The relationship of Socioeconomic Status to Living Arrangements of the Aged:
A Comparative Historical Analysis
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A 2006 study carried out by the Population Division of the United Nations, *Living Arrangements of Older Persons Around the World*, used cross-national comparison to evaluate the general applicability of a relationship I had observed in historical data. As the study explained,

> Ruggles (2001), in his study of historical trends in the United States of America, found that as the country developed economically and co-residence with children became less common, the relationship between living arrangements and socio-economic status also changed. In the mid-nineteenth century, older persons who were wealthier or had higher status occupations had been more likely than others to live with adult children. Over time, the relationship between socio-economic status and coresidence weakened and eventually reversed direction. By 1960, co-residence was clearly associated with lower socio-economic status (United Nations 2005: 87).

My hypothesis was that coresidence in the mid-nineteenth century was tied to occupational inheritance, especially agricultural inheritance. With the rise of wage labor, the incentives for coresidence diminished, and by the late-nineteenth century intergenerational coresidence was mostly a form of old-age support. The U.N. study sought to assess whether the trend I described had occurred elsewhere in the world.

> Is the historical progression just described found in other countries as well as, a typical part of social and economic development? At present, the historical data needed to answer this question are not available. However, if the process that Ruggles observed is a general one, one not specific to the particular historical circumstances of one country, then a pattern might appear in the effects observed across countries that are currently at different stages of social and economic development. The expectation would be that, in the least developed countries, co-residence with children would be more common among those with higher socio-economic status, but that the relationship would be weaker or in the opposite direction among relatively more developed countries. The analysis below explores this hypothesis (United Nations 2005: 88).

The study then presented a cross-sectional analysis of the relationship between socioeconomic status and living arrangements in different countries, and found evidence to support the hypothesis.

> In summary, this analysis shows that the direction and size of social and economic differentials in older people's living arrangements depend on a country's level of development. In countries with very low levels of development, coresidence with children tends to be associated with higher

social and economic status, as assessed by educational attainment and an index of material well-being. Among countries at moderate levels of development, these differentials tend to disappear and/or reverse direction. The results are broadly consistent with trends that had been observed in the United States of America between 1850 and 1980, as that country was transformed from a predominantly agrarian society into a modern developed one. The results reported here also reinforce the idea that, in the poorest countries, older persons living alone tend to be an especially disadvantaged group—the poorest of the poor. (United Nations 2005: 92).

This study is highly suggestive, but it is limited by its use of cross-national comparison to infer historical change. As Arland Thornton (2005) has explained at great length, this methodology has the potential to yield misleading conclusions. To assess whether the hypothesized change is actually taking place, we need historical data from a variety of countries.

Such data is now available. This paper will make use of historical census data from the IPUMS-International project in an effort to detect whether the relationship between socioeconomic status and living arrangements shifted over time. The analysis will use census data from countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Europe during the last third of the twentieth century. I will assess the relationship between living arrangements and socioeconomic status using indicators such as education, occupation, and housing characteristics. I will select particular datasets to be examined from the following list of IPUMS-International samples:

Table 1. IPUMS-International Countries with Multiple Census Years

Brazil: 1960, 1970, 1980, 1991, 2000
Chile: 1960, 1970, 1982, 1992, 2002
Colombia: 1964, 1973, 1985, 1993
Costa Rica: 1963, 1973, 1984, 2000
Ecuador: 1962, 1974, 1982, 1990, 2001
France: 1962, 1968, 1975, 1982, 1990
Greece: 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001
Kenya: 1989, 1999
Mexico: 1960, 1970, 1990, 2000
Philippines: 1990, 1995, 2000
Romania: 1992, 2002
South Africa: 1996, 2001
Spain: 1981, 1991, 2001
United States: 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000
Uganda: 1991, 200
Venezuela: 1971, 1981, 1990
Vietnam: 1989, 1999

References

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Short Abstract

In the United States, there was a strong positive relationship between socioeconomic status and intergenerational coresidence in the nineteenth century, but an inverse relationship in the late 20th century. A 2005 study carried out by the United Nations used cross-national comparisons to suggest that a similar shift is now underway around the world. To assess whether the hypothesized change is actually taking place, however, we need historical data from a variety of countries.

This paper will make use of historical census data from the IPUMS-International project in an effort to detect whether the relationship between socioeconomic status and living arrangements shifted over time. The analysis will use census data from countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Europe during the last third of the twentieth century. I will assess the relationship between living arrangements and socioeconomic status using indicators such as education, occupation, and housing characteristics.