

JOHN KNODEL

## INTRODUCTION

**ABSTRACT.** This special issue of the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* contains a series of articles on the living arrangements of the elderly in four Asian countries (the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand) as revealed in qualitative data provided by focus group discussions. These four countries are characterized by a mix of similarities and differences that makes comparison between them especially interesting. Focus group methodology, as discussed in detail in the following separate article, is a promising approach for research in social gerontology.

*Key Words:* focus groups, living arrangements, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, elderly

In most Asian countries, the primary responsibility for the elderly has traditionally been with the family (Nugent forthcoming). This pattern of responsibility has been most evident in the living arrangements of the elderly, which typically involve some form of coresidence with one or more of their adult children (Knodel and Debavalya 1992). Indeed, under present conditions at least, coresidence probably meets the wide range of the needs of the elderly more fully than any other aspect of the system. Rapid social and economic changes are underway, however, that have profound implications for the circumstances under which the future elderly will live. Moreover, these changes are occurring as demographic trends of the past decades in much of Asia and other parts of the developing world are leading to unprecedented increases in the absolute numbers of older persons and, in many cases, will result in unprecedented increases in their relative share of the total population (Jones 1990).

Most observers believe it is in the government's as well the future elderly's interest to preserve this familial system of care and support and to assist in its adaptation to the on-going process of socio-economic and demographic change. Developing successful policies and programs for the future requires a thorough understanding of the current arrangements for support and a taking into account of the views of the populace affected by them.

Despite its potential importance, research on the elderly and their support systems in developing countries has only recently begun. As a result, quantitative documentation of the current baseline situation is beginning to accumulate. Still virtually totally absent, however, is systematic qualitative research into the views and opinions of the major actors themselves, namely the elderly and their family members. Such qualitative data are essential for gaining insights into the meaning of the newly emerging quantitative research results. Yet even a recent

review of principles and methods for cross-national research on aging fails to recognize the potential for qualitative approaches, concentrating almost exclusively on the survey method (Andrews and Hennink 1993).

This special issue of the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* concentrates on the living arrangements of the elderly in 4 Asian countries (the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand) as revealed in qualitative data provided by focus group discussions with elderly as well as adult children of elderly parents. As such, it has both a substantive and a methodological theme. The substantive concentration on living arrangements stems from the crucial role they play in the familial system of support and assistance for the elderly as it currently exists in most Asian countries. Focus group methodology represents a promising new approach for cross-cultural gerontology to generate qualitative data not only on this topic but on a wide range of topics relevant to the social investigation of the elderly in Asia and elsewhere.

The research on which the contributions to this issue are based was conducted as part of the Comparative Study of the Elderly in Asia, a comprehensive project coordinated by the University of Michigan that utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data and analytical techniques. As part of this larger effort, a series of focus groups were conducted during 1990 and 1991 with elderly persons and with adults who had living elderly parents. The focus group component followed a coordinated research design that was developed collaboratively among researchers from all 4 countries. To our knowledge, this represents the first cross-cultural comparative focus group effort within the framework of social science research.

The choice of the 4 countries was originally made on the basis of a number of considerations, most of which were of a practical rather than conceptual nature (e.g., willingness of qualified collaborators, availability of survey data). Nevertheless, the four countries provide an interesting combination for comparative study of issues involving the elderly. They are characterized by moderately different socio-economic settings, demographic histories, and cultural traditions, making for interesting contrasts. At the same time, they are also all within the common regional setting of Southeast and East Asia and thus share sufficient common ground to make comparisons among them more easily interpretable than would otherwise be the case.

Table I indicates some basic demographic, social, and economic characteristics of the four countries and reflects some aspects of the rapid change that is occurring in all of them. Both Singapore and Taiwan are quite small in population size but are of particular interest given their advanced positions in the economic development of the region. Their per capita GNP in 1990 is many times that of either the Philippines or Thailand and is one indication why they are considered 2 of the 4 so-called 'tigers' in the region (along with Hong Kong and South Korea) or more prosaically as NICs (newly industrialized countries). Singapore also has the unusual feature of being a multi-cultural society with clear distinctions between the three major ethnic groups (Chinese, Indian, and

Malay). In contrast, the Philippines and Thailand are more typical of developing countries in the middle range of development levels. Both are still predominantly rural countries with large proportions of their populations engaged in agriculture. In contrast to the Philippines, however, which has been suffering serious economic difficulties over the last decade or two, Thailand has been noted for its rapid economic growth.

TABLE I  
Selected Social, Economic, and Demographic Indicators

	Philippines	Singapore	Taiwan	Thailand
Population size (in 1000s)				
1990	62,437	2,710	20,352	54,677
GNP per capita (US\$)				
1990	730	11,160	7,954	1,420
Total fertility rate				
1960-65	6.61	4.93	5.45	6.42
1985-90	4.30	1.69	1.77	2.57
Life expectancy				
1960-65	54.5	65.8	65.4	53.9
1985-90	63.5	73.5	73.4	67.3
% Urban				
1965	32	100	20	13
1990	43	100	77	23
Secondary school enrollment (as % of school-age group)				
1965	41	45	37	14
1990	73	69	85	32
% of population aged 60+ (medium variant)				
1990	4.9	7.0	9.8	6.3
2020	9.3	23.5	21.6	14.1
Sex ratio of population 60+ (males per 100 females)				
1990	90	87	123	81
2020	90	86	90	81
% of elderly co-residing with a child (in mid-late 1980s)*				
All elderly	74	88	71	77
Elderly with living children	82	93	75	80

Sources: United Nations 1993a, 1993b; World Bank 1992, 1993; \*\*Taiwan-Fukien Demographic Fact Book; \*\* 1993 Taiwan Statistical Data Book; \*\* 1991 Social Indicators in Taiwan Area; \*\* Projection of the Population of Taiwan Area.

