bury them.

Thus, this negative perception of the over-aged is strengthened when such aged person witnesses the death of children or young adults in the family. This situation creates a lot of anxiety among aged people in Esanland as this might lead the children to have negative attitude towards their aged parents. A woman aged 90 years (rural) clarified this during in-depth interview:

God gave me only three children. We were living happily until early last year when the youngest of them died in a ghastly motor accident on his way to Benin. When they brought his corpse, the elders insisted that they wanted to know what was responsible for the accident. They called a witch doctor who accused me falsely of killing my own son. The whole village has since ostracized me and my children too have abandoned me. They now see me as a witch.

This comment tallies with the study conducted by HelpAge International in 2000 in Ghana which found that older women accused of being witches are sent away by the chief of the village to an isolated place called Tendang where they will live for the rest of their lives. No wonder most of the aged in-depth interviewees articulated their perception of growing old as a period characterized by hardship and misery, social ostracism, inadequate care, ill health, pain, weakness and burden on others.

Old age was also described in terms of accumulation of years or time units at birth or in terms of age related changes in the ability of an individual to perform certain tasks efficiently and effectively. While some of the in-depth interviewees and focus group participants described old age as a change in physical strength, decline in fine-eye-motor coordination, decrease in reaction time and changes in vigour, others portrayed it as a period of inactivity. A male focus group discussant (urban) stated:

Old age is when inactivity sets in and many people begin to depend on their children. Here at Usenu, we have many people that are about that age. Others are more than 80 or even older. Therefore, we use historical events to calculate their age and determine seniority. Those born within certain chronological age are referred to as "otu" (age mates). Although a 60 years old person can be referred to as being old; those aged between 80 and 100 are usually described as "enewanre" (the oldest-old). These ones really need the younger family members to help them because they do not have strength to perform strenuous tasks. They are seen as helpless members in the community.

Sometimes, reference is made to the number of grand or great grandchildren one has. A Female FGD participant (urban) remarked:

Any one who has witnessed the birth of his great grand children cannot be said to be a young person. Therefore, to live long to witness the birth of one's great grand children is a measure of old age. At that age, one is expected to retire from farm work and allow his children to farm for him.

Old age among the Esan is not perceived from an individual perspective but rather, the way the society perceives it. The results from the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews indicate that "long life" is perceived as something that is reserved for the "unblemished" or "faultless". Thus, the aged are described as "those with clean hands" or "those who have lived well". An interview with a female aged 72 years (rural) revealed that "long life (old age) is not for everybody or people with unclean minds", adding:

That is why it is not many people reach that age. In this community, it is believed that old age is for people with clean hands and those who live well.

More than half (18) of the in-depth interviewees in rural and urban areas described old age as the ability of an aged to recount community's past events and give advice on important issues like marriage, land disputes and inheritance patterns. This view was supported by a male FGD participant aged 69:

Because of their ability to recount past events, the aged are also seen as storehouse of knowledge and repositories of experience. That is why they are called "enewanlen" (the wise ones).

Another male focus group participant aged 70 (rural) added:

That is why we say that the words of elders are words of wisdom. Everybody wants to tap from their wealth of experience. Again, it is believed that without the aged our cultural customs will be lost. That is why everybody respects the aged and take care of them.

At the society level, old age is treasured. That was why in the past, the young revered them and exempted them from hard labour. It was found that the middle age grade-ujagbedion (care providers of the aged) assisted by the egbonunghale (street sweepers) were mandated to assist the aged. A male FGD participant (rural) clarified:

Their major function is to ensure that an aged person does not suffer deprivation. Their duty includes burying the dead, provision of care and support for the aged and providing assistance in farm work. That is why this age grade is called fetchers and hewers of wood for the aged because of the assistance members of the group rendered to the aged.

However, these values are being whittled down by modernity. Greater opportunities leading to rural-urban migration is having a telling effect on these age grades and hence the entrance of egbonughele age grade in particular has been slowly dropping. The Igene age grade was also found to have been severely affected as most able-bodied youths have deserted the villages in search of education or employment opportunities. It is not surprising that old age or the aged are perceived differently. The remark by a male caregiver aged 36 years (urban) summed up the thoughts of young family caregivers of the aged:

Old age does not imply that the aged are wiser or more knowledgeable than we are. Wisdom and knowledge are in the mind. It has nothing to do with how many years one has spent on earth. There is no doubt that the aged are more knowledgeable of our local environment, but one should also not forget that formal education and technological innovations such as the internet facilities have exposed the younger generation to the whole world.

