

WORK, AGING AND DEPENDENCY IN A SHERPA POPULATION IN NEPAL

CYNTHIA M. BEALL and MELVYN C. GOLDSTEIN

Department of Anthropology, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, U.S.A.

Abstract—This paper suggests a conceptual framework for the cross-cultural study of dependency in order to encourage and facilitate data-based cross-cultural comparisons. It offers an etic, operational definition encompassing biological, activity and economic components. It also emphasizes that the emic definition is crucial for understanding a situation. The utility of distinguishing several components of an etic definition of dependency and distinguishing etic from emic definitions is illustrated using the examples of Sherpas in Helambu, Nepal. From the etic viewpoint, the Sherpas are apparently healthy, economically productive and physically active and therefore lie near the independent end of the dependency continuum. The recent emigration of many young adults has produced a demographic situation where few elderly can achieve their expectation of growing old while sharing their own households with their youngest son and his family. Although family life is valued and most elderly Sherpas have other offspring and other relatives in the village, the majority of elderly Sherpa live alone and express dissatisfaction at doing so. From their standpoint, reliance upon someone other than the youngest son for lodging or food is considered pejoratively and as dependency. Their emic definition of dependency is different from the Western definition and both differ from what we have referred to as etic dependency.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists have frequently challenged 'accepted' ideas regarding human experience that are based on the narrow Western experience and in the field of gerontology have begun to examine the assumptions of our Western industrial-based perception of aging. Recent studies demonstrate clearly that some of the biological concomitants of old age experienced in the West are not inevitable and are, in fact, limited to Western populations. Hypertension, for example, is not prevalent in non-Western populations [1, 2] and is not a universal feature of normal aging. Clark [3, p. 81] suggests that other supposedly "inevitable biological characteristics" such as sensory loss, learning deficits, confusion, etc. may also be separable from normal aging.

Another area where our Western experience of aging may be misleading is that of dependency and activity of the elderly. It is universally held that there is an inverse relationship between biological age and physical function and capability. The loss of biological function results in the decreasing capacity to perform one's economic activities and meet one's social obligations. Consequently, the process of aging is seen to produce dependency in the elderly which some anthropologists such as Clark and Simmons contend is present and dealt with in all cultures:

Dependency of all kinds apparently occurs in all cultures, and it seems to be an almost inevitable companion of advanced age [4, p. 272]. Individuals everywhere seem to have become progressively dependent upon others for their food with the onset of old age [5, pp. 34-35].

Clark [3], in fact, writes that the concept of "Aging as dependency" is one of 6 current ways that aging is conceptualized. Despite Clark's [4] pioneering essay, dependency has not been clearly delimited. More often than not it has been used without clarity and with the pejorative connotation of our own society, i.e. with the idea of being a burden or of receiving

without giving anything of value in return. For example, Fry [6, p. 9] comments that while our society tolerates dependency (nonreciprocity) in certain situations, "chronic dependency, voluntary or involuntary, borders on freeloading":

In many nonindustrial societies, the roles and statuses of older people enable them to give something of immediate use to others (i.e. the prestige generating components). Thus they can take without remorse. As we have seen in industrial societies, the prestige-generating components of the statuses of the older adults are reduced. Often what they have to give is of little value. When others are needed, little remains to give in exchange for their help. Reciprocity is out of balance, thereby jeopardizing integrity and self-esteem. Dependency is not exclusively an American problem, but is faced the resolved in various ways by all cultures (*ibid.*).

While these authors aver that dependency exists everywhere, paradoxically, there is a widely held belief that Western and traditional societies differ substantially in the aging process in that many of the debilitating and demeaning aspects associated with aging in the U.S. are not found in traditional societies. Individuals in non-Western, non-industrial societies "often retain relatively good physical and mental facilities and pursue many of the activities of earlier adulthood until shortly before death" [3, p. 79].

A leading exponent of this 'rosy' view of the state of the aged in traditional societies is the Harvard physician Alexander Leaf. He investigated the elderly in mountain farming communities in Ecuador, Pakistan and the Caucasus and found an absence of debility and senility in the elderly as well as extraordinary longevity. He asserts "... that one can view the disease process as separate and apart from the aging process, that disease is not an essential part of the aging process itself" [7, p. 86].

