

## Age and Ethnic Variations in Attitudes Towards Older Persons, Family and Filial Obligations <sup>1</sup>

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Two major interpretations have been advanced to explain the frequent finding that ethnic elders have more extensive kin support networks than Anglo elders. Structural interpretations argue that the exigencies of poverty and ill health cause minorities to rely more heavily on family members for help than Anglos, whereas cultural explanations rest upon presumed differences in family values and attitudes. Despite the prominence of these two explanations, direct tests of the cultural model are rare. In this study, we use data from a study of 100 African, Mexican, Vietnamese, European, and Native American adults to test the hypothesis that there are ethnic group differences in familism, filial responsibility norms, and attitudes toward the elderly. The role of age and socioeconomic status in explaining racial/ethnic variation in these values is also explored. Results suggest that there are important cultural differences among groups, that these differences are not a function of group differences in SES or age, and that the differences are not consistent with the common depiction of traditional ethnic "familism".

Over the last decade, the literature on aging and ethnicity has dramatically increased in both size and sophistication. Once limited

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to a handful of small, geographically bounded, descriptive studies, the literature now boasts a number of studies which are based on large representative samples, include respondents from multiple ethnic groups, and make use of multivariate statistical techniques. As a result, scholars have begun to identify a number of factors which empirically distinguish the social worlds of minority elders. Studies show, for instance, that minority elders experience a disproportionate amount of poverty and ill health;<sup>2</sup> that Black and Hispanic elders receive more help from their families than do older Anglos;<sup>3</sup> and that older Hispanic and Asian American women are more likely to live with others than older non-Hispanic white women.<sup>4</sup> Methodological advances have not been matched, however, by developments in theory. The field remains largely atheoretical. As Jackson notes,<sup>5</sup> scholars have failed to define and distinguish even such basic concepts as race, national origin, ethnicity, and minority group status. As a result, while it is possible to identify family or quality of life differences between Anglo, Black, Asian, or Hispanic elders, it remains unclear how and why ethnicity impacts the life course.

## Culture or Social Structure

Social gerontologists have usually explained ethnic/racial differences by making reference to one of two factors—either socioeconomic status or culture. A socioeconomic interpretation of kin relations among the elderly might argue, for instance, that Blacks and Hispanics receive more family support than Anglos because such support is a functional response to the exigencies of poverty and ill health. A cultural interpretation, on the other hand, might view intergenerational family relationships as a product of cultural differences in the values placed on family, filial obligations, and the aged themselves. As Mullings and others point out,<sup>6</sup> a socioeconomic interpretation does not logically or necessarily preclude a cultural interpretation. (Although Marx and Weber disagreed about which came first, both believed that socioeconomic and cultural variables were casually related.) Nonetheless, recent work in minority aging has generally treated the two as alternative explanations and scholars have expended considerable effort trying to determine which is the most important source of variation in intergenerational relationships: structure or culture? For several reasons, research is far from conclusive on this issue. The biggest problems of interpretation stem from the rather perfunctory treatment often accorded to the concept of culture itself. Survey research, for example, often finds that minority elders are in more frequent contact with their children and other relatives than their Anglo counterparts and that much of this variation can be explained by racial/ethnic differences in socioeco-

conomic status.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, this body of research seldom includes a direct measure of culture in the study design. Instead, in many studies, culture simply becomes the de facto explanation for any racial/ethnic differences left unexplained by structural variables, such as education, income, or occupation.

Conversely, those studies which have focused explicitly on cultural variables—attitudes toward family, elders, or filial obligations for example—have often focused on a single racial or ethnic group.<sup>8</sup> In addition, whether comparative or not, studies that have directly measured aspects of ethnic culture have often failed to include an analysis of the effects of socioeconomic status.<sup>9</sup> It is true that scholars, to date, have found little empirical support for the hypothesis that there are racial/ethnic differences in the value placed on the family, in perceived closeness to family members, or in satisfaction with familial support.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the conclusion that cultural differences are unimportant is not yet warranted. First of all, culture is not static; it changes as a result of changes in opportunity structures. At an individual level, values as diverse as those related to interest in public affairs<sup>11</sup> and parenting<sup>12</sup> have been demonstrated to be related to socioeconomic status. In the aggregate, changes in individual education or economic achievement may lead to changes in racial or ethnic cultures, including the values traditionally associated with intergenerational family ties.

