SHARON MENGCHEE LEE

DIMENSIONS OF AGING IN SINGAPORE*

ABSTRACT. This paper reviews research on aging in Singapore. There are three objectives to the paper: first, to describe some of the major findings on research on the elderly population in Singapore; secondly, to discuss the role of political authorities in defining and shaping the problems of aging in the country; and finally, to identify the implications that the Singapore case may hold for furthering cross-cultural research on aging. The role of the family in supporting the elderly is observed to be fundamental, and children represent the basic source of old age security. This contrasts with the low level of community and public participation in the support network of elderly Singaporeans. The government's influence in defining the dimensions of the aging problem as primarily a problem of ensuring family responsibilities across generations is also discussed. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research on aging in Singapore.

Key Words: Singapore, support, family, elderly, research agenda.

INTRODUCTION

It may seem surprising that aging is an important social issue in Singapore, a young nation which just recently celebrated 25 years of nation building in 1984. Indeed, the small island republic became a sovereign state only in 1965, after a history of British colonization from 1819 to 1959 (when internal self-government was granted) and a brief stint as a member of Malaysia from 1963 to 1965. Yet as a result of a highly successful family and population planning program and rapid improvements in health care, demographic trends point to a graying of Singapore's population. In 1947, only 1.8% of the population was 65 years and older; in 1980, this had increased to 4.7%, and it is projected that by 2010, 9.2% of the population will be in this category of the elderly (Ministry of Health 1984). These figures may appear to be little cause for concern when compared with the much higher proportion of old people in the advanced nations of the west and Japan. However, the aging of Singapore's population has emerged as a social problem following the release of a government report on the elderly in 1984 (Ministry of Health 1984).

Before the report, aging and the problems of the aged had received scant attention in Singapore. Public resources were more urgently required for education, housing, economic development, family planning and health services. The results of these efforts have been impressive. For example, the general literacy rate for the population over 10 years old was 85% in 1982 compared to just 43% in 1957. Over 80% of the population live in modern public housing constructed by the government statutory body

called the Housing and Development Board (HDB). Singapore's economy is one of the fastest growing in Asia: real GNP growth was 9.7% in 1981, 6.5% in 1982 and 8% in 1983. Corresponding figures for 1982 and 1983 for Japan and the U.S. are 3% and 3%, −1.9% and 3.5%, respectively (Singapore Department of Statistics 1983/84). The per capita GNP in 1982 was the second highest in Asia, behind Japan's. The changes with the most direct impact on aging are family planning and increased life expectancy. Annual population growth rate was 4.4% in 1957 (Saw 1981: Table 1.1); since 1979, as a result of an aggressive family planning program, population growth has declined to about 1.5%. Infant mortality has dropped from 20 per 1,000 live births in 1973 to 9.3 per 1,000 live births in 1983; life expectancy for women climbed to 74 years and 69 years for men in 1983 (Department of Statistics 1983/84). These developments have produced significant implications for the age composition of the population and heightened awareness of a growing old age dependency.

In this paper, I will first review the major findings on some dimensions of aging in Singapore. Because of the paucity of research on the elderly in Singapore, much of the discussion will focus on the support system of the elderly. Data will be based on various government and government-sponsored reports concerning the elderly, and research projects conducted by students at the National University of Singapore. The latter source of information may strike some readers as rather unusual, but in view of the short tradition of social science research in Singapore, much important information about Singaporean society is produced by student projects known as "Academic Exercises".[1] It should also be noted that the data are of uneven quality and differ in orientation given the authors' different objectives. This problem is unfortunately inevitable until more and better research on the elderly in Singapore is conducted. A second goal of this paper is to comment on the role of political authorities in defining and shaping social problems, in this case, the problem of aging in Singapore. This is related to what has become the central issue of aging in Singapore, that of how best to ensure family support of the elderly. Finally, I will discuss some implications that the Singapore case may hold for the cross-cultural study of social gerontology.

DIMENSIONS OF AGING

1. Who Are the "Aged"?

Unless death occurs prematurely, all biological organisms undergo the process of degeneration described as "aging". The physical aging of humans is relatively uniform although significant differences associated

with dietary, exercise and life-style variations have been extensively documented. However, the relationship between physiological aging and psychological and social aging is problematic; Neuhaus and Neuhaus (1982), for example, provide a good review of the complex connections between these different dimensions of aging.