Although the claims of unusual longevity for one of these populations (Vilcabamba, Ecuador) have been disproven, the real scientific import of his findings is

not longevity *per se*, but the unusually good health and physical fitness of the elderly of these communities [8, 9]. Leaf [7, p. 83] argues that while activity and social factors are both important for the good health and physical fitness he reports in these societies, physical energy is the more important of the two. With regard to physical fitness, Leaf emphasizes the effect of the rugged mountainous environment of these societies which requires a continuous high level of activity and exertion in order to survive. While Leaf himself does not carry the argument further, the elderly in these populations who retain physical and mental capacities throughout their lives appear to contradict the previously cited theory that physical dependence is universal among the elderly.

A number of authors have commented on the importance of distinguishing between the able-bodied and decrepit aged [10–12]. This raises the critical issue of *intracultural* variation, that is to say, to what extent are there significant differences within traditional societies with regard to fitness, biological function, dependency, etc.

Despite the centrality of this 'work–fitness–dependency' issue for understanding the process of normal aging cross-culturally, there are virtually no empirical data. Is dependency truly a cultural universal of aging? Do all cultures define it the same way? Does it typically commence at age 60 or 70 or 80? Is it the same for males as for females, for the wealthy and for the poor? And significantly, how is it related to decline in biological function and physical fitness? The literature is filled with anecdotal, imprecise and idealized discussions but is strikingly deficient in empirical data. The literature is also imprecise and unclear concerning what is meant by dependency, e.g. whether our own pejorative connotation is being used, or whether the meaning of the group in question is meant [13].

We suggest that a major cause of this confusion is the absence of a clearly delimited conceptual framework that can be applied cross-culturally. Such a framework must separate out the pejorative connotation of dependency that is part of our culture and root analysis in 'real' rather than 'ideal' culture. That is to say, it should focus investigation not merely on what people say they should do or claim to do, but on what they actually do. The framework must also distinguish between the subject's own meaning of dependency (the emic viewpoint), the investigator's 'scientific' meaning of dependency (the etic viewpoint), as well as distinguish between the emic viewpoint found in the investigator's own culture and that found in the culture under study.

The emic/etic dichotomy refers to two perspectives utilized in anthropology for studying human behavior. The emic perspective focuses on understanding from the point of view of the subject's own culture, the sets of perceptions and evaluations held and used by actors in a given culture. It is often referred to as the 'insider's' or 'native's' point of view. It refers to how the subjects themselves define and evaluate reality. The etic perspective, on the other hand, refers to the 'outsider's' point of view, to the set of scientific concepts and theories utilized by the investigator to analyze any societal setting. It is an objective approach applicable to all cultures.

We suggest that dependency be defined etically as the goods and services used for subsistence that an individual receives from others. This meaning of dependency addresses the underlying assumption of those who associate being elderly with dependency, namely, that in order to survive the elderly must receive assistance from others. But it does so in a way that can be measured empirically in all societal settings yet does not imply any negative or positive evaluation of such actions. An investigator can determine, for example, how often elderly people living alone prepare and cook food, how often they receive food from others or eat with others, how often they go hunting or fishing or work in the fields. It does not assume anything about the subjects' perception and evaluation of this assistance (the emic perspective), whether, for example, accepting uncooked foodstuffs from one's daughter is negatively valued and considered demeaning. Dependency in this sense is a value-free or value-neutral continuum. There is no single threshold at which 'dependency' *per se* comes into existence. There are only degrees of independence/dependence ranging from the hypothetical society in which the elderly produce all of their own needs (totally independent) to a society in which the elderly receive all their needs from others (totally dependent). Used in this manner, dependency can be measured intraculturally with regard to persons of different ages, sex, class, etc. as well as interculturally.

Furthermore, any etic framework should consider 4 components of dependency:

1. biological function and physical fitness;
2. the actual activities and work of the elderly, in particular, the subsistence goods and services they produce themselves;
3. the resources and wealth controlled by the elderly and the goods and services purchased or bartered by means of these; and
4. the goods and services obtained in addition to those produced directly by the elderly themselves (category 2) or indirectly via category 3 above.