Despite substantial and continuing inequalities, the last decades have seen significant improvement in the educational attainments of most minority groups;<sup>13</sup> employment profiles may also be coming to be more similar.<sup>14</sup> However, these changes have not been of equal magnitude for all racial/ethnic groups nor have they been equal for all members within these groups. Minority elders, for instance, are less likely to have benefited from the desegregation of schools and the workplace that followed the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s. Consequently, they generally have less education and lower incomes than younger ethnic group members and they are more disadvantaged, vis a vis Anglos, than subsequent generations are likely to be.<sup>15</sup> As a result of linguistic barriers, age differences in socioeconomic status may be even more pronounced among recently arrived immigrant groups. It is quite possible, therefore, that in failing to control for socioeconomic variables, studies of racial/ethnic culture have allowed within-group variation in SES and age to obscure continuing between group differences in values and attitudes.

### **Other Concerns**

Most research on ethnicity, aging, and culture has focused on traditional cultural values such as familism, respect for elders, and

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norms of filial obligation. Whether formally stated or not, the hypothesis has usually been that racial and ethnic minority groups hold more traditional family values than do European American. Empirically, the question has not yet been resolved, partly because of the problems noted above: insufficient attention to the measurement of culture, and the failure to control for socioeconomic variables. In addition, most studies have been based on samples of persons 65 years of age and older.<sup>16</sup> Research based only on the attitudes and expectations of the elderly always runs the risk of distorting the expectations, obligations, and respect that younger adults actually feel towards older family members. However, the problems associated with using an older sample are particularly pronounced in the study of ethnic communities, where processes of acculturation and upward social mobility can be expected to produce generational differences in commitment to traditional cultural values.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, although social scientists frequently invoke culture as an explanation for anticipated or observed differences in minority family ties, important questions remain. Because culture is seldom adequately measured, because it is viewed as a static system of beliefs, rather than an evolving system, and because research has generally failed to take age and class variation into account, we simply do not know the extent to which racial/ethnic groups differentially value family, elders, and filial obligations. We do not know the extent to which observed differences correspond to traditional cultural values and norms, and the extent to which they are products of recent experiences in the United States, and more specifically to changes in socioeconomic opportunity structures. These questions are of more than just academic interest. As Sussman notes,<sup>18</sup> changes in the family and in intergenerational relationships are issues of considerable policy import. Differences in attitudes toward filial obligations and the elderly can generate serious intergenerational conflict within racial/ethnic communities, thereby increasing levels of psychological distress among minority elders. In addition, even in the absence of sound empirical research, the vision of an idealized (and perhaps romanticized) ethnic family support system can be used by policy makers to justify reductions in the formal supports available to ethnic elders;<sup>19</sup> in an era of shrinking governmental services, any change in the willingness of families to support one another may have devastating quality-of-life consequences.<sup>20</sup> For theoretical, empirical, and applied reasons, then, it is important to understand the intersecting effects of age, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity on attitudes towards family, filial obligations, and the aged.

In this paper, we use data from five different racial/ethnic groups to answer the following questions about the cultural underpinnings of family support systems:

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- (1) To what extent do racial/ethnic groups maintain different attitudes towards the family, including attitudes towards filial obligations and old age?
- (2) Do observed differences in family values and attitudes result solely from racial/ethnic differences in socioeconomic status?
- (3) Within racial/ethnic groups, does age affect the degree to which individuals hold traditional cultural values?

