

Indirect Modernization and the Status of the Elderly in a Rural Third World Setting¹

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Currently the majority of the world's elderly reside in less developed countries and their proportion is increasing. This paper presents evidence that the process of modernization can have a negative impact on the elderly in even the most remote rural third world settings, even though those settings are not modernized or in the process of modernization in any of the the normal uses of that concept. Fieldwork was conducted in Helambu, Nepal on a sample of 37 persons over the age of 50 that included 86% of population aged 60 and over. Despite high levels of activity, health, social and economic status, the elderly were greatly dissatisfied with their situation. The paper demonstrates the manner in which modernization in India has profoundly changed household/family organization in Helambu and produced this situation.

Key Words: Nepal, Sherpa, Tibetan, Migration, Dependency, Human

A MAJOR shift in the worldwide distribution of old people has occurred. Not only have there never been so many elderly in the world as there are today, but the majority now live in the less developed countries (LDCs) and the numerical gap between the developed countries (DCs) and the LDCs will widen in the next two decades. The number of people aged 65 and over in LDCs reached 129 million in 1980 and gained equivalency with the number of elderly in the DCs (see Figure 1). It is estimated that by the year 2000 58% of the elderly (229 million) will reside in LDCs compared with only 42% (167 million) in DCs (United Nations, 1980). Thus, despite the low life expectancy and the relatively small proportion of elderly typical in LDCs (3.9% of the total population in 1980 vs. 11.4% in the DCs), the actual number of elderly living there is at an unprecedented high level and is increasing at a faster annual rate than the DCs. It is estimated that between 1980 and 2000 the number of elderly will increase 29.5% in the DCs and 77.5% in the LDCs (United Nations, 1980). Moreover, if fertility levels decrease in these LDCs, the proportion of elderly there will also increase. Table 1 shows that third-world countries that have experienced substantial reductions in fertility and growth rates also have experienced rapid increases in the proportions of elderly. These statistics indicate that the demographic elements of an "aging problem"

in LDCs are already present and potentially explosive in coming decades.

Although the presence of large numbers of elderly persons in a population may pose problems with regard to economic support, health, housing, and other service domains, it is commonly held that such problems typify only contemporary Euro-American industrial societies. This pervasive view is rooted in the theory of modernization and aging proposed by Cowgill and Holmes (1972), refined by Cowgill (1974), and supported by a number of studies (e.g., Palmore & Manton, 1974). This theoretical perspective depicts modernization and its consequences for the elderly as a process of disruption and deterioration and claims that "with increasing modernization the status of older people declines" (Cowgill, 1974 p. 124). Living in households together with their children and grandchildren, the emotional and physical needs of old people in nonmodernized societies are met by family and kinsmen. The elderly are seen to require external assistance only as modernization disrupts the traditional family's integrity and the economic and social security it provides. The theory defines modernization as:

the transformation of a total society from a relatively rural way of life based on animate power, limited technology, relatively undifferentiated institutions, parochial and traditional outlook and values, toward a predominately urban way of life based on inanimate sources of power, highly developed scientific technology, highly differentiated institutions matched by segmented individual roles, and a cosmopolitan outlook which emphasizes efficiency and progress. (Cowgill, 1974 p. 127)

¹We are grateful to Professors J. Kevin Eckert and Ruth Dunkle for their suggestions and to the Center for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, Nepal and the people of Helambu for their cooperation.

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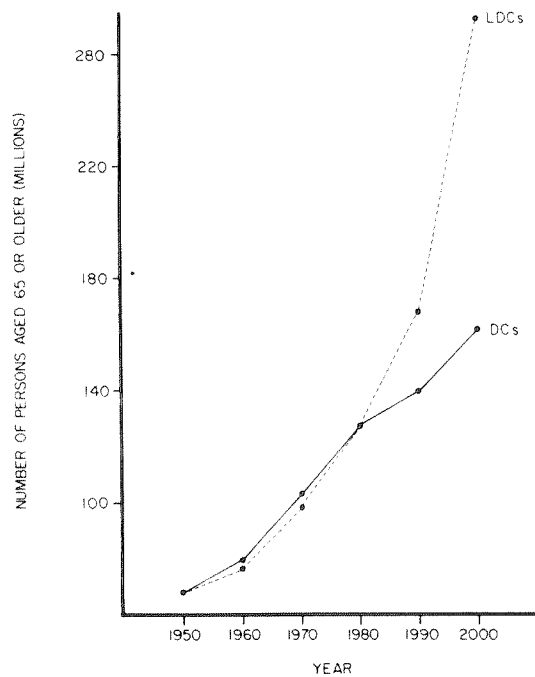


Figure 1. Increase in the number of persons age 65 and older in developed countries (DC) and less developed countries (LDC) between 1950 and 2000. (Compiled from United Nations, 1980.)