This framework encompasses what the elderly (of different age, sex, etc.) are physically capable of doing, what they actually do, and how they obtain the remaining goods and services necessary for subsistence.

The emphasis on empirically measurable etic categories does not diminish the importance of culturally specific meanings, of the manner in which different cultures define, categorize and evaluate aging and the activity of the aged. We suggest that all societies, traditional and developed, define certain types of goods and services received from others as acceptable and not degrading to one's self-esteem and social identity, while others are defined as ranging from less than ideal to outright demeaning. This meaning is culturally specific and must be discovered emically in each culture. Such expectations, perceptions, norms, etc. can vary intraculturally as well as interculturally. They are an essential component for understanding why the elderly behave the way they do, why they work at certain activities but not others, purchase certain goods and services and receive still others without reciprocity. As the following example demonstrates, they are focal to any understanding of the

emotional and psychological well-being of the elderly. However, the cultural meaning of aging and dependency, the emic dimension, must be linked to the etic framework if the study of the aging process is to develop a truly bio-cultural and cross-cultural understanding of the process of aging. The following case analysis illustrates this framework.

AGING IN SHERPA SOCIETY

Sherpas are a Tibetan-dialect speaking, Buddhist population inhabiting mountain area in northeastern Nepal. Sherpas trace their ancestry to Tibetan groups that emigrated about 450 years ago from Eastern Tibet to the Solu-Khumbu region of eastern Nepal near Mt Everest. The Sherpas of Helambu, in turn, claim descent from Solu-Khumbu.

Helambu, or Yelmu, as it is known in Tibetan, is an area situated about 2 days' walk northeast of Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. It contains Sherpa villages at higher elevations (2000–3000 m) and Tamang and Brahman-Chetri villages at the lower altitudes. This area seemed appropriate to examine activity and dependency because on the one hand it is rural, agricultural and very mountainous, while on the other hand it had been suggested that the status of the elderly there was low and that the elderly were dependent on their children.

Two ethnographers of the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu, Fürer-Haimendorf [14] and Ortner [15], both comment on the low status and poignant plight of the elderly in Sherpa society although neither present supporting data. Ortner, for example, argues that parent-child conflict in Solu-Sherpa society occurs because sons marry and take away shares of the parental property and that eventually, when all the sons marry, they leave the parents virtually propertyless. She also implies that the elderly lose their physical fitness and their capacity to do productive work, contrary to expectations deriving from Leaf's research.

In real life, as one gets old and one's children marry away; as one's property disperses bit by bit with each of their marriages; as one's physical powers, including one's sexuality, wane; and as the social structural realities of lay life are such that in fact one is not taken care of by one's children but is left to fend for oneself... [15, p. 52].

Our pilot study indicates a more complicated situation. Research was conducted over a 6-week period during July–August 1979 in Helambu in the contiguous villages of Norbugyang and Pemagyang (both pseudonyms) situated at an altitude of about 2800 m.

These villages together consist of 75 households of Sherpas containing 373 persons of whom 257 were in residence at the time. A striking aspect of the overall situation of the elderly is the large number of elderly people living alone. Eleven households (15%) consist of one elderly person alone, and in 7 of these, the lone elderly person is over 70 years of age. Another 6 households (8%) consist of an old couple living alone.

Our study focuses on 37 persons over the age of 50. The age distribution is as follows: 12 are in their 50s; 11 in their 60s; 11 in their 70s; and 3 in their 80s. Of these, 60% of the individuals over 60 and 73% of those over 70 reside alone or with a spouse. Thirty-

one percent of those over 60 and 33% of those over 70 live alone. This sample includes 86% of the villagers 60 years and older.