These questions and the subsequent analyses are guided by the recognition that culture is mutable. Not only do we expect that age and socioeconomic status will impact individual values, we expect that in the aggregate they help to account for group differences in adherence to traditional cultural values. Since culture is continuously being modified, not only by changes in education, economics and age, but also by the host of other factors that define the American experience, after controlling socioeconomic status, we expect more recent immigrant groups to hold more traditional attitudes toward family and elders than earlier arriving groups.

### DATA AND METHODS

The data are derived from a survey, conducted in Lincoln, Nebraska during Spring and Summer, 1987. A combination of disproportionate area probability sampling and snowballing techniques were used to create a sampling frame of Native, African, Mexican, Vietnamese, and European Americans, 35 years of age and older. Snowball techniques were used only when telephone screening in designated lower, middle, and upper class census tracts failed to identify a sufficient number of potential respondents in each age and ethnic group. The sample included 100 individuals, representing different points on the socioeconomic continuum, close to equally divided across age and racial/ethnic groupings. Although the sample is not strictly representative, it does include a cross-section from each group; only among Native Americans were more than one or two respondents located through snowballing. For this group, approximately 1/3 of the sample were so identified. The interview schedule was translated, and back-translated into Vietnamese and Spanish; few of the older Mexican Americans chose to be interviewed in Spanish, but most of the older Vietnamese chose to be interviewed in their native tongue. All interviews were conducted by well-trained, bilingual, "indigenous" interviewers.

**Variables.** There are four dependent variables in this study, each measuring a somewhat different aspect of attitudes towards intergenerational family ties. Familism is measured by a single di-

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chotomous variable, which asked respondents whether or not an adult child, who is offered a job promotion that would require him/her to move several hundred miles away from his/her parents (in-laws), should accept that promotion. Although this is a very specific, and somewhat limited, measure of familism, we use it for three reasons. First, it is generally consistent with the definition of familism as a value that requires the subordination of the rights of individuals to the needs of the family.<sup>21</sup> Second, it is the aspect of ethnic culture which has received the most attention from scholars interested in ethnic social mobility processes. Third, although items derived from a number of commonly used familism scales were included in the survey, in no instance did those items form a reliable scale.

Following Osako and Liu,<sup>22</sup> filial obligation is measured by two simple summated scales; each scale is a count of the number of affirmative responses to a series of statements. The first scale measures financial responsibility for an aging parent and has an alpha reliability coefficient of .69. It is worded as follows:

If an elderly couple needed money to repair their home, do you think their adult children should help them out if it means the adult children would have less money to spend for -

- (1) their children's education
- (2) their own leisure time activities
- (3) groceries and other household expenses
- (4) a new car or new furniture
- (5) a vacation

The second filial obligation scale has an alpha of .71 and measures the willingness of an adult child to take time off from work to help their parents:

Do you think that adult children should take time off from work in order to -

- (1) give their parents a ride to a funeral
- (2) take their parents to a doctor for a routine checkup
- (3) take their parents to visit a friend

Questions for the Attitudes Toward the Aged scale are a subset of those included in the National Survey of People of Mexican Descent in the United States. Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed with the following three statements:

- (1) The knowledge of older people should be passed on to younger ones.
- (2) Older people deserve respect from young people.
- (3) Older people are very important in keeping (\_\_\_\_\_) culture alive.

The scale was computed by summing responses to these items. It has an alpha reliability coefficient of .78, with scores ranging from 3 to 12. High scores reflect more positive attitudes towards older persons.

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The independent variables used in the analysis are age and ethnicity. Age was measured in 5 year intervals, and recoded to reflect an early, middle, and late stage of adulthood; ages 35-49 were coded as 1, 50-59 = 2, and 60 and over = 3.

