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AGING IN COMPARATIVE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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One of man's greatest achievements is the prolongation of life. The average length of life today in modernized societies is approximately three times what it was in primitive societies; we now live about 70 years in contrast with earlier societies in which only about one-half reached maturity and the average length of life was little more than 20 years.

It goes without saying that this lengthening of life expectancy in modern societies eventually results in increased numbers of older people and if in turn those societies also lower their birth rates, thus cutting the numbers and proportions of children, as has happened in all highly modernized societies thus far, the proportion of older people in the population begins to increase.

SELECTED CASES OF AGING

Figure 1 shows this process in five modernized countries. In 100 years the proportion of the population in France which was 65 and over increased from 7.4 percent to 13.4 percent. In the same period England increased from 4.8 percent to 12.4 percent, Sweden from 5.4 to 13.7 percent and the Netherlands from 5.5 to 10.1 percent. In the last century the proportion of the United States 65 and over has gone up from 2.9 percent to 11 percent.

These cases strongly suggest that the aging of populations is a predictable accompaniment of modernization.

DEGREES OF AGING AROUND THE WORLD

At the present time we find different parts of the world in different stages of modernization and in consequence in