There is also disagreement on when an individual is "old". References to the elderly are commonly based on chronological age and tend to be statistical conveniences rather than meaningful sociological concepts. Recent categorization of the elderly into the "young-old" (usually between 60 or 65 to 70 or 75 years old) and the "old-old" (those over 75 years old) represent attempts to "better" capture the diversity of the so-called elderly population. The question of who the elderly are is also seen in Singapore. The official retirement age is 55, and some reports on the elderly in Singapore used this to define their samples (Cheung 1976; Soh 1976). With life expectancy at around 70, 55 appears to be too "young" to qualify one as a member of the aged population. The latest report on the elderly which was released by the Ministry of Health in 1984 defined the elderly as those 65 years and over. While this may be a better measurement of the elderly population, the definition is far from objective; the "aging" of the elderly in Singapore from 55 to 65 is closely related to official plans to raise the retirement age and therefore the age at which the people may withdraw their pension funds.[2]

Thus, just as in other societies, Singapore is also faced with the problem of deciding who the elderly are. How this issue is resolved is very clearly related to changing social, demographic and political trends.

2. *Support System of the Elderly*

In this section, I will review the major findings on the support system of the elderly in Singapore. The relative contributions of the family and community in this support network are discussed; where possible, similarities and differences with other societies will be drawn.

(a) *Family support in old age.* One question that social gerontologists often ask is whether changes in family structure and processes have affected inter-generational relations and care of the elderly. For a long time, it was believed that the nuclear family form is not compatible with the maintenance of support relations for elderly parents. However, recent research on the family suggest that there may be more myth than reality to this breakdown of the traditional functions of the family. Sussman (1965) and Konig (1970), for example, successfully question the recency of the nuclear family. They argue that nuclear families were the most common family form in the past since only the prosperous could sustain an extended family. In addition, the belief that nuclear families live in

isolation has been exposed as unfounded; most family units form parts of wider networks of kin relationships. Shanas (1962; 1973), Brody (1978), Blenkner (1965) and Weeks and Cuellar (1981), among others, have reported on the predominantly family-based help and social networks of the elderly in the United States. Townsend's (1963) classic study of the family life of old people in England also underlines the continuity of family life and support relations for the elderly. As Riley puts it, "people do not grow old alone; they live in a net of family relationships" (Riley, Hess, and Bond 1983: 3). Therefore, the research picture on the role of the family in supporting the elderly in Western nations shows that while the nuclear family (or some form of it) may be the most common family form, this has not led to any decline in the family's role in the lives of the elderly.

Singapore is an Asian society characterized by the cultural traditions of its majority Chinese population (76% of the population) descended from immigrants from China, its other major immigrant group of Indians (6%), and the indigenous Malay population (16%). Singaporeans of all ethnic backgrounds believe, or at least, assume, that their Asian heritage teaches respect and filial attitudes toward the elderly. At the same time, there is growing concern, especially among certain official circles, about the increased "Westernization" of the younger generation. Westernization is often associated with the breakdown of the traditional Asian family structure and bonds; the Ministry of Health's Committee on the Aged (1984: 15) deplored the growing prevalence of a "Western ... material- istic, self-oriented and individualistic way of life" and expressed deep concern for the proper care of the elderly as a result of these develop- ments. The official perception of Western societies represented in this particular report is apparently not unique; exposure to Western values and life-styles, especially through the mass media, is widely believed to be detrimental to the "positive" Asian values on the family (Chen and Chang 1982; Singapore Council of Social Services 1981a). Using the available sources of data, I will evaluate the support role of the family for the elderly against these expressions of concern.

Three studies contain information on the living and housing arrange- ments of their elderly respondents, and all three report that most of their respondents live with their families. 79% of Chen and Chang's (1982) respondents live with adult children (sample size was 1086; respondents were 55 years and older); Soh (1976) reports that 81% of the sample of 50 elderly individuals studied live with family members, and over 70% stated that their children would never allow them to live in homes for the elderly even if they had wanted to. In the third study, Cheung (1976) interviewed 43 "poor" and 25 "well-off" individuals aged 60 and over, and found that while 85% of the well-off elderly lived with family members, only 26% of the elderly poor did.[3]

These three studies indicate that most of the elderly shared homes with adult children, and were happy to share such living arrangements. In addition to living space, almost all of Cheung's (1976) respondents agreed that children should provide financial support to their aged parents and the 80% who did receive such support were "content" to be so supported. The younger generation also subscribed to this pattern of filial obligation, according to Chen and Chang's (1982) survey, although there were some differences in degree of adherence to this responsibility; for example, women and more highly-educated respondents were more likely to express doubts about sharing homes although providing monetary assistance was not perceived to be problematic.

