

Racial Differences in Marital Status and Living Arrangements of Older Persons in South Africa

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Abstract:

This study provides a descriptive analysis of the racial and sex differences in demographic characteristics and living arrangements of older South Africans, using micro-data from the 1996 South Africa census. The results confirm broad gender patterns in older populations also observed in other societies, and show marked racial and gender patterns in family and residential circumstances. Older women are more likely to live in rural areas than older men (odds ratio 1.22), while the older men are more likely to live in the urban areas than their female counterparts (odds ratio 0.83). Older Africans are the most likely to live in rural areas. Almost 1 in 4 of older women, and in particular among older African women are widows, while only a small proportion of men are (odds ratio 5.17). Among Whites, a significant proportion (30%) are either never married or divorced. More than 50 percent of non-Whites live in extended households, while the majority of whites live in nuclear households and a significant proportion (10%) live alone. The vast majority of older men and 51% of older women, in particular older African women, are heads of their households. The results highlight the need for further research to explore the quality and dynamics of old age support within the different residential and family structures, and divergent socio-economic contexts in which the different racial groups find themselves. Such evidence is necessary to identify and respond to the needs and vulnerability of different groups of older people. Specific attention must be given to the disadvantages faced by Africans in the aftermath of apartheid.

Background and Rationale

As a result of rapid and sustained fertility decline, in tandem with remarkable improvements in life expectancy, the population of the world is ageing at a spectacular rate. Available projections indicate that globally the number of older persons (persons aged 60 years or over) will more than triple, increasing from 606 million today to nearly 2 billion by 2050, at which time over 70 percent of them will be living in the developing world (UN, 2003). The increase in the number of the oldest old (persons aged 80 years or over) is expected to be even more dramatic (a more than a five-fold

increase) over the same period.

The ageing of populations promises far-reaching consequences for the social and economic structures of societies at both global and national level. In response, and building on accumulating demographic and other evidence, many countries have begun to adapt social and economic policies to meet the needs of the growing number of older people, especially with respect to social security (Clark, 1989; Chen, 1996; Angel and Angel, 1997; Hu, Chen, and Chen, 2000). Indeed, South Africa is one of the few African countries that has instituted government-sponsored social old age pension scheme for all older women aged 60+ and older men aged 65+ (Kinsella and Ferreira, 1997; Sagner, 2000). While the monthly pension of US\$120 serves as a vital support for older people, much unmet need remains in particular among the African majority which, as a result of the deprivations entrenched through apartheid, is facing much higher rates of unemployment, lack of education, or ill-health than their white counterparts (Ferreira, Moller, Prinsloo, and Gillis, 1992), and is likely more reliant on members of their family and household for their survival and well-being.

Despite the spectre of population ageing, the demographic research community in Africa as a whole has so far paid very limited attention to elucidating the family, societal and residential parameters in which these trends are unfolding, and there is a dearth of research evidence and literature on the subject (Martin and Kinsella, 1994). What is known, to date, is largely restricted to basic findings from a few censuses and a small number of cross-sectional surveys. Longitudinal studies, which have provided so much detail on health, labour force, and family processes in the United States or other Western countries, are virtually absent. The lack of research in Africa has also militated against the development of an established focus on the 'demography of ageing', a focus which, in the West, is 'rapidly approaching maturity as a sub-discipline.... with recognizable themes and approaches' (Preston and Martin, 1994, p.7).

Population Ageing in South Africa

In South Africa, a country with one of the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence, the process of population ageing and the impacts on family structures are likely to be particularly sharp in coming years, owing to the disproportionate mortality of younger- and middle-aged

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adults (UNAIDS, 2000; United Nations, 2001a; World Health Organization, 2001). These shifts will have substantial implications for old age support dynamics, such as for example, the likely growing role of grandparents as primary caregivers of children or orphaned grandchildren.

The quest to find appropriate policies to address the needs of older people in the context of emerging societal and familial structures requires, as a basic ingredient, knowledge about the demographic characteristics and the residential and familial contexts in which older people find themselves. Moreover, given that the 'older population' cannot be assumed to be homogeneous, there is a need for information on the differential situations and needs among key - gender, racial, age and socio-economic - groups of older South Africans. Such evidence can also help to generate hypotheses on structural or cultural determinants of old age experiences to guide research not only in South Africa, but also in other African countries.