Ethnicity was based on self-identification. Respondents were asked the following: "Some people describe themselves by their race, ethnicity, or national background. How would you describe yourself?" If more than one race/ethnicity was given, respondents were asked if one race/ethnicity was more important to them than the others. If so, that ethnicity was recorded. Because of our small sample, for the purposes of this study all respondents of European descent are considered Anglo and all respondents who identified themselves as Native American or American Indian are considered Native American, regardless of tribe. Clearly, there is cultural variability within each of these groups. Evidence suggests that there is substantial variation in the salience of ethnicity among older whites and that there are differences among "Anglos" in terms of cultural attitudes towards aging, independence, and the family.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, in the aggregate, it is precisely the attitudes of this group that constitute the dominant culture. Thus, this group provides a baseline to which ethnic minority cultures can be compared. Similarly, there is considerable cultural diversity among Native American tribes. Some authors, however, have argued that a Pan-Indian culture is developing out of the common experiences produced by federal policy and urban life; it is in this context that Native Americans are treated as a single ethnic group.

Educational and annual household income were used as indicators of socioeconomic status. Because we were interested in assessing ethnic variation, net differences in socioeconomic status, education and income were used as control variables throughout the analysis. Education was the highest grade or year the respondent completed in school and annual household income was a categorical variable, ranging from less than \$3000 = 1 to \$30,000 or more = 8.

Data were analyzed through Multiple Classification Analysis (MCA). Using this technique, we tested for both the direct and interactive effects of age and ethnicity. Mean scores on the dependent variables were presented for age and ethnic groups, both before and after adjusting for the effects of the other independent and control variables. MCA also yielded two strength of association indicators. Eta is the correlation ratio, associated with category effects at a zero-order level. Beta is a standardized regression coefficient, analogous to the beta used in multiple regression; it measures the strength of category effects, after controls are introduced. Results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Relationship Between Age, Ethnicity, and Norms**

Ethnicity	Unadj	Familism (Grand Mean = .04)			Financial Help (Grand Mean = 2.21)			Time Off (Grand Mean = 1.77)			Attitudes Towards Older Persons (Grand Mean = 10.41)		
		Adj Ind	Adj Ind + Cont	Adj Ind + Cont	Unadj	Adj Ind	Adj Ind + Cont	Unadj	Adj Ind	Adj Ind + Cont	Unadj	Adj Ind	Adj Ind + Cont
African Americans	.05	.05	.03	2.30	2.48	2.49	2.20	2.30	2.31	10.25	10.26	10.27	
Vietnamese Americans	.00	.00	.06	1.45	1.23	1.19	2.50	2.43	2.28	10.76	10.71	10.49	
Native Americans	.00	.00	-.01	1.31	1.40	1.41	1.24	1.25	1.28	11.17	11.14	11.19	
Mexican Americans	.13	.13	.10	2.85	2.54	2.55	1.72	1.58	1.65	10.54	10.57	10.71	
European Americans	.04	.05	.02	3.14	3.30	3.31	1.19	1.25	1.37	9.56	9.60	9.68	
Age													
35-49	.06	.05	.03	2.70	2.86	2.88	2.03	2.01	2.06	10.84	10.72	10.79	
50-59	.03	.03	.02	2.14	2.08	2.05	1.82	1.85	1.87	9.87	9.90	10.03	
60+	.03	.08	.07	1.67	1.53	1.51	1.44	1.44	1.36	10.48	10.57	10.43	
Eta/Beta													
Ethnicity	.23	.22	.17	.47a	.51c	.52c	.47c	.47c	.42c	.38	.36b	.30a	
Age	.06	.05	.10	.27a	.35b	.36b	.22	.22	.27	.27a	.23a	.22	

NOTE: Unadj = unadjusted; Adj Ind = adjusted for independent variable; Adj Ind + Cont = adjusted for independent and control variables.

