CONFLICTS OVER CAREGIVING:
A DISCUSSION OF FILIAL OBLIGATIONS AMONG
ADULT NIGERIAN CHILDREN

ABSTRACT. A Nigerian study describing what working adult children do to help their parents.
Data were derived from interviews of 100 respondents aged 25 to 55 currently employed in the Nigerian public sector and having at least a living mother.
The commonest form of assistance was provision of monthly allowance and foodstuffs. Most of the adult children felt dissatisfied with their level of assistance to their parents, yet felt unable to do better because of the variety of demands on their limited financial resources. Since this current practice of parental support burdens the child's family and fails to provide adequately for the needs of the elderly parents, the author suggests that there is a need for government to explore other avenues for lightening the burden of parent care and thereby improving the quality of life across the life span.

Key Words: Nigeria, care-giving, adult children, filial obligations

INTRODUCTION

The topic of parent care by adult children has for a while been of interest to western gerontologists because of its obvious relevance for the issue of long-term care for the increasing number of frail and chronically ill elderly in those societies. Of interest to some gerontologists is the identification of the determinants of parent care and the consequences of caregiving for the family of the adult child. In this respect, various studies have indicated that proximity, competing responsibilities, sex of the child and level of functional disability of the elder all affect the type and level of care which adult children provide for their parents (Caro and Blank 1984; Horowitz 1982; Lang and Brody 1983; Sussman 1979). It has also been observed that care-giving to parents can, and does, sometimes lead to negative consequences for the family of the adult child (Cantor 1983; Danis 1978).

With regard to Nigerian society, even though assistance to well parents is a normative expectation for most, there are no known works which examine the topic of what adult children actually do for their parents or the consequences of care-giving on the family of the adult child. The objective of this study is therefore to examine care-giving by adult children among the Yoruba, an ethnic group in Nigeria.

Located in the southwest of Nigeria, the Yoruba constitute one of the three largest ethnic groups in the country. According to Ekanem (1972), the 1963 Nigerian census put the Yoruba as numbering about 11.32 million. More recently, Eades (1980) estimates the Yoruba population to be about 14.4 million.

in 1977, assuming a growth rate of 2.8% since 1963. The Yoruba are the most urban of all African people, and their urban way of life is traditional, dating back to well before the advent of Europeans (Bascom 1969). These old traditional cities were farming centers surrounded by belts of farms extending as much as 15 miles outside. The Yoruba commute regularly from their homes in the city to their farm huts for weeks at a time when the farming season is at its peak. The Yoruba economy is based on sedentary hoe farming, craft specialization, and trade. Each clan owns its own farm land which the chief/clan head assigns to members on the basis of individual needs.

The Yoruba kinship system is patrilineal. Every Yoruba is born into an *idilë* (clan) whose members are descended from a remote common ancestor. Residence is patrilocal with the bride generally coming to live in one of the many rooms in the compound of the groom’s father. The hierarchy of status within the clan is based on seniority and runs from the eldest *Baale* (Father of the Home) of its several compounds down to the youngest child. This arrangement is very important in regulating conduct between the members of the collectivity.

In terms of seniority, Bascom (1969) noted that traditionally, the male clan members of the compound are divided into three groups – the elders (*âgbà-îlé*), the adult males who are economically independent (*sògàn*), and the young men and boys who are still economically dependent on their fathers and who are referred to as “children of the house” (*omo îlé*). Each age group has distinct functions which it performs for the smooth running of the clan and the entire community.

In the precolonial Yoruba society, fulfilling filial obligations to elderly parents did not disrupt adult children’s performances in roles related to work, social, and other family responsibilities. To start with, since marriage was polygynous and the emphasis was on having many children, the older man was assured of adequate farm hands to keep his farm going even in old age. Thus, with the support of his children and wives, an elderly male was economically active almost to the point of total incapacity (Fadipe 1970). Since other family members had been involved with him all along in his farming activities, it was easy for them to continue the farming and, therefore, ensure the economic survival of the family. When no longer economically active, the older men performed a number of functions which served to sustain those members who were still economically active. They became experts on farming, served as arbitrators in disputes and as informal educators of the young ones in the family teaching them about the history and culture of the clan (Uka 1966), and helped in providing first aid treatment to sick family members.

Similarly, the females of the household started their marital life, first as “strangers” in their husband’s family but as they bore children, the females acquired enhanced status in their new family. While still able, they were expected to assist their husbands on the farms and to assist with the sale of incidental surpluses from the farm. It was also the duty of the young wives of the house/family to assist the elderly people in the compound with their