

A Discourse on Aging in Contemporary Ghana

A Webinar Presentation to the University of Ghana Centre for Ageing Studies

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Outline of presentation

- A statement of the question explored in the study
- A background that serves as an entry to the study, including an overview of the gap filled in extant literature
- A description of the theoretical perspective for the study, and the analytic approach
- A description of study methods; participants, data collection, and data analysis
- Present key findings of the study, and
- Reflect on contributions to the literature, implications for policy and practice, openings for future research

The question explored in the study

- What does growing older (or aging) mean to elderly Ghanaians?
- How do they understand and describe the aging experience in everyday language?

Background to the study

- a growing demographic group, globally and locally
- Global picture – those aged 65+:
 - Surpassed the population of children under five in 2018,
 - 703 million in 2019
 - projected to be 16% of the global population (1 in 6) by 2050 (United Nations, 2019)

a growing demographic group

- Continental – African picture:

- In Africa, older adults include those aged 60 and above (He et al., 2020; Help Age International, 2008)
- Between 2020 and 2050, this population will triple from 74.4 million to 235.1 million (He et al., 2020)

National – Ghanaian picture:

- 1 in 15 Ghanaians is aged 60+, 2million or 6.5% of the estimated 30.9 million (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021)
- By 2050, the population of older adults will hit a 6.3 million mark (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013)

Extant Research on Aging and Older Adults in Ghana

- A corresponding increase in interest in research on aging and older adults (De-graft Aikins et al., 2016)
- Extensive and multidisciplinary research
- Existing research has highlighted:
 - the changing socio-demographic profile of older Ghanaians (Kpessa-Whyte, 2018; Tawiah, 2011)
 - the health challenges faced by the elderly (Ayernor, 2012, 2016; Kuuire et al., 2017; Kwankye, 2013; Minicuci et al., 2014)
 - Poverty, low income, and care problems among older adults (Aboderin, 2004; Coe, 2017, 2019)

Extant research cont'd

- Other studies have looked at:
 - The important socialization role of older adults; e.g., care for orphans and other vulnerable children (Atobrah, 2016; Drah, 2014),
 - Feelings of loneliness and lack of respect expressed by older adults (van der Geest, 2002, 2004),
 - Reasons for pride and regret among older adults (Issahaku, 2019),
 - Challenges & opportunities for social participation (Issahaku, 2021)

The gap

- The growing research on aging is a welcome trend for:
 - Theory development; better policies; and better practices catered to older adults
- However, current research has a notable limitation:
 - the quantitative studies do not explore interpretations of the aging experience,
 - the qualitative studies focus more on “challenges” – poverty, health, and care needs

The gap & the goal of the study

- Studies that purposefully explore the question: “what does growing older (or aging) mean to elderly Ghanaians?” are in short supply
- ❖ No recent study has directly posed the question, neither has any study explored this question using discourse analysis
- The goal of this study: What does it mean to grow older? How do older adults speak about the aging experience?

Theoretical perspective

- Two complementary perspectives inform the study:
 - the interpretive perspective (Marshall et al., 2016;) and
 - the life course framework (Cattell & Albert, 2009; Elder, 1995; Sokolovsky, 2009)
- ❖ Both draw from traditions of phenomenology and symbolic interactionism (Marshall et al., 2016)

Theoretical perspective - interpretive

- the unique ways in which individuals make sense of their lives and experiences and how they create and inhabit particular social identities
- How social life is interactional and how interpretations people give to their lives and experiences evolve and change over time and cross-culturally
- How people construct and interpret their realities drawing from knowledge in current circulation, past experience, and every day social interactions

Theoretical perspective – life course

- Lives as lived in context and in motion and lives as linked
- how people make sense of the age-graded social passages they go through in their unique cultural contexts
- as people navigate the cultural contexts of community, family, gender, and work over the life span, they graduate from adulthood to elderhood to possibly ancestorhood (Cattell & Albert, 2009; Elder, 1995; Sokolovsky, 2009)

Analytic approach – Discourse analysis

- Discourse: patterned ways in which social reality is constructed through the power of language, using
 - Knowledge from oral traditions, cultural assumptions, and beliefs
 - Knowledge from scientific or non-scientific sources
- Discourses:
 - create the objects of whom they speak, and
 - are the focal ways in which a culture produces and circulates beliefs that instill discipline and guide social interactions
 - Consist of descriptive, explanatory, argumentative, and evaluative narratives and, sometimes, a critique (see, e.g., Foucault, 1972; Wood & Kruger, 2000)