Modernization entails four major phenomena adversely affecting the elderly: (a) scientific technology as applied to economic production and distribution, (b) urbanization, (c) literacy and mass education, and (d) health technology (Cowgill, 1974).

According to these criteria, most of the rural, agrarian LDCs in the third and fourth world have not undergone modernization, and the status of the elderly there should be high. We suggest that this view is an oversimplification. On the one hand it ignores evidence dating back to Simmons' classic study (1945) that the elderly are not invariably well-off in all traditional societies. More importantly, by emphasizing modernization's total societal transformation, it has obscured the impact of modernization at incipient stages when the material and technological accoutrements of modernization have not yet appeared in rural areas and, in particular, has obscured the potential impact of modernization on nearby areas that are not yet in the process of modernization. We suggest that irrespective of the initial status of the elderly, the interrelatedness of today's world has created a situation wherein modernization can adversely affect the status of the elderly even in the most rural and isolated third- and

Table 1. Proportion of Elderly aged 65 and over, 1950-2000, in Selected Third-World Countries Using U.N. Medium Variant Projections

Country	Year					
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
High fertility						
Nepal	4.4	3.5	3.0	3.0	3.3	3.6
India	2.7	3.1	2.9	3.0	3.2	3.7
Low- to -moderate fertility						
Ceylon	3.9	3.6	3.6	4.1	4.8	5.7
Singapore	2.4	2.1	3.3	4.8	5.3	7.1
Republic of Korea	3.0	3.3	3.3	4.0	4.0	5.9
Hong Kong	2.5	2.8	4.0	6.4	8.4	10.0

Note: Compiled from United Nations, 1980.

fourth-world countries. By overemphasizing the dichotomy between traditional and modern society, modernization and aging theory has fostered an overly sanguine portrait of the mass of rural agrarian elderly in LDCs that has lulled both gerontologists and governments into complacency with regard to the needs of the elderly. This paper will illustrate the manner in which modernization can have an indirect impact on the status of the elderly by examining a remote rural area in the Nepal Himalayas.

THE SHERPAS OF HELAMBU, NEPAL

Helambu is a rural area situated about 2 days' walk northeast of Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. The authors conducted a study over a 6-week period during July through August, 1979 in the contiguous villages of Norbugyang and Pemagyang (both pseudonyms) situated at an altitude of about 2600 m. These two villages included 75 households of Sherpas containing 373 persons, 257 of whom were in residence at the time of the study.

Agriculture is the basic subsistence strategy in Helambu and cultivation of crops such as wheat, barley, radish, and potatoes is still done by hand in the traditional way. The diet is also traditional and consists primarily of Tibetan style tea (made with salt and butter), home-brewed liquor, roasted barley and millet, rice, potatoes, radishes, meat, and dairy products. The area has no roads, telephones, or electricity, although a piped water system to several public taps has been established recently. There are no Western-type health facilities, the presence of a Nepali-language primary school is a recent phenomenon, and the use of manufactured goods remains minimal. While very important changes (which are discussed below) have occurred in

Helambu over the past 4 to 5 decades, anyone walking through these villages (and there is still no other way to get there) would consider them traditional and preindustrial. Helambu is clearly not modernized or even in the process of modernization in any of the usual meanings of the concept used earlier by Cowgill (1974) and the elderly should, therefore, have high status.

The meaning of status, however, requires comment. As used by Cowgill and Holmes and others, the concept has little utility for measuring the situation or condition of the elderly cross-culturally because it has not been clearly defined. The attempts by Watson and Maxwell (1977) and Palmore and Manton (1974) to operationalise status, although useful, are still too narrow to accommodate rural LDC societies. If status is taken to mean only, or primarily, prestige and social standing, it refers to only *one* component of the total *situation* of the elderly. If, on the other hand, high status (prestige) is taken ipso facto to imply health, wealth, and happiness, then the concept incorrectly lumps very different and independent factors. To investigate the condition of the elderly cross-culturally, we have suggested disaggregating the status concept into nine dimensions including: (a) social status (prestige), (b) biological status (e.g., biological function, physical fitness), (c) health status (morbidity), (d) activity status (physical work undertaken), (e) authority status (power and authority exercised in the community and family), (f) economic status (control of resources and wealth), (g) household status (household composition), (h) psychological status (satisfaction with personal situation), (i) ritual status (role played in ritual life) (Goldstein & Beall 1981). Each of these status dimensions describes a facet of the situation of the elderly that can be operationalized and measured and can vary independently of the others. For example, physical fitness and activity levels may rank high but economic status may be low, or social status may rank high but psychological status may be low. This tentative framework allows for intrasocietal as well as intersocietal comparisons for each dimension, as well as for eliciting the relationships among all of the dimensions within a single society. For example, the economic status of the elderly may be studied by comparing males and females within a society or by comparing traditional and industrial societies or by correlating economic with one of the other statuses.