The analysis presented in this paper contributes to the building of such an evidence base. It provides a descriptive analysis of the key demographic characteristics and living arrangements of the older South African population, and of the main gender and racial group differences in these. The paper specifically aims to address three interrelated questions: what is the marital or familial status of the aged? What are their residential patterns and the characteristics of the living arrangements? And what, if any, are the differences by race and gender?

Methods and Approach

The analysis uses the latest available South African census micro-data - i.e. from the 1996 Population Census of South Africa. This data set is part of the census data collection currently archived by the African Census Analysis Project of the Population Studies Center of the University of Pennsylvania, for the purposes of research and training (Zuberi, 2001). For this analysis, 'older persons' are defined as all individuals aged 60 years and above (United Nations, 1991). The unit of analysis is the individual older person, while the study population is the entire population of South Africa.

The analysis distinguishes four major racial groups: - Africans, Whites, Coloureds, and Asians - which, respectively, constitute approximately 77%, 11%, 9% and 3% percent of South Africa's population (Statistics South Africa, 2000).

Residential patterns are explored first by household structure. The definition of household used in the analysis follows that set by Statistics South Africa as "a person or a group of persons, who occupy a common dwelling (or part of it) for at least four days a week and who provide themselves jointly with food and other essentials for living" (Statistics South Africa, 1998). Four key household types are identified drawing on the works of Morgan, McDaniel, Miller and Preston (1993): (1) *Single*, i.e. persons living alone, (2) *Nuclear*, comprising household head and immediate family members, defined as husband and/or wife and (non adult) children, including step- and foster children (3) *Extended*, i.e. a nuclear household plus other relatives and (4) *Augmented*, a nuclear or extended household plus non-relatives. In addition, the analysis distinguishes older persons who reside in an institution. No

attempt is made to distinguish polygynous households in this study's classification because the South African census does not provide information on polygyny. Moreover, due to data constraints it has not been possible, in this study, to explore the presence of skipped generation households (that is, grandparents and grandchildren), which are highly significant in the context of HIV/AIDS.

In addition to household structure, and in order to begin to illuminate the dynamics within the various households enumerated above, the analysis examines the relationship of older people to the household head, defined in the census as 'the person that the household regards as such' (The assumption is that such a person is 'usually the person who assumes responsibility for decision making in the household' [Statistics South Africa, 1998]). Thus, the paper analyses, whether an old person resides in a household headed by him or herself, or his or her spouse, child, relatives or another not biologically-related person. To classify older people's relationship to the household head, the analysis uses the following categories set by Statistics South Africa (1998): 1) head, 2) wife/husband, 3) son/daughter including stepchild, 4) brother/sister, 5) mother/father, 6) grandparent, 7) grandchild, 8) other relative, 9) non-relative and 10) institutions for persons who were surveyed in institutions.

The association of family status and living arrangements to gender and racial group and other socio-demographic characteristics are explored using simple percentages, odds and odds ratios. The odds values, (o), are calculated for all relevant categories of tables as: $o = \text{proportion} / (1 - \text{proportion})$, where 'proportion' is the proportion of the event in the total population. Gender differentials with respect to the selected characteristics are examined at the $p < .0001$ level of statistical significance, while the chi square (χ^2) is used to represent the test of significance, which is an appropriate test of the independence of categorical variables (Hosmer and Lemeshow, 1989).

Results

Basic Characteristics of the Older Population

Table 1 shows the basic demographic characteristics of the older population in South Africa. As expected, the racial distribution of South Africa's older population broadly follows that of the population as a whole. Thus, the vast majority (70%) of older South Africans are Africans, followed by Whites (21%), Coloureds (7%) and Asians (2%). As furthermore expected, there are, for both sexes, consistently fewer older persons with advancing age, reflecting the impact of increased mortality. Overall older women outnumber older men, and most markedly so in the oldest age-group (80+), where there are almost twice the number of older women than men.

Significant gender patterns also emerge in terms of rural-urban residence. More older women live in rural than in urban areas, while the converse is true for older men. Older women are 20% more likely to live in rural areas than their male counterparts (odds ratio 1.22), while older men are more likely to live in urban areas (odds ratio 0.83). Overall there are almost twice as many older women in rural areas than older men.