\*Based on special tabulations made by John Casterline from data sets of the Comparative Study of the Elderly in Asia.

Demographically, all 4 countries have experienced substantial improvements in life expectancies over recent decades and, in all but the Philippines, very pronounced fertility declines. Both Singapore and Taiwan are now experiencing total fertility rates below the replacement fertility level of 2.1, meaning that if fertility remains at the present level, couples will have fewer children than necessary to replace themselves in the reproductive ages a generation from now. The most recent data for Thailand indicate that there too fertility has fallen to the replacement level (Thailand no date). Even in the Philippines, fertility has declined moderately although it remains well above levels for the other three countries.

Primarily because of differences in the timing and pace of the fertility decline, the 4 countries differ in the proportion of their populations that are aged 60 and over (the conventional age range used to define elderly in most treatments of the topic in these countries). While differences are moderate as of 1990, with no country having as much as 10% in the 60 and over range, quite pronounced differences are likely to appear by 2020 with the elderly projected to constitute almost one fourth of the population in Singapore compared to less than a tenth in the Philippines.

In most countries of the world, the sex ratio of the elderly typically favors females due to the accumulated affects of lower female mortality over the lifetime of cohorts constituting the elderly age group. Three of the 4 countries in our study conform to this pattern showing a predominance of females among the elderly in 1990. In contrast, in Taiwan a very striking predominance of males is apparent, the legacy of the large influx of Nationalists, particularly male military personnel in 1949 and 1950, whose migration was spurred by the communist takeover of mainland China. This unusual sex ratio impacts in a number of ways on today's elderly in Taiwan. This situation will not persist long, however, as the current cohorts in the elderly age range will be replaced in the future by those with more usual sex ratios. Thus by 2020, Taiwan's elderly are anticipated to resemble the other 3 countries in this respect.

One feature all 4 countries share at present, and 1 that is of particular interest for the present special issue of the *JCCG*, is that the large majority of elderly in each reside with 1 or more of their children (according to surveys taken in the mid to late 1980s). This co-residence is the feature of the support and care systems that we concentrate on in our substantive analyses in this issue.

Following this introduction are 6 related articles. The first discusses the focus group methodology with attention to its potential for cross-cultural focus group research on the elderly. The next 4 present the substantive findings for each of the 4 countries. The final article provides a comparative perspective on the country specific results.

The approach taken in each of the country studies can best be described as grounded social description. The basic data are the views and explanations provided by the actors themselves, both the elderly and their adult children. We have attempted to let the data speak for themselves by including numerous quotations from the focus group participants. Moreover, although the reporting

and interpretation of the results takes into account our prior knowledge and understanding of the issues under investigation, we have deliberately eschewed approaching these data from any particular theoretical stance. In so doing, we believe the advocates of most major perspectives common in social gerontology, whether derived from modernization theory, exchange theory, equity theory, or the life course, will find much of relevance in the results.

Finally, there are a number of reasons why the following collection of articles should be of particular interest to readers of the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*. First, the substantive findings are all based on a similar methodology for all 4 countries. Second, both the data collection and analysis have been coordinated from the beginning, enhancing the comparability of the substantive findings. Third, the focus group method is currently of considerable interest not only among qualitative researchers but among increasing numbers of quantitative researchers, who recognize the need for complimentary qualitative data. Fourth, the mix of social, economic, and cultural similarities and differences among the 4 countries renders them an interesting set for comparative analysis. Lastly, as the first social science comparative study based on focus group methodology, the set of articles provides a basis for judging the promise of this approach for future research.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Comparative Study of the Elderly in Asia was sponsored by the U.S. National Institute on Aging (Grant AGO 7637). Cynthia Glovinsky provided editorial assistance for most of the articles included in this special issue. Pearl Johnson provided help in manuscript preparation.

#### REFERENCES

- Andrews, G. and M. Hennink 1993 Cross-national Research on Aging: Principles and Methods. *Bold* 3(3): 2-7.
- Jones, G.W. 1990 Consequences of Rapid Fertility Decline for Old Age Security in Asia. Working Papers in Demography, No. 20. The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Knodel, J. and N. Debavalya 1992 Social and Economic Support Systems for the Elderly in Asia: An Introduction. *Asia-Pacific Population Journal* 7(3) : 5-12.
- Nugent, J.B. with B. Sarkar and M. Chowdhury Forthcoming Informal Systems of Old Age Security In Old Age Security World Bank.
- Social Indicators in Taiwan Area of the Republic of China, 1991 1992 Taipei, Taiwan: Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics.
- Projections of The Population of Taiwan Area, the Republic of China, 1992 to 2036 1993 Taipei, Taiwan: Manpower Planning Department, Council for Economic Planning and Development.
- 1990 Taiwan-Fukien Demographic Fact Book, Republic of China 1991 Taipei, Taiwan: Ministry of the Interior.
- 1993 Taiwan Statistical Data Book 1993 Taipei, Taiwan: Council for Economic Planning and Development.

- Thailand, National Statistical Office No date Survey of Population Change 1991. Bangkok: National Statistical Office.
- United Nations 1993a World Population Prospects: The 1992 Revision. New York: United Nations.
- United Nations 1993b The Sex and Age Distribution of the World Populations: The 1992 Revision. New York: United Nations.
- World Bank 1992 World Development Report 1992. New York: Oxford University Press.
- World Bank 1993 World Development Report 1993. New York: Oxford University Press.

*Population Studies Center*  
*University of Michigan*  
*1225 S. University*  
*Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104-2590*  
*U.S.A.*