Analytic approach cont'd

- Discourse analysis has been used “as a method of analysis; a methodology; a perspective on social life that involves metatheoretical, theoretical, and analytic principles . . . ” (McMullen, 2011, p. 205)
- pays attention to how language is deployed (e.g., words & phrases used)
- how the social context shapes understanding & interpretations
- lends itself to the analysis of both primary data or existing textual, audio and visual materials
- Enables the analyst to focus on one or more dimensions of the data, and
- highlights how the claims made by participants corroborate or contradict what is already known

(McMullen, 2011; Potter, 2004; Willig, 2003; Wood & Kroger, 2000)

Methods

- Participants:
 - 23 older adults purposively sampled from the Northern and Greater Accra Regions for the study
 - ❖ Field outreach and purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of:
 - elderly men and women,
 - older adults from rural and urban areas,
 - individuals with formal-no formal education,
 - older adults who had pursued varied occupations during their active years, and
 - older adults belonging to different ethnic or tribal groups (see Table 1)

Data collection

- Semi-structured in-person interviewing with participants at mutually agreed locations
 - Interviews explored the focal question: what does it mean to say one is aging or growing older?
 - Sub-questions explored included what participants are excited about and what their fears are about growing older
 - 19 interviews in English, 4 interviews in Dagbani
 - Use of an audio recorder to capture and transcribe the data and import into Nvivo

Data analysis

- I followed steps for analyzing discourse outlined in the literature (McMullen, 2011; Potter, 2004; Willig, 2003; Wood & Kroger, 2000)
- I gained familiarity with what participants were saying and how they were saying it by reading the transcripts repeatedly and making notes of key messages
- I paid attention to:
 - the multiple ways in which participants spoke of the aging phenomenon,
 - the differences and similarities in their accounts, and
 - stayed closer to their explanations and interpretations
- I used open and axial coding to identify and outline patterns of meaning in the emerging discourse, (see Table 2 below)

Table 2. Coding of data on what aging means

Question of focus	Sample codes	Subthemes	Themes
<p>What aging means – what participants are excited about</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Many years -Knowledge -Experience -Wisdom -Problem solving -Grandparent -Family elder -Community elder -Traditional leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Accumulated social value -Changed/Enhanced social status -Changed expectations & responsibilities 	<p>Powerful senior</p>
<p>What aging means – what are participants' fears?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Body/joint aches & pains -Quick exhaustion -Loss of strength -Inability to work -Income loss -Impairment – hearing, memory, vision -Need for care -Sickness -Closer to death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Physical & cognitive limitations -Loss of social influence -Increased dependency & proximity to death 	<p>Declining elder-ambiguous ancestor</p>

Data analysis cont'd

- Drawing from the existing literature and from my familiarity with the cultural context of the study I:
 - interrogated the data by focusing on literal and implied meanings in participants' utterances,
 - made judgments on what concepts would serve as heuristics for the emerging themes,
 - reduced the data to main themes that constituted the discourse on aging as *displayed* in figure 1

Findings: discourse on aging

- Consistent with the tone of discourse, the data revealed:
 - subject positioning by participants (e.g., aging persons as experienced, wise, weak or strong people),
 - narrative structure in participants' utterances (e.g., comparative analysis, use of folklore), and
 - dilemmas (e.g., about changing physiological functions and social status)
- the themes of “powerful senior” and “declining elder-ambiguous ancestor” emerged as the contrasting components of the discourse

Powerful senior — predominantly constructed by male participants

- Characteristics of the powerful senior included:
 - a sense of accumulated social value which leads to,
 - enhanced social status, and
 - changed expectations and responsibilities
- According participants, aging:
 - brings experience, knowledge, wisdom and strength of character all of which in unique ways make one a powerful senior member of society

An illustration

- *If you hear that somebody is growing older, the first thing that comes into the mind is your age, it is very, very important . . . And, it comes with experience. Once you are aging you pass through life situations and by that you acquire more knowledge and then with that experience you have wisdom. (Male, 61 years)*

The powerful senior

- Has a better understanding of events/issues and can proffer solutions; you become a problem solver

An illustration:

When a person says he is growing older, then life is becoming very interesting for you. Because he sees himself above so many things that have happened before which the young ones are doing, and he feels he could do better. Secondly, seeing the mistakes of the young ones, he can see that he too, some time ago, had also gone into that and says, 'if I had known I should have done this. Because now that I'm growing older, I have solutions to so many of them'. (Male, 63 years)

Powerful senior: wise, makes decisions, presides over ceremonies

- An illustration through folklore:

A boy once asked his elderly father, 'father, what is special about growing older'? The father sat him down and told the following story. "There was a young man understudying an elderly native doctor. One day the native doctor asked the young man to go bring a live vulture for a ritual. Confused, the young man asked: 'how on earth can I catch a live vulture'? The elder smiled and, tapping the young man, said, 'don't worry, I will tell you what to do. Go to the open field, lie down face up, pretend to be dead, and watch what happens'. The young man did as was told and soon vultures started hovering over the spot. The first to come was a 100-year old vulture who said: 'I have seen many vultures captured because they went close to a suspicious carcass like this one'. Then it went away. The second was a 75-year old vulture who said: 'some of my friends have been captured because they went to eat a suspicious carcass like this one'. Then it went away. The third vulture was 25 years old and it said: 'Aha! This is booty on a silver platter'. Then it landed by the side of the young man to eat. Can you guess what happened to it? What an elder can see while sitting down, a young man cannot see even if he climbs an oak tree". (Male, 68 years)

Powerful senior: nurturance of children and general responsibility for family and community well-being

- Female more than male participants emphasized the care and nurturance role of the powerful senior.

Illustration:

Growing old is a blessing from God. To grow old is a blessing from God. For me I will be happy if I can live more than 100 years. I will be happy in the sense that I can look after my grandchildren. (Female, 74 years).

Growing older, you experience a change in your life. Old age is characterized by the presence of children, sometimes many of them in your life. For this reason, your plans change. You become a parent, a grandparent. (Female, 60 years).

Nurturance comes with some stress

An illustration:

So, if you go on retirement and your children are still in the basic school then you will think more. Paying school fees and some petty, petty things will be needed for the children. If you go on retirement and you have to provide all these things you will think more and that will make you have headache; your pressure too will go up. (Female, 61 years)

Responsibility for the general well-being of family and community

- Illustrations:

Growing older, for me, your attitude and your behavior and other things change. Your movement and code of dressing also change. You cannot dress like when you were young. You know, other generations look up to you. So, your dress code should be different from that of the younger generation. When you have children in the house, they must pick up some of these things from you. (Male, 69 years)

Growing older, you are becoming mature, you are now an elderly person. Like currently, with my current age, I'm now the family head. I am now the family head and for that matter, I will even find it very difficult to leave the family house. This is because, in fact, the people we are handling in this house, they are many. So, I am thinking that if I leave, the family will disintegrate. (Male, 67 years)

Declining elder-ambiguous ancestor

- The other component of the discourse is “decline and ambiguity”
 - ❖ The aging person:
 - progressively experiences decline in social influence,
 - eventually fades into the ambiguous state called ancestor
 - Characteristics of the declining elder-ambiguous ancestor include:
 - physical and cognitive limitations (e.g., disease & impairment),
 - loss of social influence,
 - increased dependency, and
 - death & dying (sooner or later)

Decline: physical limitations

- An illustration:

It [growing older] means you are no longer strong like the first time; you cannot do things as you used to do before. Your energy is less; everything of yours has limits. You cannot go about your work because sicknesses start setting in. You get sicknesses which probably when you were younger you weren't getting them. Then you become tired with the least work that you do. So, you cannot more make ends meet like the first time. (Female, 63 years).

Decline: physical limitations

Growing older, I will say there are signs and symptoms that will tell you that you are growing older. Because in life if you were able to do certain things and then at a certain time you can't do those things again, it means you are growing weaker. Growing weaker means you are growing older. Right now, my health condition; I see that I urinate very frequently. In the night, maybe, I urinate about three, sometimes, about four, times before daybreak and I could see that I'm growing older.

(Male, 72 years)

Decline: cognitive limitations

Different people can have different experiences. To me, growing older means advancing in years and getting weaker in strength, getting memory crisis, losing your memory and your body stature. Even your sight, your hearing, may be affected. (Male, 62 years)

The way you used to live, you can no longer live that way. You experience a change in your life . . . Then you experience a decrease in your mental ability. (Female, 60 years)

Ambiguous ancestor: death & dying

When you are growing older, there is a proverb in Dagbanli which says that 'if a leaf is turning yellow, it is going to fall from the tree'. It means you are going towards your death. Yes, growing older means one is getting closer to death. (Male, 65 years).