a<.05 b<.01 c<.001



FINDINGS

Contrary to conventional wisdom, neither age nor ethnicity significantly affects familism, at least as it is measured in this study. This is noteworthy, because there has been significant debate in the literature about the extent to which social mobility is impeded in some ethnic groups by an unwillingness to accept jobs that require relocation away from the family. Although a higher proportion of Mexican Americans do agree with the "familistic" position, very few individuals in any group think that promotion opportunities should be foregone. Only 4% of the sample (one African American, two Mexican Americans, and one European American) actually agreed that children should not accept a promotion, if it means moving away from parents or parents-in-law. It is possible that differences between Mexican Americans and other ethnic groups would be significant in a study with a larger sample. Even so, such differences would probably derive, in large part, from socioeconomic differentials; income is related to attitudes toward family and promotion at the .04 level of significance and education is related at .07 (data not shown).

There is virtually no evidence, then, of ethnic variation in this aspect of culture. Furthermore, it is unlikely that ethnic differences which existed at an earlier time have simply disappeared as a result of some process of acculturation. Age is unrelated to promotion attitudes; it is unlikely, therefore, that failure to find an ethnic effect stems from the fact that younger cohorts have less traditional family values than their elders. At least with respect to promotion opportunities, then, there is little reason to expect significant intergenerational conflict over attitudes toward the family.

Because "familism" has occupied a prominent place in the literature on ethnic social mobility, particularly for Hispanics, one final point is probably in order here. It is true that socioeconomic variables influence attitude toward family and promotion. However, the suggestion that this attitude is a cause of ethnic differences in social mobility and socioeconomic status seems most unlikely. First, almost no one favors giving up a career opportunity for family, and second, groups do not significantly differ on this value.

Evidence for ethnic variation in attitudes towards filial obligation is much more compelling than that for "familism." Ethnicity is strongly related to the willingness to take time off work and to financially help ones' parents. However, the pattern is not the same for both variables, and thus does not support the view that ethnic minorities are consistently more willing to support older family members than are Anglos. With an unadjusted mean ( $\bar{x}$ ) score of 3.14 on a 5-point scale, European Americans are, in fact, the most willing

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to financially assist their parents. Note, however, that their unadjusted mean score of 1.19 makes them among the least willing to take time off work to help. On the basis of this finding, it might be tempting to conclude that time and money are simply alternative modes of satisfying filial obligations. Since European Americans are often more occupationally successful than members of other groups, it is easier for them to give their parents money than to give them time. Vietnamese Americans, on the other hand, who are the least willing to make personal financial sacrifices for their parents ( $\bar{x}$  = 1.45), are the most generous group with their time ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.50). Time and money, however, are simply functional alternatives. The two scales are not significantly correlated ( $r$  = .15). Furthermore, some groups are low on willingness to help with *both* money and time. As a group, Native Americans have few monetary resources. Perhaps as a result, they are among the least willing to give financial assistance to parents ( $\bar{x}$  = 1.31). Note, however, that they are also among the least willing to take time off work ( $\bar{x}$  = 1.24). African Americans, who as a group are also economically precarious, nevertheless rank in the middle, in terms of willingness to make financial sacrifices ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.30). At the same time, they rank near the top in willingness to take time off work to help ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.20).

Age is significantly and inversely related to both measures of filial obligation; younger persons believe adult children should make greater sacrifices for their parents than older persons do. Since analysis reveals no significant age/ethnicity interaction effects, this pattern holds for all ethnic groups. Some scholars have suggested that the willingness to support older family members has decreased among succeeding generations of Asian and Mexican Americans.<sup>24</sup> They have argued that acculturation and the decreasing importance of family ties have exacerbated intergenerational conflict in ethnic communities. There is nothing in these data to suggest that this is the case; regardless of ethnic identification, persons 60 years of age and older expect adult children to take the least financial responsibility for their parents and are the least willing to have children take time off work. Ethnic norms and ethnic differences in filial obligations do not, then, seem to have changed, nor do they seem likely to do so as the next generation reaches older adulthood. It is unlikely, therefore, that conflicting values and expectations for intergenerational support have jeopardized the mental health of older ethnics. Of course, the data presented here deal with what people say, not with what people do. As Rosenthal notes,<sup>25</sup> variation in norms of filial obligation may not be matched by corresponding differences in actual filial support and the discrepancy between expectations and behavior may still be a source of distress to minority elders.

