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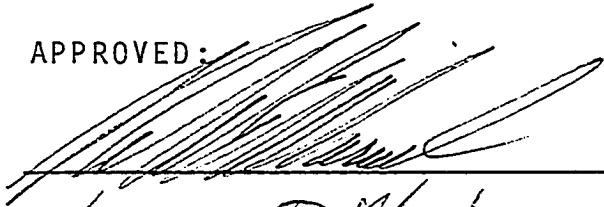
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PREVIEW

A COMPARISON OF MEXICAN-AMERICAN AND ANGLO ELDERLY
REGARDING THE PERCEPTION OF AND INTERACTION WITH
THE SENIOR CENTER AND THE FAMILY: A SURVEY

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by

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THESIS

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Meeting the needs of the older members of society has received considerable attention during the past three decades. The passage of the Older Americans Act of 1965 was a significant milestone recognizing the special needs of the nation's elderly.¹ New institutions, such as the senior center and Medicare, have come to play an important role in their lives. Determining how the elderly relate to these relatively new institutions is important as it can determine how they are functioning. An assessment, therefore, of the way in which the elderly perceive and interact with these institutions becomes imperative.

The senior center is a relatively new phenomena on the American landscape. Although there are nearly 8,000 centers throughout the country, their proliferation did not occur until the middle of the 1970s when funding mechanisms became available.² What is the perception that elderly Anglos and Mexican Americans have of the senior center? What kind of interaction exists between members of both groups and the center? How do the two groups compare regarding these? These questions are a primary concern of this study.

The other focus of this study is the family, for it, too, serves as an important resource to the nation's elderly.³ How different or similar are Anglo and Mexican-American elderly regarding important aspects of the family, such as nuclear versus extended, authority relations, male/female roles, and level of interaction with relatives? These are some of the issues to be addressed in this study.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on the elderly in general, and more specifically to the distinction between elderly Anglos and Mexican Americans. It increases the knowledge of how these two groups relate to their respective families. It also represents a preliminary attempt, a baseline study, to define the similarities and differences between Anglos and Mexican Americans regarding their interaction and concept of the senior center. Additionally, it enhances the available literature on ethnicity as a factor in the aging process.

Most significantly is the potential use of the findings of the study by policy makers, service providers, and senior center administrators responsible for making decisions that affect the services provided to the elderly.

Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: If elderly Anglos and Mexican Americans are administered the survey instrument, there will

be no no significant difference regarding their perception of the senior center.

Hypothesis 2: If elderly Anglos and Mexican Americans are administered the survey instrument, there will be no significant differences regarding their interaction with the senior center.

Hypothesis 3: If elderly Anglos and Mexican Americans are administered the survey instrument, there will be no significant differences regarding their perception of the family.

Hypothesis 4: If elderly Anglo and Mexican Americans are administered the survey instrument, there will be no significant differences regarding their interaction with the family.

Background

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, elderly are individuals who have attained the chronological age of 60 years. The age of 60 years is an appropriate frame of reference as this is the age of eligibility for nutrition program meals offered at senior centers. In addition, the under 60 years of age senior center participant is a significant minority in the senior center population.

A senior center in this study is a facility offering an organized program of activities and services for ambulatory elderly who can function independently and do not require constant supervision or care. A Mexican-American is a person of Mexican descent, while an Anglo is a person of non-Hispanic, non-Black, non-Oriental origins.

The "Greying" of the Population

In 1900, the 60-years-and-over group made up only 6.4 percent of the entire population. By 1980, they constituted approximately 16 percent of the population representing 31.9 million persons out of a total of 226 million. One in six Americans in 1980 was 60 years or older.⁴ By the year 2050, the elderly will represent more than a quarter of the entire population.⁵ This trend is recognized as the "greying" of America. The most recent data, 1985, indicate a U.S. population of 240.8 million persons.⁶

There are significant factors involved in the "greying" of our population. Health statistics indicate that people are living longer. A person reaching the age of 65 in 1976 could expect to live an additional 16 years as compared to 11.9 years in 1900.⁷ In addition, the birth rate declined to an all-time low in 1976 of less than 1.8 children per woman of child-bearing age, an indication that youth will comprise a smaller proportion of the total population in the years ahead.⁸ The public policy

implications of this phenomena are significant but are beyond the scope of this study.

