FADING OUT: RESOURCE CONTROL AND CROSS-CULTURAL PATTERNS OF DEFERENCE*

ABSTRACT. This is a qualitative and inductive study of the means by which the aged in 95 societies transfer control over material and symbolic resources to younger members of society. Four interrelated patterns of transfer were identified, along with associated displays of deference. Patterns of resource deployment were found to change as aging continued and 'fading out' occurred.

Key Words: fading out, discretionary resource transfer, deference, symbolic interaction, ethnology

INTRODUCTION

To survive, cultures must develop processes for transferring control of resources (knowledge, material goods, and values) from one generation of leaders to a new generation of properly trained successors. In traditional societies — slow-changing and with relatively stable configuration of roles — individuals learn the rudiments of their society's culture as juveniles, achieve controlling positions as mature adults, and transfer control to a new generation at the end of their life cycles. Therefore, aging in traditional societies can be understood as a process of developing, consolidating and relinquishing control over cultural resources.

In general, people do not gain control over identical resources. Nor do they 'use' resources at the same rate or value them similarly. Many researchers have recognized that control over important societal resources results in deference and care as a person ages. However, much of this work has conveyed a lopsided view of intergenerational relationships, linking deference with resource control, but not discussing the complementary displays of influence which accompany displays of deference.

This paper presents a typology of deference interaction patterns in relationships to age, influence, and control over resources. The process of 'fading out' will introduced, in which the status of influential elders is gradually reduced. It will become clear that as this process takes place the aged deploy their resources differently and that deference displays towards them are correspondingly recast.

METHOD

Much of the existing cross-cultural work on the aged focuses on the influence of culture in predicting their well-being. Much of this work
assumes that culture makes a difference, that the aged in one society may be held in greater esteem than in another, and that hypotheses can be tested that predict which elements of culture influence the aging process.

Concepts used in these studies (e.g., social change) have ordinarily been macrosocial in scope and designed to test existing theory. The goal here is to generate a theoretical framework for the understanding of aging through an examination of interactional events.

The data used to generate this framework were essentially the same as those used to test certain quantitative hypotheses relating the control of valuable information by old people to their status in the community. A sample of 95 societies was selected from Murdock and White's (1969) Standard Cross-Cultural Sample, consisting of 186 independent 'distinctive world areas.' A codebook was prepared, using a pre-coded format. All of the ethnographies available for the 95 societies — which were read by native research assistants or by the investigators — were obtained either from library stacks or from category 116 of the Human Relations Area Files. Original ethnographies were read in English, Spanish, German, Dutch, French, and Flemish. Readers not only used the simple pre-coded format but, in addition, they copied all the original statements, in their proper contexts, to provide complete information on the activities of the aged. These extensive ethnographic notes, supplemented by readily available information on contemporary societies, provided the data set upon which the following observations were based. Details of the quantitative part of this investigation may be found in several publications (e.g., Maxwell, Krassen-Maxwell, and Silverman 1978).

The usual unit of analysis in quantitative studies is the community itself. The units of analysis in the present study, however, were not whole societies, but rather theoretical constructs emerging from descriptions of interactions\(^1\) between older persons and others in a variety of social settings. For this reason, societies were not coded in terms of the constructs. The goal was to establish categories, not to characterize communities, although future research along these lines is certainly a possibility.

Continuous comparative analysis is a method for the secondary analysis of ethnography appropriate for discovering social processes that are common to all population groups. A detailed description of the method has been published in an article. ‘Search and Research in Ethnology: Continuous Comparative Analysis’ (Maxwell and Maxwell 1980a). The method has five stages:

**Stage 1.** Creating analytic units. This stage borrows techniques from content analysis. I was interested in studying the process whereby the aged earn and receive deference. As in content analysis, the objective at this stage is to isolate the data. It involves the abstraction, from ethnographies, of broad descriptions detailing instances in which older people are shown