This sex differential, as Table 2 indicates, mainly reflects the gender patterns in the African population,

Table 1. Selected Characteristics of Elderly Persons Aged 60 and Above by Sex, and Sex Ratios

Characteristics	Percent	Number	Female Odds(1)	Percent	Number	Males Odds (2)	Odds ratios (1)/(2)
<i>Age</i>							
60–64	31.1	533,223	0.45	32.0	349,032	0.47	0.96
65–69	26.4	451,897	0.36	27.9	305,134	0.39	0.92
70–74	16.6	284,262	0.20	17.8	194,021	0.22	0.91
75–79	13.8	236,940	0.16	12.9	140,513	0.15	1.07
80+	12.2	208,475	0.14	9.5	104,163	0.11	1.27
<i>Place of residence</i>							
Urban	49.8	853,617	0.99	54.5	596,200	1.20	0.83
Rural	50.2	861,181	1.01	45.5	496,963	0.83	1.22
<i>Racial groups</i>							
Africans	69.6	1,193,379	2.29	64.9	708,961	1.85	1.24
Coloureds	7.1	121,885	0.08	7.9	86,432	0.09	0.89
Asians	2.1	36,531	0.02	2.7	28,985	0.03	0.67
White	21.2	363,002	0.27	24.6	268,785	0.33	0.82
<i>Marital status</i>							
Never married	9.2	156,985	0.10	8.44	92,210	0.09	1.11
Married (civil or religious)	26.7	458,161	0.36	50.46	551,647	1.02	0.35
Married (traditional)	18.0	308,260	0.22	22.53	246,336	0.29	0.76
Living together	1.1	19,145	0.01	2.89	31,638	0.03	0.33
Widowed	38.5	659,309	0.62	10.44	114,170	0.12	5.17
Divorced	3.2	55,317	0.03	2.79	30,526	0.03	1.00
Others	3.4	57,621	0.03	2.44	26,636	0.02	1.50
Total	100.00	1,714,798	1.57	100.00	1,093,163	0.64	2.46

Source: Computed from the 10 percent micro-data sample of the 1996 Census of South Africa.

Note: The odds (o) are values calculated for all categories as: $o = \text{proportion} / (1 - \text{proportion})$. The gender differential in relationship to *age* is statistically significant ($p < .0001$) and the χ^2 test associated with the model of independence is 5,905.6 at 4 df. The gender differential in relationship to *place of residence* is statistically significant ($p < .0001$) and the χ^2 test associated with the model of independence is 6,055.7 at 1 df. The gender differential in relationship to *racial group* is statistically significant ($p < .0001$) and the χ^2 test associated with the model of independence is 7,032.4 at 3 df. The gender differential in relationship to *marital status* is statistically significant ($p < .0001$) and the χ^2 test associated with the model of independence is 316,116 at 6 df.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Rural and Urban Residence by Race for Older Men and Women Aged 60 Years and Above

Race	Older Women 60+ Years				Older Men 60+ Years			
	Place of Residence		Total	Number	Place of Residence		Total	Number
	Urban	Rural			Urban	Rural		
Africans	45.12	54.88	100.00	1,193,379	51.99	48.01	100.00	708,961
Coloureds	61.89	38.11	100.00	121,885	62.01	37.99	100.00	86,432
Asians	59.37	40.63	100.00	36,531	63.57	36.43	100.00	28,985
White	79.35	20.65	100.00	363,002	80.13	19.87	100.00	268,785
Total	49.78	50.22	100.00		54.54	45.46	100.00	
Number	853,617	861,181		1,714,798	596,200	496,963		1,093,163

which may in part be attributed to the aftermath of the apartheid policy encapsulated in the Group Areas Act, 1988, that forced men to leave behind their wives and children in the rural areas (Oosthuizen, 1993; US Bureau of the Census, 1994). Additionally, the disparity may be explained by the higher out-migration of especially African young men to cities in search of work and schools. While social attachments to childhood contexts may induce some of these migrants to return to the rural areas after retirement (Kinsella and

Ferreira, 1997), the majority may choose to remain in the cities where social amenities and other benefits of modernization are concentrated (United Nations, 1991).