Based on these reports, it appears that the family is the primary provider of basic help and support to the elderly in Singapore. If an elderly person has adult children, the chances are very high that he or she will share a home with one of the children. Two important points emerge from these studies on the housing and financial support of the aged in Singapore. First of all, the importance of children as the major source of old age security is clearly demonstrated. The elderly poor, i.e., those receiving public support, are less likely to have family members who could provide housing and financial help while the elderly with family members, especially adult children, fare much better. Singaporeans expect their children to support them in their old age, and are quite happy to depend on their children when they are old. This contrasts with certain Western values of independence which motivate people to plan for their own support when they are old, or which discourage them from turning to their adult children for financial support. Cantor (1979) discusses the role of such values on relations between the elderly and their children in the United States, where support relations across the generations tend to emphasize emotional and psychological help. Thus, the family is perhaps more important for elderly Singaporeans since they depend on the family to provide fundamental support, such as housing and financial assistance.

There are at least two factors which may account for the importance of the family in the support system of the elderly in Singapore. One factor is the lack of a comprehensive social security and retirement benefits system. The closest attempt to institutionalize retirement provisions is the Central Provident Fund (CPF), which was established in 1955 and covers all workers in the labor force except for employers, the self-employed and unpaid family workers. In addition, if the worker's monthly wage is less than $200,[4] the worker need not contribute to the fund but his or her employer must contribute 25% of the worker's wage each month to the worker's CPF account. As of January 1, 1984, the rates of contribution (which are mandated by law) were 25% from the employer, subject to a maximum of $695, and 25% (no ceiling) from the employee, each month. However, since the fund was only established in 1955, most of the present

generation of elderly Singaporeans do not belong to it. Only 9.1% of the
fund's members in 1982 were 50 years and older, out of a total member-
ship of 1,725,300. In addition, the largest group of members (14.2%) had
balances of less than $200 in their accounts, an amount that is clearly
insufficient for self-maintenance upon retirement from the work force
(Singapore Yearbook of Statistics 1982/83). The low balances can be
largely attributed to the fact that fund members are allowed to draw on
their accounts to purchase housing, certain government-sponsored insur-
ance plans and shares in a few government-operated companies. Thus,
while this has encouraged home ownership among Singaporeans, the
fundamental objective of the fund as a retirement fund is undermined.
According to Chen and Chang's (1982) study, only 2.3% of their elderly
respondents counted on the CPF or other pension funds for monetary
support in their old age; they expected their children to provide for their
old age.

Another reason for the emphasis on economic support across the
generations and the dependence on children may be the cultural traditions
of the Chinese who, so far, have been the only ethnic group studied in
these reports on the elderly in Singapore. Many of those interviewed
expressed a strong preference for living with an adult son and his family,
and also tended to depend on sons for financial support. The prescribed
role of male children as supporters of elderly parents was shared by
younger respondents. For example, 56% of the younger respondents
surveyed by Chen and Chang (1982) believe that the best living arrange-
ment for older people is to live with a married son, or at least, to live close
to a married son (26% gave the latter as a second choice). The patriarchal
traditions of the Chinese must be considered in understanding the role of
adult children, in particular, sons, in the support system of the elderly in
Singapore. However, it should be noted that this is probably true only of
the Chinese and Indian populations; Malay cultural traditions are less
male-dominated and I suspect the mother-daughter bond may be more
useful in examining the role of the family for the elderly Malay. The
strength of the parent-son relationship among Chinese Singaporeans is
another contrast with the central role of women in the family support
networks in the West documented by Townsend (1963) and Blenkner
(1965), among others.[5]

Secondly, these studies on the elderly in Singapore also highlight the
plight of the impoverished old, many of whom lacked a family support
network to provide housing and financial assistance. More of the elderly
poor lived alone and felt neglected, lonely and resigned (Cheung 1976).
The same study also reports that financial problems were acute for 74% of
the elderly who were poor. The difficulties encountered by this group
serve to underline the importance of the family in supporting the elderly
in Singapore. At the same time, the experience of this group demonstrates

the limitations of a support system that is primarily dependent on the family, and the need to address the concerns of the elderly who do not fit into the conventional family life-cycle model (such as the single, childless, and widowed). Bytheway (1979) and Nock (1979) have argued for innovative ways to address the needs of elderly people whose life statuses depart from the conventional family life-cycle model; alternatives to the family life-cycle approach should also be useful for research on the elderly in Singapore. Many of the elderly poor who live alone are first generation immigrants who either never married or do not have living adult children.