The city of El Paso joins the nation in "greying" as evidenced by the existence of 43,174 persons 60 years or older for 1980 as compared to 28,513 in 1970. This represents an increase of 14,661 or 51 percent, which is a considerably larger increase than the 32 percent increase of the El Paso population as a whole for the same period. The 1980 census reported a population of 425,259 persons compared to 322,261 in 1970 for the city.⁹

There were in 1980 a reported 31.9 million elderly whites as compared to slightly over one-half million elderly Mexican Americans. The remaining portion of elderly, representing 3.1 million persons, are members of Black, Spanish origin other than Mexican, and other races.¹⁰ While there is a significant difference in the number of elderly Anglo compared to elderly Mexican Americans nationwide, the El Paso experience is different. The West Texas Area Agency on aging reported in 1982 an elderly population of 49,556 in El Paso County. Of this number, 22,696 or 46 percent were Hispanic, and 25,244 or 51 percent were Anglo, with the remaining 1,636 or 3 percent being made up by other groups.¹¹ There are almost as many elderly Hispanics as there are Anglos in the city. While Mexican Americans constitute nearly all persons labeled as Hispanic in El

Paso, this group also includes other persons of Latin-American origins.

Ethnicity, Culture, and Aging

Aging is a process which in some aspects is seen differently by distinct ethnic groups and cultures. As a result, the behaviors and expectations of the elderly may vary from group to group. In spite of the commonalities that apply to all aged, i.e., biological and physiological deterioration and reduced activity, their distinct cultures impact on their views of aging and the modes of adaptation during this period of one's life. This concept, which anthropologists refer to as cultural relativism, indicates that a successful institutional response in one cultural environment does not necessarily mean success when applied within another culture.¹²

The Mexican-American people can be thought of as a subculture within the dominant culture of the United States. Bengston defines ethnic subcultures as "groups distinctive from the majority population not only in racial origin but also in terms of shared history and cultural values." He adds that ethnicity does impact upon how one views aging and that it must be considered alongside other aspects such as sex, class, and age.¹³ The Mexican-American aged and their Anglo counterparts may, then, perceive and interact with institutions such as the senior center and the family in different ways.

One's identification with a group, ethnicity, and the important values associated with it is an important consideration in the aging process, physiological changes notwithstanding.¹⁴ Social programs should take into account social and cultural components of service recipients as a recognition of their lives and personal history.¹⁵

Research and Senior Centers

Ralston has noted that recent research regarding Black elderly in general, and more specifically to their relationship with senior centers, is rather skimpy.¹⁶ The same can be stated for Mexican-American elderly. The growing number of both elderly and senior centers in the U.S. indicates a need for research in this area.

This researcher was unable to locate any publication which dealt with comparisons between Mexican-American and Anglo elderly senior center participants regarding their perception or interaction with the senior center. The El Paso case involving high participation rates in senior centers by both Anglo and Mexican Americans is ripe for this type of study.

The problem with research regarding the elderly until recently has been that they have been treated as a homogeneous entity and the solutions sought grasped for general applicability. The dominant component of this research has been chronological age, while ethnicity, sex, class, and other social variables have played a secondary

role.¹⁷ According to Kent, there is a need to conduct meaningful research amongst minority groups in a manner which respects their rights.¹⁸

The integration of knowledge about ethnicity as it relates to aging and program implementation is still far from being developed. There is not sufficient application of what is known about the needs of particular aged, ethnic groups to programs which are designed to serve them. The linkage of ethnic orientations and program implementation has not been realized. Much remains to be done in this area.¹⁹

According to Gelfand and Kutzik, service providers have come to recognize the multiplicity of ethnic backgrounds amongst the aged and are attempting to incorporate this factor in order to enhance service delivery. This is particularly true of urban centers.²⁰ Have El Paso senior centers met the challenge of recognizing the needs of different ethnic groups?