The study attempted to investigate and measure what the elderly actually do. An activity-work survey of 30 different elderly persons age 50 and over was conducted. Twenty-four hour sequential recall interviews made on 15 different days during the peak agricultural season yielded a total of 69 person-days of activity data. The subjects in this study were asked to enumerate all their activities and meals for the previous day and the reports were supplemented with direct spot-check observation. Since Western time concepts are not well developed in this society and since very few persons had and used watches, the time dimension was organized emically, i.e. according to the Sherpas' own division of daily time. They discussed their activities with reference to the four named meals they eat daily. For example, they would normally state they had worked in the fields from the second 'meal' (about 10 a.m.) to the third 'meal' (about 3 p.m.). The time spent performing activities such as fieldwork was estimated on the basis of the average length of time (as we measured it) between these culturally delimited 'meals'. Work and activity were categorized into 5 general types:

1. Heavy work

(a) *Agricultural field labor.* Agricultural field labor during the period of observation consisted almost entirely of digging potatoes for which Sherpas use an iron hoe with an inwardly curved blade. The handle is about 600–700 cm long and the blade about 15 cm × 30 cm. To use this implement, the worker must bent over almost horizontally from the waist and dig in this position.

(b) *Carrying loads.* This involved either a basket of potatoes, leaves or fertilizer, or a brass jug of water, or a load of firewood or grass/fodder. The lightest measured load was 14.5 kg and the heaviest was 35 kg.

2. Moderate work

This consisted of herding, milking animals, feeding animals, cutting loads of grass (but not carrying it back), carrying meals to the field for workers and collecting mushrooms in the forest.

3. Household-maintenance work

This involves a variety of tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, drying potatoes, cleaning the stable, etc.

4. Wage labor

Two types of wage labor were done: government office work (one person) and construction-carpentry work.

5. Craft labor

Making wooden bins, weaving mats, sewing, etc.

Table 1 illustrates the heavy work performed by the elderly Sherpa. Ninety-one percent of the person-days worked by men and 87% of those worked by women included heavy labor defined as at least one instance of either carrying a heavy load or fieldwork. The data show also that there is no difference in the incidence

Table 1. Number of person-days in which fieldwork and carrying was done

Age	Fieldwork					Carrying					Heavy work (fieldwork or carrying)				
	50's	60's	70's	80's	Total	50's	60's	70's	80's	Total	50's	60's	70's	80's	Total
	N %	N %	N %	N %	N %	N %	N %	N %	N %	N %	N %	N %	N %	N %	N %
Males															
No	5(31)	2(29)	4(44)	1(33)	12(34)	2(12)	1(14)	2(22)	0(0)	5(14)	1(16)	1(14)	1(11)	0(0)	3(9)
Yes	11(69)	5(71)	5(56)	2(67)	23(66)	14(88)	6(86)	7(78)	3(100)	30(86)	15(94)	6(86)	8(89)	3(100)	32(91)
Females															
None	1(17)	4(44)	1(20)	0(0)	6(29)	3(50)	3(33)	1(4)	0(0)	7(33)	1(17)	2(22)	1(20)	0(0)	4(19)
Yes	5(83)	5(55)	4(80)	1(100)	15(71)	3(50)	6(67)	4(80)	1(100)	14(66)	5(83)	7(78)	4(80)	1(100)	17(81)

of undertaking heavy labor between those 50 years of age and those over 70 years of age. According to these findings, elderly persons 70 years and over are as likely to perform both field work and carrying loads as those between 50 and 69 years of age. The amount of time spent at fieldwork is also instructive. On those occasions when agricultural work was performed, the average number of hours worked was 4.1 hours per day for males and 3.6 hours per day for females.

Although stress tests and formal health surveys have not yet been conducted, a number of factors indicate good health status and physical fitness. Systolic and diastolic blood pressure did not increase significantly with age and the average blood pressure for males over 60 was 111/77 and for females was 125/86 mm Hg. Very few had arthritic impairment of movement in their fingers. There was only one case of partial blindness (the 87-year-old man mentioned below) and no deafness or senility. The elderly communicated cogently and apparently had no thought or memory disorders. Only one male was too ill to perform heavy labor during the period we observed and he was hypertensive and appeared to have recently suffered a heart attack.