To sum up the role of the family in supporting the elderly in Singapore, it can be seen that just as in many Western societies, the family remains the major component in the support system. The contribution of the Singaporean family is, however, different in many respects. The primary line of support is along financial and physical dimensions, such as in providing a shared living space. Little published evidence is available on emotional and psychological support across the generations (indeed, the neglect of such dimensions of support in the research conducted so far may be significant in its implications for the role of emotional support of the elderly by the younger generation). In addition, the parent-son bond seems to be the fundamental relationship that sustains the family's role in old age in Singapore. In the next section, I will turn to the contributions of the community in the support system of the elderly.

(b) *Community support of the elderly.* One of the most serious difficulties that elderly people face is the drop in income following retirement from the labor force. This affects the retiree and his or her dependent spouse, and is particularly stressful when social security provisions are inadequate or medical expenses are high. Blau (1973) concludes that for most old people in the U.S., where there is a system of social security and retire-ment benefits, it is still difficult to entirely escape the financial deficit and other stresses following the role-exits associated with retirement. Age as a correlate of stratification is generally acknowledged; in 1972, Field (1972) estimated that 1/3 of the elderly in the U.S. had incomes that placed them below the official poverty line. This had improved to "just" a 14.1% poverty rate among the population aged 65 and over in 1983 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1984).

The financial problems of the elderly are especially worrisome for those who live in societies where family care and support is perceived as a private matter. Being poor for the elderly in Singapore is clearly asso-ciated with the absence of a family-based support system. The official retirement age is 55, and labor force participation declines rapidly with age (see Table I).

On retirement, income is substantially reduced, but it has already been shown that the elderly in Singapore do not have sufficient means of

TABLE I

Age specific labor force participation rate (per 100 population),
1982

Age Group	Total	Male	Female
10 or over	63.4	81.5	45.2
55—59	47.8	75.4	18.6
60—64	31.4	53.9	10.0
65—69	23.5	39.1	9.6
70—74	16.3	27.7	6.7
75 & over	6.9	13.0	3.0

Source: Singapore Yearbook of Statistics 1982/83.

self-support in old age. Chen and Chang (1982) report that over 60% of
the elderly in their study were not financially independent. The family is
expected to, and in most cases, does, perform the role of provider for the
elderly in Singapore. Where this is not possible for a variety of reasons,
the elderly person has to seek assistance from the community. Information
on community sources of financial aid for the elderly is not easily
available, but whatever data there are suggest that such community help is
woefully inadequate. It was estimated that 48% of the "aged destitute" in
fiscal year 1978/79 did not receive any assistance from the public assist-
ance scheme administered by the Department of Social Welfare of the
Ministry of Social Affairs (Wong 1980). Of those 52% who did obtain
help from this agency, the level of such support can be seen from Table II.

TABLE II

Level of public assistance provided to the elderly, 1978/79

Minimum monthly requirement[a]	Public assistance allowance	% of minimum requirement met
$120.92[b]	$60.00	46.9%
$110.12[c]	$60.00	54.5

[a] This amount excludes medical, entertainment and other per-
sonal expenses. All dollar amounts are in Singapore currency;
approximate current exchange rate, October 1985: (S$1.00 =
US$0.43).
[b] For a single "destitute" male.
[c] For a single "destitute" female.

Source: Singapore Council of Social Services, 1981b: Table B.

Field (1972) had chastised the level of public assistance to the elderly in the U.S. as "niggardly"; stringent eligibility requirements and bureaucratic red tape often conspired to humiliate the applicant for such assistance. The current state of official aid to the elderly in Singapore appears to represent a grim echo of this hopefully former attitude toward the elderly in the U.S.; indeed, it seems that the conditions are worse in Singapore. Note that the low level of help available is considered "relief", not "subsistence". Thus, only the truly "destitute" may qualify. It is not clear where the aged destitute can go for help beyond this "relief". Wong (1980) commented briefly on the charity organizations to whom the aged poor can theoretically turn for additional aid, but concluded that the process for obtaining such aid is tedious, difficult, and too often unsuccessful.