In general, as Table 2 further indicates, older Africans are the most likely of all racial groups to live in rural areas (roughly 50% do) and the least likely to live in urban areas. Conversely, an overwhelming majority of older White men and women (80%) reside in urban areas. In large part, this differential likely reflects in

large part racial differences in socio-economic status, with Africans, the most disadvantaged of the racial groups, likely less able to afford the high cost of living in towns and cities. In addition, the racial differences in rural-urban residence may reflect African cultural preferences for extended family living for which rural conditions may be more conducive. Finally, the differences may reflect the much higher degree of institutional residence among White older South Africans (to be discussed below), with such institutions typically located in urban areas (Naicker, 1994).

Marital Status

The analysis documents significant gender and racial differences in the marital status of older people. As shown in Table 1, equally large proportions of older women are widowed (39%) as married (45%), while 9% are never married and 3% are divorced. Among older men, in contrast, the large majority (73%) are married with only 10% widowed, though similar to females, 8% are never married and 3% divorced. The preponderance of female compared to male widowhood in old age is striking: older women are five times more likely to be widowed than older men (odds ratio 5.17). Conversely, older men are almost 3 times more likely to be married than older women (odds ratio 0.36).

These results are consistent with what obtains elsewhere (Morgan, McDaniel, Miller, and Preston, 1993; Mba, 2004a). Indeed, there are more older widows than widowers, and more married older men than

women in virtually all countries of the world due to three major factors – women live longer than men; women typically marry men older than themselves; and men are more likely than women to remarry after divorce or the death of a spouse.

The clear gender patterns in marital status among older South Africans, as Table 3 shows, are accompanied by some striking racial differences.

Substantial proportions of White older women are never married (10%) or divorced (20%) compared to much lower proportions among their non-White counterparts; conversely, substantial proportions of older African, Coloured and Asian women (10–15%), but only a minority of White women are widowed; and the same pattern holds for males. These patterns may reflect, on the one hand, differential cultural norms between Whites and non-White groups regarding the necessity for marriage and acceptance of non-marriage and divorce. On the other hand, it may reflect the greater benefits bestowed on Whites due to apartheid, and consequently, a greater ability especially for women to be economically independent and stay unmarried or live divorced.

Living arrangements of older people: household structure

Table 4 presents the percentage distribution of individuals by the type of household in which they reside, as well as by age group and race. Overall, around half (48.9%) of all older South Africans aged 60+, and more

Table 3. Percentage Distribution of Racial Differences by Marital Status for Older Men and Women Aged 60 Years and Above

A	Older Women 60+ Years								
	Marital Status								
Race	Never married	Married (Civil or religious)	Married (Traditional)	Living together	Widowed	Divorced	Others	Total	Number
Africans	1.03	34.44	31.50	16.11	14.86	1.14	0.92	100.00	1,193,379
Coloureds	2.29	26.33	27.29	18.99	10.10	11.65	3.35	100.00	121,885
Asians	3.17	31.28	28.09	15.04	12.07	8.02	2.33	100.00	36,531
White	10.00	25.91	11.68	24.55	6.88	20.04	0.94	100.00	363,002
Number	156,985	458,161	308,260	19,145	659,309	55,317	57,621	100.00	1,714,798
B	Older Men 60+ Years								
	Marital Status								
Race	Never married	Married (Civil or religious)	Married (Traditional)	Living together	Widowed	Divorced	Others	Total	Number
Africans	2.45	35.33	29.44	15.99	12.92	2.65	1.22	100.00	708,961
Coloureds	3.22	25.69	28.88	19.55	10.97	9.56	2.13	100.00	86,432
Asians	4.11	29.54	27.69	18.32	11.94	6.41	1.99	100.00	28,985
White	13.89	24.79	14.00	22.78	7.33	17.44	3.77	100.00	268,785
Number	92,210	551,647	246,336	31,638	114,170	30,526	26,636	100.00	1,093,163

Source: Computed from the 10 percent micro-data sample of the 1996 Census of South Africa.