A typical day in the life of the eldest man in the village is illustrative of the vitality and self-reliance of even the older elderly. Dorje is 87 years old. He has 3 sons and 2 daughters but all 3 sons have died. His wife died 3 years ago at the age of 80 and he now lives alone, although he has leased most of his land to others. While interviewing him, he indicated that on the previous day he had performed the following activities:

He got up late when others in the village were already up and about. He walked to the water tap near his house and got a full jug of water (about 16 kg) which he carried back to his household. He then made a fire, boiled water and churned a pot of Tibetan tea. He reheated the previous night's leftovers (rice and potatoes) and ate that with tea as his first meal. After this he went to one of his fields to dig potatoes. He carried back a load of about 15 kg and commented that he thinks he misses a lot of the potatoes since he is virtually blind in his left eye. He then walked back to his field carrying a load of manure which he spread on the field in preparation for planting radish. Then he returned home and spread out the potatoes he had carried back earlier on the porch to dry. After this he walked to the water tap, washed his hands and feet, returned home, and again made a fire. He cooked a pot of potatoes and ate

them with salt and hot chili for his second meal. He also had one cup of locally distilled liquor (rakshi) with the meal. After washing the pots he again went to the field, this time to plant radishes. He worked at this for three or four hours and then returned to his home where he repacked the potatoes he had left out earlier and carried them into the house. It was about 4 p.m. by then. He drank another cup of rakshi and ate the leftovers from his second meal. He didn't go back to the fields to work anymore and stayed home for the remainder of the day cooking dinner in the evening.

Economically, the elderly living alone or with a spouse maintained ownership over land in all but one instance, that of a man who had immigrated from another village many years ago. Sherpa inheritance norms hold that each male has rights to a share of the natal family patrimony including land and movable property. Normally this is transferred to sons when they marry and set up their own independent nuclear families. However, the youngest son is expected to remain with his parents and bring his bride into the natal household forming an extended stem family. This son eventually inherits two shares (his and his father's) together with the family house and possessions. Should the youngest son not remain with his parents, the parents retain their share of the land and parental house. Thus, the elderly living alone controlled land and possessed a house and the various furnishings that went with it. Although all but one of these elderly did heavy work including fieldwork, it was obvious from discussions that many could not work all their land holdings themselves. It was common, therefore, for the elderly to hire day-laborers to help in planting and harvesting and also to leave their land to relatives or neighbours. The standard lease arrangement in Helambu is for the lease-holder to pay one-half of the yield if the seed is provided and one-third if not.

The elderly Sherpas in Helambu, therefore, appear to exemplify the robust and socially-economically productive old age that Leaf and others discuss. From the etic perspective, they do not appear to be dependent to any substantial degree. They are physically able to work in the fields, carry loads, do standard housework and other maintenance tasks and possess the critical land resources necessary for subsistence independence. The debility and senility normally associated with aging in the West is not present among

the Sherpas studied although there was clearly evidence of morphological and functional involution with increasing age [16]. Yet these losses do not produce elderly folk requiring substantial assistance in goods and services to subsist or to accomplish the basic activities of daily life.

Despite the apparent absence of debility and senility, and despite the independence and self-reliance manifested by the elderly in Helambu, many Sherpas overtly express unhappiness with their situation. Several spontaneously volunteered that they wished they were dead or would die soon, and others commented that they were lonely and felt abandoned. These negative feelings exist even though being elderly in Tibetan culture is not considered a low status. In fact, Tibetan culture views becoming old in a positive way, as a time when the cares and worries of managing a household are lessened and are shifted to one's child or children. Aging is seen ideally as a process of disengagement. It is a time when persons devote more time and attention to acquiring religious merit through religious activities and rituals in preparation for the future, i.e. in preparation for the rebirth that comes after death and which is determined by their actions in this life. Although all productive work does not usually cease, the worries associated with subsistence should and the elderly ideally should live as respected members of extended families in which their son and daughter-in-law look after the day to day activities. Moreover, Tibetan norms and values hold that one's parents in particular, and the elderly in general, should be treated with kindness, consideration and respect. Tibetans frequently say such things as:

pha ma'i bka' drin gsaab dgos red

One must repay the kindness of one's parents.