Another major need of the elderly without family support is for housing. Cheung (1976) reports that the elderly poor in his study spent at least 1/4 of their total income on housing. As stated earlier, more than 80% of Singaporeans live in government-constructed and maintained high-rise apartments. These represent the only affordable housing for the majority of Singaporeans who live in one of the most expensive and land-scarce cities of the world. Through its policies of application and allocation of housing, the government is able to promote certain values on the family; for example, young singles do not qualify for HDB housing and one must be over 45 (for women) or 50 (for men) in order to apply for HDB housing as single individuals (even then, there are rules on sharing of apartments by such single applicants). In addition, to promote sharing housing with one's elderly parents, higher priority is given to families who apply for apartments as "three-tier families" (that is, families composed of members spanning three generations).

These housing policies have the general effect of making it difficult for the elderly without family members to obtain inexpensive government housing. The priority awarded to three-tier families has also led to some undocumented but widely believed abuses of elderly parents who are used to obtain housing but are subsequently mistreated by their children. There are only two real options available to the elderly who cannot qualify for HDB housing or who cannot afford to jointly rent an HDB flat with another elderly person. Some voluntary charity organizations operate homes for the aged, such as the homes maintained by various Chinese temples, Chinese clan associations and Christian missions. However, a survey by the Singapore Council of Social Services (1981a) on the supply of such housing indicates that the demand far exceeds supply. The shortage is especially acute for the elderly sick and non-ambulant. A second possibility are the government-operated homes, but these are only for the "truly destitute" and are even fewer in number than the homes maintained by charity organizations. Finally, there are a few commercial

nursing homes which are too expensive for the elderly poor but which represent an alternative for those who can afford to choose not to live with their children.

Besides housing and financial assistance, community support of the elderly can assume other forms, such as the provision of nursing help for the elderly sick and food for those in need. Unfortunately, the level of such support in Singapore is not much better than that in housing and monetary aid. The Singapore Council of Social Services (1981a) concluded that medical information on the health status and needs of the elderly as a special group is almost non-existent; the little information there is suggests that there is a real lack of such services for the aged, although a section on geriatric medicine has just been established in the Singapore General Hospital in early 1985. Domiciliary nursing for the elderly sick is supposed to be provided on a voluntary basis by the Home Nursing Foundation but Wong (1981) estimated that in 1979, only 4.4% of the approximately 15,000 people needing such services received them. Another source of community service for the elderly have been day care centers established in some housing estates (complexes of high-rise apartment buildings, shops, etc.) where the elderly may spend the day outside of their homes. The response to these centers has been very poor, according to the Singapore Council of Social Services (1981a), although the reasons for the lack of interest are not clear. Other community-based support services for the elderly such as good neighbor programs, meals on wheels and home help have all been put forward in the various surveys on the elderly in Singapore (for example, Wong 1980; Singapore Council of Social Services 1981a), but most are still unavailable.

From the above review, the level of community support services for the elderly in Singapore appears to be quite low. The major task of providing assistance to those elderly without a family support system has fallen on voluntary charity organizations. While their contributions are essential in the face of a non-interventionist attitude on the part of official agencies, charity operations are clearly inadequate given the demands and diverse needs of the elderly population. In the next section, I will turn to a discussion of the role of political authorities in defining and shaping official policies on the elderly in Singapore, and the implications for the status of the elderly in that country.

3. *The Government and Aging in Singapore*

I have already referred to the impact of the Ministry of Health's (1984) report on the elderly in Singapore in creating widespread publicity and discussion of the aging of Singapore's population. The report contains vital information on the official ideology on this issue. One theme dominates the Ministry's report on the elderly: the elderly must remain in the family

and it is the family's responsibility to provide for the aged in society. Thus, other potential sources of support and aid for the elderly, such as government agencies, voluntary organizations and commercial (private) services, are to be kept to the barest minimum. A secondary and related message contained in the report focuses on the breakdown of the traditional Asian family and the negative consequences for the status of the aged. A discontinuity in the socialization of the younger generation was perceived; specifically, Western influences on morals, family and individualism were regarded as eroding the filial relationship between children and parents. It was feared that this could only produce a breakdown of the traditional Asian family's care of, and responsibility to, the older generation. I have briefly referred to recent research which indicates that such perceptions of the Western family are unfounded; however, because the political authorities in Singapore choose to believe and publicize this particular interpretation of Western culture, it is necessary to examine the context in which this belief is perpetuated and the consequences for understanding the aging process in Singapore.