During the focus group discussion, a retired police man in his mid-70s (urban) remarked:

The way we perceived old age during our time is quite different from the way this present generation now perceives it. They associate old age with "traditional practices" and call us "old school". They see us as fetish. Just because they are graduates, they no longer respect age. Western education and civilization are changing our culture of respect for the aged. Our children are trying to Europeanize themselves. They no longer have regard for us.

Another 72-year-old male FGD participant (urban) aged 72 years remarked:

The gradual erosion of the extended family system is also responsible for the way the aged are perceived and catered for. In the olden days members of the extended family were the rally point. Unfortunately, our children only know members of their nuclear family. Westernization has really destroyed our culture.

These remarks indicate that the traditional perception of ageing/old age is changing. This is linked to social change such as urbanization, decline in extended family system and rural-urban migration. Modernization theory as postulated by Durkheim and Cowgill becomes relevant to the study. They argue that as society evolves from rural and agrarian to urban and industrial social systems, there will be changes in values, attitude and norms. As a result of this change, most villages in Esan are now being inhabited by schoolchildren and aged men and women breaking down the communal assistance arrangement. These changes are affecting perceptions and attitudes of the young towards the aged in the study area.

The data generated from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions also showed that ageing/old age is perceived as ancestral blessing or something that is "designed" or "ordained" by the gods. An 82-year-old woman (rural) affirmed this during in-depth interview:

For me to live up to this age when most of my age mates have since died is a blessing from the gods and my ancestors. Being able to see my grand and great grand children should be considered a blessing too. You can see that the gods and my ancestors have really blessed me with long life. I enjoy good health; have children, grand children and even great grand children. That is why our prayer in Esan is that one should live long to see his or her children's children. What else can I say God and our ancestors have not done for me?

It was found that the aged (particularly the oldest in each family) was the priest at the ancestral shrine who had custody of the family staff (ukhure). It was generally believed that through him, the spirits of the ancestors especially that of his father would protect and guide his children. Hence, in the traditional Esan society, the aged were described as intermediary between the living and the dead. A male Focus group participant (rural) explained:

All the members of the community through the aged appease or appeal for protection and fruition. Through him sacrifice of goats is made to ward off danger in the family. Because of this, the aged were regarded as representatives or intermediaries between the living and the dead (ancestors). This makes them to be more powerful and respected as they play advisory roles and make important decisions in the community at large.

Thus, failure to look after an aged person implies neglecting the ancestors and thereby inviting the wrath of the gods and ancestors or curse upon the neglectful children. According to a female FGD participant aged 65 years (rural):

Anybody who wants to live long and needs the blessing of his aged parents should look after them; otherwise, the ancestors would visit such a person with punishment.

However, it was found that this perception of old age or the aged was also changing due to the effects of modernization. This was the opinion of 16 out of the 32 interviewees covered by the study. For instance, a male in-depth interviewee aged 75 (rural) said:

The introduction of formal education and advent of Christianity are the major causes of these new values and norms redefining the way children relate with their aged parents. These factors contribute to the way the aged are being perceived. It also results in their diminishing status and undervalued roles in several ways. First, education is forcing the young ones out of the rural area and from their parents. This is really affecting the way they should have taken care of their aged parents. Secondly, Christianity has eroded most of our cultural practices. First is the erosion of ancestral worship, which our children no longer see as relevant. This affects the way they perceive the aged who are the custodians of these cultural practices.

Another male in-depth interviewee aged 82 (rural) remarked:

Unlike in the past, when the aged were seen as custodians of cultural tradition, they (especially the old-old) are now seen as having hand in community's misfortune and thus, are perceived as evil by the young ones. This perception will definitely affect the way the younger generation will cater for an aged person who has been perceived as evil.