While this cultural 'ideal' regarding the elderly is obviously never completely realized with respect to all individual elderly persons, the Sherpas of Helambu appear to be a striking deviation since 15% of all the households in the 2 villages consist of lone elderly persons and 60% of the elderly over 60 lived either alone or with a spouse, even though in most instances they had children or grandchildren living in the village. Other Tibetan societies for which data exist do not exhibit this pattern. In Limi, a remote Tibetan speaking area in N.W. Nepal studied by Goldstein, only one elderly male lived alone in the village of Tsang ($N = 288$), while all others (excepting one old Tibetan refugee) lived with children or close relatives. In Dzinga ($N = 256$), another Tibetan area 3 days south of Limi, no-one lived alone. There, James Ross (personal communication, 1980) reports the 21 persons over 60 years of age reside in 13 households of which 10 include married children with their families and 2 contain unmarried children. One female has no permanent household and resides with her employers.

Several explanations exist for this apparent contradiction. First, it is possible that Sherpas are an atypical example of Tibetan culture and the current 'status' of the elderly is merely a reflection of their different traditional value and normative system. Second, important changes in the recent past may have influenced Sherpa culture and society and altered traditional patterns. The Sherpas of Helambu, however,

do not appear atypical for Sherpa or Tibetan culture. They speak a dialect of Tibetan, many read and write Tibetan language, their religion is Tibetan Buddhism and their rituals reflect the Tibetan Buddhist Great Tradition, they eat typically Tibetan foods, e.g. barley tsamba (roasted meal) and buttered-salt tea, and possess typical patterns of Sherpa hospitality and social organization. Their ideals concerning old age also fit traditional Tibetan culture. We shall argue, therefore, that the latter alternative is the major causal factor, i.e. that major changes are transforming traditional Sherpa social organization and the norms and values associated with it. The psychological and emotional malaise expressed by many Sherpas stems precisely from a discrepancy between traditional expectations and the actual reality with which the elderly must now cope.

Although Nepal was closed to foreign travellers until 1951, very important changes have occurred over the past four decades that have seriously affected the social and economic life of Helambu (as well as Solu-Khumbu, the other major area of Sherpa residence). These are discussed in more detail in Goldstein and Beall's article [13] and it will suffice to say that substantial emigration from Helambu to India (and to a lesser extent, Kathmandu) began during World War II. The creation in India of a vast network of mountain highways and a booming construction industry provided a new source of economic opportunities for the Sherpas. The history of this process in Helambu is unknown but the results are clear. In 1979, 31% of the population in the villages of Pemagyang and Norbugyang was living outside the village on a long-term basis. In the younger age categories this was even higher with 36% of those 30-40 and 35% of those 20-30 living in India and Kathmandu. This has produced a tremendous disruption in the Sherpa family system. In Helambu, youngest sons who would otherwise have remained with their parents in extended stem families leave. Even though they often plan to return permanently to Helambu someday, the likelihood that the traditional extended family ideal of the elderly can be attained is seriously diminished. In fact, very often it appears that these sons ask that their share of the land be legally separated while they are living abroad thus depriving the elderly of the double share of land that they would normally have held. High mortality among emigrant Sherpas has probably exacerbated this situation. Speaking of the Darjeeling Sherpas in 1957, Furer-Haimendorf [17, p. 85] writes:

Living in quarters little better than the old-fashion coolie lines of tea gardens, and exposed to contact with the crowds of an Indian bazaar, many Sherpas fell victim to tuberculosis, venereal diseases and other infectious ailments. In the healthy climate and comparative isolation of their mountain homes they had developed no immunity against diseases common in Indian towns...

It is reasonable to suggest that more younger sons die in India than would have died had they remained in Helambu. Demographic research with other Tibetan populations [18] also indicates that, under normal circumstances, once a youth lives through infancy there is little mortality risk until he/she reaches old age.

The presence of so many elderly living alone in Helambu, therefore, does not reflect the traditional cultural pattern. Elderly Sherpas live alone not because of traditional values and norms but rather because they have to. Massive emigration has precluded the realization of the extended stem family since the sons who should be living with the parents are either residing in India or have died untimely deaths there.