To reiterate an earlier point, ethnic differences in actual

intergenerational support have been well-documented in the literature; racial/ethnic minority elders are usually found to be in more frequent contact with their children than Anglo elders, and are also found to give and receive more help. The question, of course, has been whether those differences reflect the effects of culture or socioeconomic status on need for support or on the availability of alternative sources of support. However, it is possible that socioeconomic status also influences ethnic intergenerational support by affecting filial obligation norms, i.e., culture. Our results, however, do not support such a model. The ethnic group differences observed in this study—in attitudes towards financial assistance and taking time off—do not derive from group differences in socioeconomic status; education and income are unrelated to both filial obligation scales (data not shown). Furthermore, introduction of socioeconomic controls does not significantly change the effects of ethnicity; for financial assistance, the beta coefficient for ethnicity changes from .51 to .52 when SES is added to age in the analysis. For willingness to take time off from work, the effect of ethnicity is only marginally reduced by including education and income in the analysis, from a beta of .47 to a beta of .42. If, as previous studies have suggested, socioeconomic differentials account for racial/ethnic differences in intergenerational/family support behavior, it appears that the underlying explanation must be structural, not cultural.

Ethnic variation in attachments to norms of filial obligation cannot be explained by socioeconomic status, but the patterns observed in these data cannot be explained by traditional cultural explanations either. Despite all the rhetoric and debate, we find little evidence that the values and commitments of adult children to their parents are consistently higher among Vietnamese, Mexican, African, or Native Americans. In addition, age is inversely related to strong norms of filial obligation. Thus, there is little support for the proposition that filial obligation has declined among ethnic communities, as a result of the acculturation and upward social mobility of younger age cohorts. Cultural differences are substantial, but the differences do not simply reflect the traditional Latino or Asian values of family and filial obligation; more likely, current ethnic attitudes are a product of recent urban-American experiences. This is an important point, and we will return to it in the conclusion.

Finally, ethnicity is significantly related to attitudes toward older people. Results for this variable are consistent with the literature that suggests ethnic minorities place more importance on the aged than do Anglos. Consistent with Schweitzer's work,<sup>26</sup> Native Americans express very positive attitudes toward the aged. The unadjusted mean score for Native Americans is 11.17, followed by Vietnamese, Mexican, and African Americans, with means of 10.76,

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10.54, and 10.25, respectively. European Americans place considerably less importance on the aged than other ethnic groups, with a mean of 9.56. Introduction of control variables does reduce the correlation between ethnicity and attitudes towards older persons, from an eta of .38 to a beta of .30. However, with one exception, the introduction of age and socioeconomic status does not change the overall pattern. (The one exception is that Mexican American attitudes toward elders become more favorable than Vietnamese American attitudes, once the effects of education and income are controlled.) Note, however, that neither education nor income has statistically significant main effects.

Before controlling socioeconomic status, the effects of age are significant at the .05 level. Even after controls are introduced, age effects approach statistical significance, having a probability of .055. Individuals, aged 50-59, have less favorable attitudes than either younger or older people. It is interesting to note that in all ethnic categories, this age group expresses a substantial willingness and expectation to support older family members (see results for financial and time commitment variables). At the same time, results suggest that these individuals value the contributions of older people the least. This pattern may reflect a "second-generation" phenomenon, with value conflicts being most pronounced between the foreign-born generation and the first generation to be born, or grow up in, the United States. More likely, it reflects the ambivalence of middle-aged individuals attempting to care for their own aged parents. Younger adults, who express the most positive attitudes towards older persons and an even greater willingness to support aging parents, may have yet to face the necessity and the reality of caring for aging family members.