This finding supports the study by Oppong (2006) that in most developing societies, the aged are susceptible to being accused of witchcraft. The finding showed that the belief that the aged would be properly catered for as it was done in the traditional society is fast diminishing. Nigerian dwindling economy was identified as a major cause of this widespread apprehension experienced by the aged. It was not surprising that most of the in-depth interviewees and focus group participants saw ageing/old age as the "final stage of suffering". Ten of the aged interviewed wished they never grew old. Five out of the interviewees described old age as a time of "loneliness", four portrayed it as a time of "depression", three saw it as a period of "neglect" while four described old age as a period characterized by "physical separation from spouse and children". For the majority of the caregivers and aged women, ageing/old age was described as a nightmare.

The in-depth interview and FGD comments below throw more light on perception of old age in the study area. In the words of a female focus group discussant aged 82 (rural):

What people do not know about old age these days, especially for women, is that it is a period characterized by physical separation from husbands (who are usually the breadwinners) through death and from their children because they now leave us alone in the village to fend for ourselves in the midst of declining health. It is sad, it is depressing! As for me, I did not envisage that life would be like this when I was growing up. Back then, we saw our aged parents as "helpless individuals" who must be catered for.

Similarly, during the FGD, an 80-year-old male participant (rural) stated:

Nowadays, people see old age as something to be afraid of because they feel it is a time they will not be able to do what they used to do especially now that children are not always available to take care of their aged parents. Hence, they feel that they will suffer when they are old. So, old age has become a nightmare to so many people because of the uncertainty of the future. Our children are not even helping matters. Their eyes are "outside" even when they know that there is no job out there. Some of them don't even want to assist their aged parents. It was not so during our time. Things have really changed.

These comments have also demonstrated that the effects of modernization such as urbanization, industrialization and the present economic downturn which are gradually altering the traditional perception of old age and the aged as being the guardians of the traditional society, the upholders of cultural values and institutional wisdom. In view of all these changes, care and support, which were presumed to be the priority of the aged, are not secured in contemporary period.

Intergenerational Change in Care and Support

During the data collection, participants were asked to compare care and supports provided for the aged in the traditional with modern Esan society. A male FGD participants aged 82 years had this to say:

In the olden days, the aged were seen as the rallying point of every family and society. That was why adult children, grandchildren and, in fact, the able-bodied men and women ensured their wellbeing in the society. While adult children provided food, shelter and comfort for the aged, the little children stayed around to provide them with company or helped with the tasks of daily living, which they could no longer carry out. They also nursed them when sick, and, more importantly, give the assurance of a proper burial when they died. Today things have changed as most aged persons are left to fend for themselves.

Care and support for the aged were so important that even at the point of death the issue of care was taken very seriously. A male FGD participant aged 92 years (rural) elaborated further:

The traditional Esan man and woman valued the aged and ensured that he or she does not suffer any deprivation. Even at death, it was ensured that he was properly buried.

The extended family and community members formed the major caregivers and supporters of the aged in traditional Esan society. When a man was too old to farm, it became the responsibility of the entire family to assist him in the farm. According to a male focus group participant aged 82:

When a man is too old to farm, it is the duty of the community, his children and his younger brothers to go to farm for him. His duty was to sit down at home and give instruction on where to work. He occasionally goes to the farm to oversee what the children were doing. The children ensured that their aged parents were not allowed to work. The younger women assisted the aged women in domestic chores like assisting them to cook, fetching water and marketing their products.

While the sons worked on the farm, the wives, daughters and daughters-in-law ensured that the aged were not hungry. In the words of another male focus group participant aged 75 (rural):

It was also their duty to wash their clothes, fetch firewood for them to keep warm at night and bathe them if they were too old to bathe by themselves.

Of particular importance, are the living arrangements of the aged which was the basic indicator of care and support provided by young adults. In the words of a female in-depth interviewee aged 85 (rural) told us:

Then, almost every aged person lived with his or her children and members of the extended family who took care of them and provided them with necessary support. Care and support to the aged was physically provided by children in those days because they were living under the same roof with their aged parents. The children included his sons, daughters, brothers, half brothers, grandchildren and of course his wives. In those days, there were only few migrated to neighbouring villages but they were always coming to the village to see how their aged parents were faring. They also ensured that they left their children with them to be running errands for them, otherwise all the children stayed with the aged to farm, cook and wash.

However, the study found that care and support for the aged by children and members of the extended family was actually declining in both urban and rural areas compared to the traditional period. Twenty out of the 32 in-depth interviewees and FGD participants believed that care giving and support to the aged were on the decline. Female FGD participants (urban) also supported this view. One of the female FGD participants aged 65 (urban) said:

Though children and members of the extended family still cater for their aged relatives, such care and support are very minimal compared to the past.