While it is impossible to address the history of political development in Singapore in this paper, I will attempt to sketch the major relevant points of the political system which I believe touch on the subject of aging. The present government is formed by the People's Action Party (PAP), headed by Lee Kuan Yew, who is the Prime Minister. The PAP has held political power in Singapore ever since elections for the assembly were first held in 1959 (when Britain granted internal self-government to the colony of Singapore). Lee has been the only Prime Minister the country has ever known. Political analysts and other interested observers of the Singapore political scene agree that understanding Lee is the major factor in understanding what goes on in Singapore, given the tight control that he has held over the political system of the country. One can only guess at what the Prime Minister believes in through examination of the policies that have been introduced over the years; in this paper, I will try to identify the major ideological strands that touch on the family and the elderly. I propose to do this by discussing one example of government policy on the family, the introduction of moral education in the school system, although I recognize that this can only be suggestive of the role played by political authorities in the problem of aging.

The Singaporean education system is a public enterprise defined and operated by the government. The education system has undergone numerous changes. The most important change deals with the languages taught and used in the schools. The current system is quite complex, and is founded on the early tracking of children into different "streams" from the age of nine; children are tracked based primarily on their linguistic and mathematical abilities.[6] Another change in the education system dealt with the introduction of "moral education" into the classroom curriculum in the

early 1980s; the implementation of this policy is not complete pending the training of teachers and the definition of different courses. The decision to teach moral education in the schools is closely related to the official ideology on the family, and the elderly. One component of the moral education curriculum is Confucian Ethics, and one fundamental (if not the most important) cornerstone of Confucianism is filial piety. It should be noted that students can choose from a number of "moral education" subjects, most of which are essentially the study of different religious systems, for example, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, but the component which received the greatest attention and publicity was Confucian Ethics. Between 1982 and 1983, a number of eminent scholars on Confucianism were flown into Singapore from prestigious universities in the U.S. and accorded many opportunities to praise the relevance and significance of Confucianism for a society like Singapore.

Related to the introduction of Confucian Ethics into the school curriculum are the frequent speeches by officials on the superiority of the traditional Asian (meaning Chinese) values regarding the family; as I have pointed to earlier, these pronouncements are often based on a misunderstanding of the strength of family bonds in the west. Indeed, the perceived breakdown of the traditional Asian family that is believed to be caused by exposure to Western values has led to a suggestion by the Ministry of Health's (1984) report on the elderly that Singapore introduce laws to ensure the support of elderly parents by the younger generation. On a less serious note, the Ministry's committee which wrote the report also recommended that the Ministry of Culture, which controls the mass communications system, institute a mass education campaign to instill filial piety in Singaporeans and to "shame" those who would abandon their elderly parents.

It is easy to observe the role of the government in Singapore in almost all areas of social interaction; the political authorities are unabashedly explicit in their belief that their policies are best for the people and society. Thus, when moral education was introduced into the classroom agenda, the debate was not over what moral education is and the goals of moral education; discussion was at the level of how best to implement the teaching of a taken-for-granted good. The experts on Confucianism who were brought in at tremendous expense tended to act as persuaders of the public rather than objective appraisers of the education system and how Confucianism fits into the system. The high level of publicity and resources devoted to the teaching of Confucian Ethics demonstrates, I believe, the deep concern that the current political authorities have regarding family care and support of the elderly. This is reinforced by a conscious policy of minimalist state participation in providing support services to the elderly. In addition, the frequent criticisms directed at the perceived negative effects of Western culture by various government

representatives can be interpreted as part of an overall policy aimed at promoting family responsibility towards the elderly. Taken together, these developments have encouraged the definition of the problem of aging in Singapore as one of how best to ensure the proper care of the elderly by the family.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has been necessarily brief in reviewing the state of knowledge about the elderly in Singapore because of the short history of research on this topic. My goal was to present a starting point from which future research on the elderly in Singapore could develop; to this end, I had consciously focused on some of the shortcomings and deficiencies in the existing literature, hoping that the future research agenda will fill in these gaps.

The major points that emerge from my review of the current stock of research on the elderly in Singapore are:

(1) The family remains the basic unit of support for the elderly. Both elderly parents and their adult children believe that it is only right for children to care for their aged parents.

(2) Within the family support system of the elderly, the parent-son bond forms the base. In addition, the support relationship is focused on financial and housing support of elderly parents.