It [growing older] means a lot to me. I met my mother's parents, but I didn't meet my father's parents; they were gone at old age. When my mother's parents died, I said, 'ah! So, one day I will also die'. Not quite long afterwards, in 1982, 5th January, my father died. I said 'ah! Everybody is now going turn-by-turn. I know one day it will come to my turn'. As I am getting old, I do tell my children, my grandchildren, I say 'your mother knows my mother, they know your grandmother, where are they? They are gone. In the same way, maybe, one day you will get married and have issue and your children will know me. But one day, you will not see me on earth again'. So, growing older means moving toward the time you will depart from earth. (Female, 71 years).

Discussion

- “powerful senior” and “declining elder-ambiguous ancestor” constitute the discourse on aging
 - ❖ On the one hand, the aging subject enters into elderhood (Sokolovsky, 2009), a position of seniority and social influence
 - powerful seniors make decisions, or take actions that produce effects
 - ❖ On the other hand, the aging elder also experiences decline and ambiguity in social relations due to
 - a progressive accumulation of physical, cognitive, and social losses, a process whose climax is the death event

Discussion – making sense of powerful senior

- Cross-cultural literature on aging (Cattell & Albert, 2009; Gurven & Kaplan, 2009; Makoni & Stroeken, 2002; Sokolovsky, 2009)
 - Powerful seniors are in the postreproductive survival stage,
 - they have gone through the socially graded rites of passage, which endow one with cultural knowledge and wisdom

So, “what an elder sees while sitting down, a child cannot see if they climb a tree”

- ❖ This is why the elder/senior is in a better position to provide guidance, make decisions, and preside over important ceremonies

Discussion – making sense of decline

- Scientific (biological-epidemiological) literature on aging (Lopez-Ortin et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2015)

❖ Elders experience *senescence, which is:*

“characterized by a progressive loss of physiological integrity, leading to impaired function and increased vulnerability to death” (Lopez-Ortin et al., 2013, p. 1)

❖ However, death may not end it all, because of the belief in and worship of ancestors (Cattell & Albert, 2009; Ephirim-Donkor, 2016; Lee & Vaughan, 2008)

Study limitations

- 23 is a relatively small sample
- Sample is predominantly northern, urban, and 60% male
- Interview data not triangulated with observation or focus group data
- ❖ The findings are not for purposes of generalization; they constitute a partial, rather than a full, discourse on aging in Ghana
- Note, however, that this type of research does not require:
 1. A large sample
 2. Equal numbers of men and women in the sample, or
 3. Equal numbers of participants from the North and South

Conclusion

- The study makes a contribution to literature on aging and older adults in Ghana
- The narratives of 'powerful senior' and 'declining elder-ambiguous ancestor' provide an understanding of local discourses of aging from the unique perspectives of older Ghanaians
- Discourses on aging are particular ways of speaking to and about older adults and serve as surveillance on everyday practice toward the elderly

Implications

- Tap the social capital of powerful seniors for local & national devt
 - councils of elders at district and regional levels to aid devt planning
 - recruit elders to teach moral and history lessons in basic schools
 - Declining elders need adequate & sustained support:
 - full, not partial, coverage on the NHIS to access healthcare services
 - Income support – to meet food, housing, and care needs
- E.g., an expansion of the LEAP and an increase in the amount paid out, and an increase in pension payouts

Thank you

- Thank you to the audience for your attention
- Thank you, Madam moderator, and over to you

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Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Characteristic	N=23
Age Range	
60-69	14
70-79	8
80+	1
Education	
Some/None	15
Post-Secondary	8
Faith	
Christian/Catholic	13
Muslim/Other	10
Gender/Sex	
Man/Male	14
Woman/Female	9
Marital status	
Currently Married	13
Never Married	1
Widow/Widower	9
Residential Location	
Rural	3
Urban	20
Geographic Region	
Northern Ghana	18
Southern Ghana	5
Ethnicity/Tribe	
Akan	6

Mole/Dagomba	13
Wala	2
Kassena	2
Former Occupation	
Agric. Extension Officer	1
Civil Servant	3
Cook	2
Farmer	3
Janitor	1
Mason	1
Nurse	2
Trader	2
Security officer	1
Teacher	4

Figure 1. Discourse on aging among participants