Another female participant added:

But because children no longer live with parents, they hardly understand their problems.

The only thing they do these days is to provide support by sending remittances.

Sometimes, remittances are sporadic or intermittent so that they do not meet the needs of the aged. An in-depth interview with female respondent aged 71 (rural) stated:

One thing our children do not know is that money cannot go to the market for you neither can food cook itself. In our days, it was the responsibility of children to ensure that their

parents were properly catered for. Today, most of us are living alone without any children around to cater for us. Even, no grandchild wants to stay with his or her grand parents.

A female in-depth interviewee remarked:

I do not know what is wrong with children nowadays. When my parents were alive, I used to send my children to stay with them to run errands for them. Do you know that I am the only one living in this big house? When the loneliness was getting too much, my daughter sent her daughter to stay with me. Instead, she was always quarrelling with me saying I was the one depriving her of good education. She ran away to meet her parents when I was ill and needed her most. She said the school her mother attended in this village is no longer good. There is nobody to take care of me when I am ill.

Some of the aged whose children have migrated to the cities were in the same situation as those who were childless or whose children were unable or unwilling to help them. Not only were they deprived of their loved ones, they also had no one to carry water, fetch firewood, dispose their refuse or transport their household provisions, since these services are not provided to rural communities on a systematic basis. The emerging scenario in the study area, therefore, was that care and support for the aged who have nobody to take care of them are gradually becoming the responsibility of social service providers like the Church, local government and local philanthropists. They donate items such as drinks, food, clothes and drugs. A childless widow aged 72 in the in-depth interview (rural) remarked:

I depend on the Good Samaritans and members of my church. Were it not for them, I would have died of hunger and disease. My church members always visit me to comfort me. Sometimes, they give me money and when they see my condition, they send their children to assist me. At times, when the suffering is becoming unbearable, they help me contact my late husband's children. They have their responsibilities. I am not blaming anybody; it is not their fault that I do not have a child of my own.... the local government has also been helping by giving me 200 Naira every month.

Confirming this, the former vice chairman of Esan Central Local Government said: When I saw the suffering of the aged, I introduced a Scheme for the Aged, Destitute and the Childless who have nobody to take care of them. I compiled the names of these aged and started paying them 200 Naira each every month although some of them are now dead. I spent 16,000 Naira every month. I did that for ten months before I left office. I hope the present local government chairman will continue doing this.

Although care and support for the aged have declined, it was also found that the reduced care provision by children was more problematic. The FGD participants and in-depth interviewees in both rural and urban areas were dissatisfied with current family care and support services for the aged compared to before. As expected, the aged in the in-depth interviews and FGDs attached greater value to non-material (physical presence and emotional) support. As a result, a female FGD participant aged 68 years (rural) pointed out:

Children who visit their parents are usually taking care of them more than those who send remittances. There is lack of emotional support these days. Daughter in-laws hardly visit their parent-in-laws unlike when they used to live with them to take care of them. We are suffering because our children no longer stay with us to take care of us. Migration to cities as a result of Western education is our bane.

Factors Responsible for Changes in Care and Support for the Aged

Following the discussion of changes in care and support for the aged, the participants were asked to identify factors responsible. An overwhelming majority of the entire study group put the blame on out-migration, unemployment, Westernization and industrialization. This finding is similar to that of Abumere (1991). He found that the Esans formed the highest migrating group in old Bendel State (now Edo and Delta States). Lack of infrastructural facilities and major industries in Esan has been linked to large-scale migration of the younger family members to several parts of the country thereby leaving their aged parents behind in their rural homes. The study shows that migration is a major factor that creates emotional distance between young and old. A male FGD participant aged 82 (rural) remarked:

Migration to cities by our children in search of white-collar jobs is the major cause of these new values and norms redefining the way children relate with their aged parents. This factor contributes to separation of the aged from their children. In this situation, physical

care of the aged by the children is problematic; even remittances suffer if emotional ties between parents and children are weak.

The assertion corroborates the findings in the literature that migration, industrialization and urbanization involve the physical separation of the older and the younger generations. Akeredolu-Ale and Aribiah (2001), for instance, observes that it is common for industrialization and urbanization to increase the rate at which the young, unmarried individuals leave their rural homes and migrate to urban areas to take up employment leaving the aged behind in the rural areas.