Utilizing this framework the Helambu study investigated the situation of the elderly in Norbugyang and Pemagyang. The study focused on 37

persons over the age of 50 and included 86% of the residents 60 years of age or older. The age breakdown of the sample is: 12 in their 50s; 11 in their 60s; 11 in their 70s; and 3 in their 80s. The household status of these individuals is described by their households' composition: 60% of the individuals over age 60 and 73% of those over age 70 lived alone or with a spouse. In 70% of the households consisting of a lone elderly person, the elderly person was 70 years of age or older. Although it was not possible to obtain detailed information on economic status, all but one of the elderly in our study owned sufficient land in the village to provide for subsistence needs.

To determine the activity status of the elderly, an activity-work survey of 30 different elderly persons aged 50 or over used recall interviews on 15 different days during the peak agricultural season. This yielded a total of 69 person-days of activity. The participants in this survey were asked to enumerate all their activities and meals for the previous day, and this was supplemented with spot-check direct observation.

Ninety-one percent of the person-days worked by men and 87% of those worked by women included heavy labor, defined as at least one instance of either carrying a heavy load (between 14 and 35 kg) or field work (usually digging up potatoes using an iron hoe that requires that the worker bend over almost horizontally from the waist and dig in that position). The data show that elderly persons in their 70s and over are as likely to do field work and carry loads as those in their 50s. When agricultural work was performed, males averaged 4.1 and females 3.6 hours a day.

These activity patterns reflect maintenance of the minimal physical capacities to perform work. Indeed, only one male was too ill to perform heavy labor during the period we studied. A number of factors indicate that the biological functional status of the elderly in Helambu is generally excellent. Particularly relevant to activity status is the virtual absence of certain activity-limiting conditions such as high blood pressure, joint immobility, blindness, and deafness. Systolic and diastolic blood pressure did not increase significantly with age. The average blood pressure for males over 60 was 114/77 and for females over 60 125/86. Virtually none of the elderly had osteoarthritis of the hands as manifested by Heberden's or Bouchard's nodes, and none had finger contractures. There was only one case of partial blindness and no deafness or overt senility. The elderly communicated clearly and had no apparent thought or memory disorders.

The social status of the elderly in Tibetan (Sherpa) society is relatively high, although as Ekvall (1980, p. 434) has stated the elderly are "not valued for being old *sui generis*, but are valued and honored for discretion, know-how, and wisdom". Nonetheless, ideally, old age is a time when the trials and tribulations of obtaining subsistence shift to one's children and a process of disengagement is begun that culminates in death and rebirth. Tibetan norms and values hold that one's parents in particular, and the elderly in general, should be respected. One's children have a debt of gratitude to repay to their elderly parents. Authority and ritual status are also high since the elderly are often heads of their household. However, despite this and the high activity, health, and economic status, many elderly Helambu Sherpas overtly expressed unhappiness with their lot. Their psychological status was extremely low. Almost all of those living alone drank home-brew liquor daily, and a few consumed three or more cups per day. Several spontaneously volunteered that they wished they were dead, and others commented that their children had abandoned them and that the young in general did not care about the elderly.

With regard to this, it is essential to note that the household status of the Helambu Sherpas deviates markedly from other Tibetan groups in that so many elderly persons live alone or with a spouse even though in most instances they have children or grandchildren living in the village. We shall argue that the psychological and emotional malaise expressed by many Sherpas stems precisely from this changed situation that produced a discrepancy between traditional expectations and the subtly transformed social reality with which the elderly must now cope. In turn, we argue that it is the indirect impact of modernization in India which caused the household change.

THE INDIRECT IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION AMONG SHERPAS

The history of change in Helambu may be briefly outlined as follows. Local inhabitants report that the most striking social change has been the emergence of out-migration to India for work. This apparently began during World War II when the British received permission to recruit Sherpas for road and other construction projects in India and has increased substantially during the last 20 years. During the time of our study, 31% percent of the villagers of Pemagyang and Norbugyang were living outside the village on a long-term basis. In the

younger age categories, 36% of those between the ages of 30 and 40 and 35% of those between 20 and 30 were living in India or Kathmandu.

Underlying this migration is the modernization of India's political and economic infrastructure, in particular, the creation and maintenance of an extensive communication/transportation network of motorable roads throughout the Indian Himalayas. This process of modernization in India has indirectly affected the remote Sherpa area in the Nepal Himalayas by altering the traditional economic alternatives available to Sherpas. It has drawn Sherpas to India to work on construction projects as laborers and then as both laborers and contractors and has exposed them to new secular value orientations. The consequence of this has been devastating to the social matrix in which the elderly exist in Helambu, despite the absence of overt "modernizing" changes in Helambu itself.