Questioning the elderly living alone and as couples reveals, however, that most of them have living children. Of the 17 such households, 2 had no children (1 of these was a nun) and for 2 there is no information. Of the remaining 13 households, 9 have living sons and the other 4 have living daughters. In many cases there were also married grandchildren and/or siblings in the village. This raises an important question. If the youngest son is living in India or has died, why then don't the elderly live with other sons, or with an adult daughter or married grandchild? The extensive out-migration reported for Helambu cannot, in and of itself, explain the presence of so many elderly folk living alone bitter and unhappy about their 'abandonment'.

The answer to this question lies in the Sherpa's own definition of dependency, in the emic dimension of dependency. As elder sons in Helambu marry and separate from their parental household, they receive a share of the family's land and set up independent nuclear households that are considered jurally distinct from their natal ones. While short term or temporary aid in times of crises (sickness, etc.) is expected and not considered pejoratively (what Clark [4] calls 'crisis dependency'), regular assistance with regard to basic subsistence activities (e.g. cooking, cleaning, working in the fields, etc.) is not consonant with expectations and maintenance of self-esteem. Fürer-Haimendorf writes of the autonomy of children who have separated:

Elderly sons and married daughters may visit the parents off and on and bring gifts of food and beer on feast days, but only in exceptional circumstances will they work for their parents without receiving the usual wage [14, p. 86].

Consequently, if the youngest son migrates to India or dies after the elder son(s) separate, the elderly couple are left alone. However, it is considered culturally unacceptable for the elderly to move in with other children even if invited. To do so would be to abdicate their independence and demean their self-esteem. It means leaving their own house and turning over their fields to their son (and daughter-in-law) and becoming an appendage to the son's household without power and authority. When the indirect influence of modernization via emigration produced substantial numbers of old folk in just such a situation, they opt to reside alone, despite the fact that they do not want to live that way and are lonely and unhappy with their fate. They are bitter about the recent changes that have caused this transformation but have themselves been unable to accommodate to the new situation. The cultural expectations and aspirations of the elderly in Helambu are simply out of touch with the new reality in which they are immersed. The consequences of this is the unexpected situation of rural elderly who are hale, healthy, pro-

ductive and economically not wanting, but psychologically and emotionally maladapted.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents preliminary data from a pilot study among elderly Sherpas in the Helambu area of Nepal. It addresses a series of widely held views regarding dependency, productive labor and psychological well-being among the elderly and it demonstrates the complexity of the relationships between them. We show that etically, by objective markers of functional independence, elderly Sherpas residing alone are not dependent on others to any substantial degree. They are productive members of their community for whom the Western aging syndrome of debility and senility is not present.

Nevertheless, they are unhappy and dissatisfied with their situation. They are lonely and bitter with what they perceived as abandonment by their children. In reality, however, their abandonment is more apparent than real and is an artifact of the manner in which Sherpa culture defines expectations and perceptions. In many cases these elderly folk have other sons and daughters as well as nephews and grandchildren living in the village but are unable to reside with them because of Sherpa notions of pejorative dependency. As in the U.S., therefore, Sherpa elderly hold independence as an important value. Their definition of dependency, however, is very different from that of our own society and both differ markedly from what we have referred to as etic dependency.

The study of aging cross-culturally has all too often been characterized by untested generalizations, ethnocentric speculations and a focus on norms rather than actual behavior. This paper has demonstrated the need for greater concern with 'real' rather than 'ideal' culture and the need to refine the conceptual models utilized in cross-cultural research. Whether or not dependency is a universal aspect of normal aging depends on how it is defined. Our pilot data indicate that etically, dependency in aging may not be the norm in pre-industrial societies. Similarly, this study shows that continuation of productive activity, relatively high social status, economic resources and relatively good health do not necessarily produce a positive adjustment to aging. The claim that physical fitness and biological function are linked to social and psychological status [7] appears to be an oversimplification. Finally, the paper demonstrates the growing realization that the situation of the elderly in non-Western societies is far from the overly romanticized view commonly expounded in the West. It appears clear that not only are there significant differences among various non-Western societies, but that there are also important differences among the elderly within these societies.

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