Four of the rural aged interviewed identified Western civilization and education as the major reasons for the decline in care and support for the aged. A retired male police officer in the focus group discussion, aged 68 (urban) stated:

The real cause is so-called civilization and education. Our children are copying European ways of life, which is not good for us. The younger generation believes that this is jet age. Because of this they try to sidetrack all we have inherited from our ancestors. Nowadays, you hardly see children of this generation paying 'actual homage', which was common in the past. When we were younger, we used to "sleep" in our fathers' farms but now the young are trying to Europeanize themselves. They call us old school. Just because they are graduates, they no longer respect age. Western education and Western civilization are responsible for the diminishing care and support for the aged.

According to another male in-depth interviewee aged 75 (rural):

The introduction of formal education and advent of Christianity are the major causes of these new values and norms redefining the way children relate with their aged parents. These factors influence to the way the aged are being perceived. It also results in their diminishing status and undervalued roles in several ways. First, education is forcing the young ones out of the rural area and to leave their parents. This is really affecting the way they should have taken care of their aged parents. Secondly, Christianity has eroded most of our cultural practices. First is the erosion of ancestral worship, which our children no longer see as relevant. This affects the way they perceive the aged who are the custodians of these cultural practices.

Earlier studies have also attributed the decline in care and support for the aged in the developing countries to the content of formal schooling, which is heavily westernized and this tends to purvey Western values of individualism and self-fulfillment (Caldwell, 1980). These processes were also found to have undermined the traditional norms and filial piety and leave members of both the older and younger generations less willing to sacrifice the younger generation's prospects in order to provide physical care for their elderly parents. With this finding, the study gives strong support to Parsons' theory of Pattern Variables that decline in care and support for the aged is as a result of society's evolvement from collectivism to individualism. However, one of the male focus group discussants, aged 70 (urban), disagreed that urbanization and Western education are the cause. According to him:

If a man struggled to train his child to tertiary institution, he will not expect this child to stay with him at home. He expects him to go out to work to be able to support his parents. Therefore, children going to the cities to look for work are doing so for the betterment of the whole family. Since there is no work here, children have seek it in the cities. While in the cities, some good children send their parents monthly allowances and provide material or financial support to settle medical bills, which is good.

More than half of the aged however, attributed the decline to the advent of Christianity, which they claimed has destroyed the extended family system in the study area. This opinion was also shared by the male focus group discussants in the rural area. For instance, a male participant aged 81 affirmed:

Christianity has eroded most of our cultural practices. First is the erosion of ancestral worship, which our children no longer see as relevant. This affects the way they see the aged who are the custodians of the cultural practices. Again, Christianity came with the idea of one-man one wife, which is gradually destroying our extended family system. In those days, a man married many wives so that if one of them were not around, others would look after him. Widow inheritance is also dying as nobody wants to inherit a widow, all because of Christianity. In the past, they were integrated into the family.

However, 15 of the 32 of those interviewed disagreed that Christianity inhibits children from taking care of their aged parents. A female interviewee aged 40 (urban) persistently asked: How can somebody say it is Christianity? Is it not the same Holy Bible we read every day that says, honour your father and mother? Most of the people helping the aged in this area are Christians.

Furthermore, more than three-quarter of the FGD participants in the urban area attributed the reduction in care and support for the aged to the rising cost of living and unemployment. They argued that the present economic situation is affecting the younger generation's ability to cater for their aged parents. There is no doubt that this situation leaves the aged unsupported, as most of the offspring are no longer around to assist in farm work which had hitherto characterized the traditional Esan society. According to a female in-depth interviewee:

Conclusion and Recommendations

Decline in care and support for the aged was evident in the ways old age and aged persons are perceived. The low perception has been attributed mainly to western influence. Although this causal factor is apparent in the study, it is mutually exclusive. It is also related to other lower explanatory factors, which have direct impact on care and support for the aged in the study area.

The following recommendations are offered in lieu of the study findings:

- Members of the family should be encouraged to see the aged in positive light. This should be carried out through public enlightenment campaign;
- There is also need to formulate or strengthen policies/programmes aimed at enhancing family relationships across generations, such as having a "family day" (as in Malaysia), where both the young and old can participate.

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