(3) The contribution by community and official sources to the support system of the elderly in Singapore is minimal. The reasons for this are complex, but the role of government ideology on the family and traditional cultural values which sustain family responsibilities must be considered if a better understanding of this support system is to be gained.

(4) The elderly poor were identified as a group which could use greater assistance from the community. Most of the elderly poor did not have families to provide fundamental support services; given the inadequate level of community and official help, the plight of this group is clearly in need of urgent attention.

(5) Singapore's population is pluralistic and presents an ethnic and cultural diversity which is expected to influence how the elderly of each ethnic community interact with family members and the larger community. There is no information on ethnic differences on aging in Singapore. As I had suggested earlier, the parent-son bond of the Chinese may not be found, or may not be as strong, among the Malays.

(6) The association between old age and poverty is widely recognized in the west. In addition, many of the older people are female, given the longer life expectancy of women in most industrialized societies. Singaporean women also enjoy a longer life span, but very little information exists

on the possibly different aging experiences of men and women in
Singapore. This is another area in need of further investigation.

(7) Finally, while none of the existing reports on the elderly in
Singapore inquired into the emotional and psychological well-being of the
aged other than cursory questions on whether the elderly person felt
lonely, other indicators suggest that quick action is needed to find out
more about the elderly and to provide greater assistance to those elderly
in need. For example, suicide rates increase dramatically with age for both
sexes, but the increase is much larger among men: from 1969—1976,
while the total suicide rate for the population was 13.9 per 100,000 for
males and 10.3 per 100,000 for females, males aged 60—69 had a suicide
rate of 62.4 per 100,000, and those over 70 years old had a suicide rate
of 136.1 per 100,000. The corresponding rates for older women were
26.1 and 57.8 per 100,000. These figures come from Hassan (1983: 62)
who employs a Durkheimian perspective to suggest that "the high pro-
pensity for suicide among the aged is . . . a function of the absence of a
system of *community* (emphasis added) care which invariably leads to a
weakening of individual bonds with society, as well as with 'family society'
and with certain cultural ideas about old age". These data on suicide and
old age in Singapore is compelling reason enough for official action to aid
those at greatest risk.

Much remains to be documented on Singapore's experience with its
aging population. As an Asian society undergoing rapid changes and
trying to achieve a balance between its Asian identity and as a member of
the international community, I believe its experience can be informative
for other developing societies such as its neighbor, Malaysia, and other
newly-industrializing nations such as Taiwan and Hong Kong with pre-
dominantly Chinese populations. Indeed, the policy-makers of Singapore
can probably learn much from Taiwan and Japan, two countries who are
further along in the aging of their populations. In this paper, I have only
begun to sketch the main dimensions of the aging problem in Singapore;
the task ahead is large but necessary if the goal is to facilitate the
satisfactory transition of the population as it ages.

NOTES

[1] "Academic Exercises" are research reports based on field work. This is required of
students who have been admitted to a fourth year of study in the university to work
towards graduation from college with an honors degree; students who do not qualify for
the fourth year graduate with a "general" degree after three years. Many of the academic
exercises submitted by sociology and social work students represent the only information
available on various aspects of Singaporean society.

[2] The Ministry of Health's (1984) report on the elderly (which was released in mid-1984)
contained a recommendation that the retirement age be raised to 65, from the current 55.

This recommendation aroused much debate because withdrawal of CPF funds is based on retirement, and many feared that they would be forced to work longer and may not live to retrieve their contributions. In an article written for the Far Eastern Economic Review, Kaye (1984) discussed some of the problems associated with any attempts to raise the retirement age and therefore, when an individual may withdraw his or her CPF funds. For example, raising the age of withdrawal of CPF money will probably be especially hard on low-income individuals who are more dependent on this source for income in the later years. Much of the controversy on this subject was also provoked by certain official comments that Singaporeans were not using their CPF money wisely; thus, it was better if the money remained in the CPF longer (as can be expected, this attitude did not go over well).

[3] In Cheung's (1976) study, "poor" respondents were those receiving some form of public assistance; "well-off" respondents simply referred to individuals who had personal or family sources of income.

[4] All currency cited are in Singapore dollars; approximate current exchange rate, October 1985: US$1 = S$2.23.

[5] While the parent-son relationship is stressed, it remains to be seen if the daily care and help of elderly parent does not fall on the shoulders of either daughters or daughters-in-law.