Traditionally, as each son reached marriageable age in Helambu, he received a share of the patrimony, married, and set up a new and independent monogamous family unit. The youngest son, however, was expected to remain with the parents after marriage and help look after them in their waning years. For this he would receive their share of the land in addition to his own. This pattern has been drastically altered by the extensive migration of young people to India. Youngest sons who would otherwise have remained with their parents in extended (stem) families are no longer present. Parents in Helambu tried (and still try) to keep their sons and daughters from migrating to Kathmandu and India, but the pull factor of income, new skills, and excitement, and the push factor of what young people perceive as the tedium and harshness of farming have been too powerful to overcome. Moreover, even though the migrants may plan to return to the village someday, the independence they experience living abroad will make return to a subordinate position in an extended family difficult.

The situation with regard to the large numbers of elderly living alone in Helambu, therefore, does not reflect the traditional cultural pattern despite the rustic, backward impression given. The elderly Sherpas living alone were not doing so because of traditional values and norms but because they had to. Massive emigration to India has precluded the realization of the extended stem family ideal. Thus, in an indirect manner, infrastructural modernization in India has very profoundly affected the social system of a remote Nepali area while leaving its material technology and conditions untouched and "traditional".

Examination of elderly living alone and as couples reveals that many of them have children, grandchildren, and/or siblings living in the village. Of 17 such households, two had no children (one of the households was a nun) and for two there is no information. Among the remaining 13 households, there are nine with living sons, and the other four have living daughters. This raises an important question. Whereas family life is valued, in cases where the youngest son is living in India or has died, why don't the elderly live with their other sons, or with an adult daughter, or a married grandchild?

The explanation of this enigma lies in the Sherpa's own definition of dependency (Beall & Goldstein, 1982). Dependency can be conceptualized etically (objectively, from the observer's point of view) as well as emically (subjectively, from the subject's point of view). Etically, it is a continuum concept referring to the extent to which the elderly receive goods and services from others without regard to how this is valued in a particular culture. Emically it is based on the culture's own definitions; it is a concept in which some, but not necessarily all, types of goods, services, and situations are defined as conferring a pejorative status equivalent to our culture's (emic) definition of dependency. The Sherpa example illustrates this.

As indicated above, when elder sons in Helambu marry they establish jurally distinct independent nuclear households. Once this occurs, even if the youngest son migrates to India or dies, the parents cannot recall an older son and his family to live with them. They may be able to move in with another son but to do so would be to relinquish their independence and diminish their self-esteem as well as economic and authority status. It would mean turning over their house and fields to their son (and daughter-in-law) and becoming a powerless appendage to the son's household. As in our own society, long-term dependency has a strong pejorative connotation. Thus, when the indirect impact of modernization produced substantial numbers of old folk in this dilemma, they chose to live alone, despite the fact that they do not want to live that way and are lonely and unhappy with their fate. They are bitter about the recent changes that have caused this transformation but have themselves been unable to ignore or redefine their cultural definition of dependency to accommodate the new situation. The cultural expectations and aspirations of the elderly in Helambu are incongruent with the new reality in which they are immersed. The consequence of this is the anomalous situation of elderly who are hale, healthy, productive, and economically not wanting,

but who perceive themselves to be psychologically and emotionally deprived.

It is interesting to note, however, that certain aspects of the cultural system appear to be changing. For example, many of the elderly indicated that they thought small families were more advantageous than large ones. Their rationale for this was that whereas one can not count on children to provide for aging parents, the fewer sons a person has, the more land the parents retain when old (given their pattern of equal division among male coparceners), and the more economic power and security they have. Thus, rather than favoring large families as a form of old-age security, small families and family planning were widely considered to be good things. In any case, with respect to their household situation, so long as they are able to function independently, this is the option the elderly grudgingly prefer.

The impact of distant exogenous forces on this remote Nepalese village illustrates the manner in which modernization, contrary to common belief, can adversely affect the status of the elderly without transforming the total society. The theory of modernization and aging, by failing to indicate the power of modernization to produce such an impact on isolated segments of otherwise traditional settings, has supported an intellectual climate in which the elderly in rural third- and fourth-world countries are not considered problematic and in need of support. We suggest, to the contrary, that this is not necessarily the case and that the Helambu example reflects another aspect of the relationship between modernization and aging. Moreover, when the current plight of such elderly persons in LDC countries is projected onto the ever increasing corpus of elderly persons in rural Asia and the third world, the future of the elderly in such areas is anything but rosy. The spectre of millions of third-world elderly living alone, without adequate social service support institutions, is an unpleasant, but not unlikely scenario for the remainder of this century.

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