## CONCLUSIONS

Because results are based on a small non-representative sample of residents of a single midwestern community, they must be viewed with some caution. Specifically, given the small number of cases in each ethnic group and modest variation in socioeconomic status, it is likely that the magnitude of ethnic differences and the ability of income and education to explain those differences has been underestimated in this study. More importantly, variation in the density and size of ethnic populations may produce regional differences in commitment to traditional family values; theoretically, acculturation, i.e., the diminution of traditional attitudes, should be most pronounced in communities where racial and ethnic minorities constitute a small percentage of the population. Because the racial/ethnic minority population in Lincoln is relatively small, ethnic

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differences in familism, filial obligation, and attitudes toward the aged may be further underestimated in this study. It is important to note, however, that there are no theoretical or empirical reasons to believe that the direction of the relationships uncovered here or the causal dynamics underlying those relationships would be any different given a larger, nationally representative sample. Thus, even given limitations due to the nature of the sample, the findings have three important implications. First, data demonstrate a point that has often been made, but seldom directly tested, that there are important cultural differences between and among minority groups. On the basis of observed differences in attitudes towards elders and towards filial obligations, it is not only appropriate to describe African, Vietnamese, Native, and Mexican Americans as minority groups, i.e., as groups defined by limited access to power and resources, but also as ethnic groups, i.e., groups that have unique cultural attributes.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, cultural/attitudinal differences among these ethnic groups, and between them and European Americans, cannot be explained by socioeconomic inequalities alone; cultural differences persist, even after controlling for education and income.

Findings suggest, however, that explanations which rely on notions of traditional culture are not complete either; results from this study simply do not conform to the idea that non-European ethnic groups are more familistic, overall, than European Americans. Although ethnic minorities score significantly higher on some family attitude scales, there are no differences, or they score lower, on others. The notion that older ethnics or more recently arrived groups are more traditional than their younger or earlier arriving counterparts receives only mixed support; age often has effects directly opposite those predicted. The Vietnamese, the most recently arrived group, are not the most traditional with respect to any of the variables included in this analysis. Results strongly suggest the need for a more sophisticated and more dynamic view of ethnic cultures or subcultures. Attitudes and values regarding the family, filial obligations, and the elderly are likely to be affected by the racial and ethnic differences in average life expectancy, health, and the need to support older family members; they are also likely to be affected by changes in the availability of and experience with the formal support system.

In sum, our findings present a picture quite different than that found in ethnographic accounts of traditional, often rural, African American, Native American, Vietnamese, and Mexican communities. It seems clear that certain aspects of each of these cultures, aspects relevant to the elderly, have been shaped or modified by the American urban experience. Further research is clearly required to identify the most relevant historical and structural influences. In an era of health and welfare reform, the need for such research is both

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urgent and compelling, given the strong tendency for cultural explanations to provide policymakers with a justification 1) for ignoring the special service needs of minority elders, and 2) for minimizing the importance of racial discrimination and economic factors as deterrents to the appropriate use of services by this population and their families.

A second important finding is that, with respect to the attitudes studied here, age and ethnicity do not interact. It is unlikely, therefore, that conflicts over values will create unusual hardships for ethnic elders, even among the newest immigrant groups. It also appears unlikely that cohort flow alone will lead to a diminution of ethnic cultures. While the meaning of ethnicity may change over time and over the life course,<sup>28</sup> the change does not seem to be one of lessened concern or lessened traditionalism.

Finally, it is important to note that the relationship between socioeconomic status and attitudes towards family, filial obligations, and older persons is weak to nonexistent. A history of oppression and poverty may lead to gradual cultural evolution, and changing patterns of intergenerational mobility may lead to some change in individual commitment to traditional values. However, among these current adult cohorts there is little in our data to indicate that education and income are important causes or important consequences of attitudes towards family, filial obligation, or the elderly. A full understanding of the impact of ethnicity on family forms and family attitudes, thus, will require a more careful theoretical grounding in both history and the life course.

## NOTES

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