[6] The current education system is based on a report prepared by a special committee appointed by the Prime Minister in 1979. It operates on the twin principles of merit and efficiency. Students are tested regularly and frequently to separate the "bright" from the "not-so-bright" into different streams or tracks. The first differentiation occurs at the end of Primary 3 (students are about nine years old then) when children are tracked into one of three streams: a normal bilingual stream, an extended bilingual stream and a monolingual stream. Those in the first two streams (bilingual) are taught a similar curriculum, using English and one other language (Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil, depending on the child's ethnic background) except that the "normal" stream takes 3 years and the "extended" stream stretches over 5 years. Children in the monolingual stream are considered less able to study two languages and are instructed in just one language; the curriculum is also slightly altered and five years are needed before the students proceed to vocational schools. The bilingual children, on the other hand, will continued to be tested and differentiated in secondary school, pre-university or junior college, and finally, at the university level.

REFERENCES CITED

Blau, Z. S. 1973 Old Age in a Changing Society. New York: New Viewpoints.

Blenkner, M. 1965 Social Work and Family Relationships in Later Life. In Social Structure and the Family: Generational Relations. E. Shanas and G. F. Streib, eds. Pp. 45—69. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Brody, E. 1978 The Aging of the Family. The Annals 438: 13—27

Bytheway, B. 1979 Aging and Sociological Studies of the Family. In Family Life in Old Age. G. Dooghe and J. Helander, eds. Pp. 15—29. The Hague: International Association of Gerontology.

Cantor, M. H. 1979 Neighbors and Friends: an Overlooked Resource in the Informal Support System. Research on Aging. 1: 434—463.

Chen, P. S. J. and C. T. Chang 1982 The Elderly in Singapore. Unpublished Manuscript of a Study Commissioned by the Singapore Ministry of Social Affairs.

Cheung, P. P. L. 1976 Problems of the Aged in Singapore. Department of Sociology, University of Singapore: Academic Exercise.

Field, M. 1972 The Aged, the Family, and the Community. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hassan, R. 1983 A Way of Dying, Suicide in Singapore. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press,

Kaye, L. 1984 The People's Managers. Far Eastern Economic Review. July 19, 1984: 80—81.

Konig, R. 1970 Old Problems and New Queries in Family Sociology. In Families in East and West. R. Hill and R. Konig, eds. Pp. 602—622. Paris: Mouton.

Neuhaus, R. H. and R. H. Neuhaus 1982 Successful Aging. New York: Wiley.

Nock, S. L. 1979 The Family Life Cycle: Empirical or Conceptual Tool? Journal of Marriage and the Family 41: 15—38.

Riley, M. W., B. B. Hess and K. Bond, eds. 1983 Aging in Society. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum.

Saw, S. H. 1981 Demographic Trends in Singapore. Department of Statistics Census Monograph No. 1.

Shanas, E. 1973 Family Kin Networks and Aging in Cross-Cultural Perspective. Journal of Marriage and the Family 35: 505—511.

Shanas, E. 1962 The Health of Older People: a Social Survey. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Singapore Council of Social Services 1981a Social Policy and the Elderly in Singapore. Singapore: Council of Social Services.

Singapore Council of Social Services 1981b Rapport. Volume 6, Number 1.

Singapore Department of Statistics 1983/84 Singapore Yearbook of Statistics.

Singapore Department of Statistics 1982/83 Singapore Yearbook of Statistics.

Singapore Ministry of Health 1984 Report of the Committee on the Problems of the Aged.

Soh, Y. H. 1976 A Sociological Study of the Problem of Old Age in Singapore. Department of Sociology, University of Singapore: Academic Exercise.

Sussman, M. B. 1965 Relationships of Adult Children with their Parents in the U.S. In Social Structure and the Family: Generational Relations. E. Shanas and G. F. Streib, eds. Pp. 62—92. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Townsend, P. 1963 The Family Life of Old People. London: Pelican. Originally published in 1957.

U.S. Bureau of the Census 1984 Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 145. Money Income and Poverty Status of Families and Persons in the United States: 1983. (Advance Data from the March 1984 Current Population Survey). Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

Weeks, J. R. and J. B. Cuellar 1981 The Role of Family Members in the Helping Networks of Older People. Gerontologist. 21: 388—394.

Wong, S. Y. 1980 Modernization and Aging: an Examination of Support Resources. Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore: Academic Exercise.

Cornell University, Ithaca
N.Y. 14853, U.S.A.