Table 4. Percentage Distribution of Individuals by Household Type, Age Group and Race

		Nuclear	Single	Extended	Augmented	Total
African	0-14	40.7	0.0	41.2	18.0	100
	15-59	39.9	5.7	38.9	15.5	100
	60+	20.6	6.0	58.0	15.5	100
	80+	14.3	5.7	64.5	15.5	100
Coloured	0-14	47.3	0.0	34.8	17.8	100
	15-59	46.5	2.2	34.3	16.9	100
	60+	25.4	5.3	53.4	15.8	100
	80+	15.9	6.3	62.3	15.5	100
Asian	0-14	61.1	0.0	30.3	8.6	100
	15-59	57.7	1.4	32.9	8.0	100
	60+	30.9	4.0	56.9	8.2	100
	80+	19.5	4.4	67.0	9.1	100
White	0-14	74.5	0.0	12.6	12.9	100
	15-59	67.7	5.4	12.2	14.6	100
	60+	54.8	19.2	17.2	8.8	100
	80+	32.8	30.4	26.4	10.4	100
South Africa	0-14	44.0	0.0	38.5	17.5	100
	15-59	44.5	5.2	35.0	15.3	100
	60+	28.5	8.7	48.9	13.9	100
	80+	18.7	11.4	55.7	14.2	100
Total	43.0	3.7	37.3	16.0	100	

Source: Computed from the 10 percent micro-data sample of the 1996 Census of South Africa.

than half (56%) of those aged 80+ live in extended households. Next common are nuclear households in which 29% of 60+ year olds and 19% of 80+ years olds live, and augmented households in which 14% of older people reside. Significantly, 9% of those aged 60+, and 11% of those aged 80+ live alone.

The increase with age in the proportion of older people residing alone and in the extended households, and the concomitant reduction in nuclear households is notable. It may reflect possible transitions from nuclear households at older ages, as older people lose a spouse or partner with whom previously a nuclear household was shared, leaving them alone, or moving to live with kin in the anticipation of receiving support or care.

Importantly, as Table 4 further makes clear, the broad distribution of older people's household structure masks significant racial differences. The majority of African, Asian and Coloured older people, 58%, 53%, and 57% respectively, live in extended households, while only a minority (17.2%) of White older people do. Similarly, African and Coloured older people (16%) are much more likely to live in augmented households than Whites (9%). Conversely, the majority of white older South Africans live in nuclear households (55%), while only about (20-25%) of the other racial groups do. Similarly, and significantly, almost 1 in 5 White older people live alone – compared to only 6%, 5% and 4% among Africans, Coloureds and Asians, respectively. Finally, as shown in Table 5 and Figure 1, Whites are significantly more likely to live in institutions than any of the other racial groups, with almost 12% of 60+ year old women, and 6% of men; and almost 30% of women and men aged 80+ doing so. For all races, however, and irrespective of sex, institutional residence rises with advancing age and, presumably, increasing frailty and need for long term care.

These striking racial differences in household structure in old age may reflect, on the one hand, socio-cultural norms or preferences relating to family ties and co-residence – such as for example, a

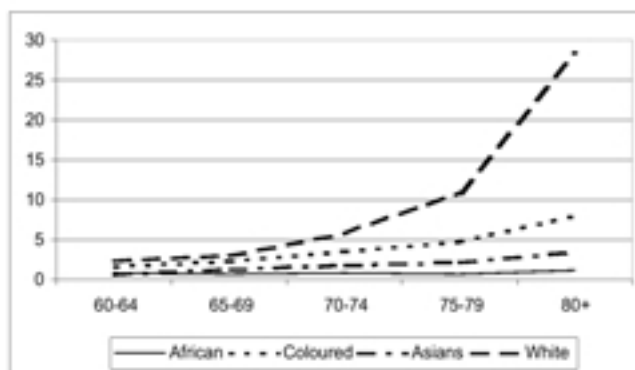


Figure 1. Proportions of the Elderly Living in Institutions by Racial Groups

Table 5. Percent Distribution of Male and Female Institutional Residence by Racial Group

Racial Group	Women 60+	Men 60+
Africans	0.1	3
Coloureds	4	5.1
Asians	1.8	2.2
Whites	11.7	5.6

Source: Computed from the 10 percent micro-data sample of the 1996 Census of South Africa.

'Western' preference for nuclear family living among Whites contrasting with a preference for extended family living among non-Whites. On the other hand, the residential distribution between the races may reflect resource limitations. Among Africans, for example, such constraints may necessitate joint extended family residence as living in separate households is not affordable.