Cuellar refers to the senior center as a creative response to aging because it satisfies the social needs of its members. In providing a means by which the elderly can engage in activities of their own choosing, the senior center addresses the psychological needs as well.²¹

Cuellar describes the senior center, or voluntary association, as an adaptive mechanism for Mexican-American elderly. It is seen as a means by which members assume

control of their lives and future. He posits that it is a phenomena replacing the traditional means, the family and neighborhood, of addressing problems in a mobile, urban society.²²

It is clear that more research on senior centers is needed. How different groups perceive and interact with the senior center will assist service providers in implementing programs that address the needs of the groups they serve.

The Family and the Elderly

The family serves as an important resource for the elderly. Data indicate that a substantial majority have contact with family members often and rely on them in time of illness.²³ Some researchers, however, have suggested that more information needs to be collected on minority families as a changing, highly mobile society impacts on the traditional values associated with the group.²⁴

Jose Cuellar indicates that the traditional model of the Mexican-American family as an institution which is abundantly supportive of its elderly is idealistic. He notes that much needs to be learned about the elderly Mexican American trying to cope in an urban environment.²⁵

Maldonado indicates that modern society has brought about changes which may impact negatively on the Mexican-American elderly. The change from an extended to a nuclear orientation in family structure, brought about by the demands of an industrial society, have affected the status,

role, and kinship relations available in an extended family setting. This has created discontinuities for the young and old and resulted in changes in the basic functions of the family.²⁶

El Paso Senior Centers

Most senior centers in the city of El Paso began operations in the late 1970s as a direct result of the availability of federal funds both for construction or modification of facilities and to sustain a meals program and social services for the aged. Local government officials saw an opportunity to provide services to a growing population of elderly and seized it.²⁷

There are currently 15 senior centers in El Paso County operated by the city and county governments of which twelve are located inside the city limits.²⁸ Of these, most are situated in the south, central, and lower valley regions of El Paso with the west side and northeast having one each, while east El Paso has none. They have been built according to federal guidelines targeted at construction in economically eligible areas.²⁹

Although most centers/facilities are owned and operated by the city of El Paso, the county is involved in the provision of meals and transportation services throughout El Paso County. Both city and county governments operate some of the centers independent of one another;

i.e., the city operates two senior centers that do not offer daily meals or transportation services.³⁰

The services offered by senior centers are comprehensive in nature. In addition to a diverse range of recreational and social activities, most centers offer a daily meal at noon and transportation to the center and back home. The center is a link to elderly shut-ins who are unable to go to the center as meals are delivered to them on a daily basis.³¹ In addition, information and referral, educational classes, counseling, legal aid, health screenings, and opportunities for volunteering are made available through the center. All the services listed are offered in a majority of the centers. Spatial limitations, funding, and participant desires have played a role in determining the less-than-comprehensive nature of the services offered in the rest.

Most of the centers operate Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. with some opening on weekends and evenings to accommodate special activities such as dances or bingo games. The city of El Paso allows people 55 years of age or older to participate in senior center activities; however, federal guidelines restrict participation in nutritional and transportation services to those 60 years of age or older.³²

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to elderly Anglo and Mexican-American participants in selected senior centers in the city of El Paso, Texas. The principal focus was the perception and interaction of both groups with the senior center and the family.

The study was further limited by the research design used--a survey incorporating personal interviews. Sommer and Sommer indicate that surveys provide general information only, do not predict behavior, and are constrained by the content of the questions.³³ The interview process itself may affect the results as can the difficult process of coding responses to questions.³⁴

The Course to Traverse

The purpose of this chapter was to establish a point of departure. The purpose and limitations of the study, demographic data on the elderly, and the status of El Paso senior centers were discussed. Chapter II will review the literature with emphasis on the Older Americans Act, senior centers, relations between the elderly and their families, and some key differences between Mexican Americans and Anglos.

Chapter III will focus on delineating the research design. The population and sample, the subjects, the development of the survey instrument, and the procedure used

in obtaining the data will be discussed. Chapter IV will summarize the results of the survey. The conclusion-- Chapter V--will summarize the previous chapters, discuss the results, reach some conclusions, and make recommendations.

PREVIEW