The much greater likelihood of institutional living among White compared to African or other older South Africans, may also reflect cultural preferences for institutional rather than extended family living among whites, or an absence of kin to cohabit with, and converse preferences among the other racial groups.

Older people's relationship to household head

Further insights into the residential dynamics of older people can be gleaned by examining their relationship to the head of the household, shown in Tables 6 and 7.

Tables 6 and 7 show that in total around half (51%) of older women are heads of the household in which they reside, while 25% are spouses, 9% are mothers, and 4% are grandmothers of their household head. Among older men, the overwhelming majority are household heads (80%), with only 4% being spouses and 3% fathers of their household head.

The fact that older women are much more likely than older men to be spouses of the household head is not unexpected in an African setting where tradition and culture confer roles on the basis of gender and where the roles and authority tilt heavily in favour of the man (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2003). In South Africa, particularly among the largest racial group, Africans, boys and girls learn early in

Table 6. Percent Distribution of Relationship of Elderly Women Aged 60 and Above to the Household Head by Selected Characteristics, South Africa, 1996

Characteristics	Head	Wife	Daughter	Sister	Mother	Grand-mother	Other relatives	Non-relatives	Institutions	Total
Age										
60–64	48.45	35.06	1.96	1.96	5.66	1.96	1.96	0.99	2.00	100.00
65–69	53.70	27.54	0.99	0.99	7.41	2.91	1.96	0.99	3.51	100.00
70–74	53.49	21.88	0.99	0.99	9.09	3.85	2.91	0.99	5.81	100.00
75–79	55.56	13.79	0.99	0.99	11.50	6.54	3.85	0.99	5.79	100.00
80 +	45.95	7.41	1.96	0.99	15.25	9.09	5.66	0.99	12.70	100.00
Place of residence										
Urban	45.05	28.57	0.99	1.96	9.09	2.91	3.85	0.99	6.59	100.00
Rural	57.63	21.26	1.96	0.99	8.26	4.76	2.91	0.99	1.24	100.00
Racial group										
Africans	59.02	20.00	1.96	1.96	8.26	4.76	2.91	0.99	0.14	100.00
Coloureds	41.86	29.08	0.99	1.96	10.71	2.91	6.54	1.96	3.99	100.00
Asians	25.93	26.47	0.99	2.91	24.81	3.85	12.28	0.99	1.77	100.00
Whites	31.97	39.39	0.99	0.99	9.09	0.99	3.85	0.99	11.74	100.00
Marital status										
Never married	50.00	6.54	8.26	6.54	9.09	6.54	7.41	2.91	2.71	100.00
Married (civil or religious)	25.93	64.03	0.99	0.00	4.76	1.96	1.96	0.00	0.37	100.00
Married (traditional)	50.00	33.77	0.99	0.99	6.54	4.76	1.96	0.00	0.99	100.00
Living together	30.56	56.14	0.99	0.99	3.85	2.91	1.96	1.96	0.64	100.00
Widowed	72.53	0.00	0.99	0.99	13.04	5.66	4.76	0.99	0.07	100.00
Divorced	73.75	0.99	1.96	2.91	9.91	2.91	4.76	1.96	0.85	100.00
Others	5.66	1.96	0.99	0.00	1.96	1.96	0.99	0.99	85.49	100.00
Total	51.22	24.81	0.99	0.99	9.09	3.85	3.85	0.99	4.21	100.00

Source: Computed from the 10 percent micro-data sample of the 1996 Census of South Africa.

life to distinguish between male and female roles by watching and helping their parents and elders around them, who also provide specific instructions on family and societal norms and appropriate behaviour. Whereas boys stay close to their fathers and are trained in male assignments and are prepared to take up the roles of fathers and heads of households, girls learn domestic chores from their mothers and female elders and are taught maternal responsibilities, including how to be a 'good' wife. Women, through this, are conditioned to accept male dominance.

Underlying the overall gender patterns lie important racial and marital group differences. For older women, as Table 6 shows, African older women, and to a lesser extent Coloureds, are much more likely to be heads of their household than their Asian and White counterparts. Indeed almost 60% of older African women are household heads. Similarly, a majority of older women in rural areas (58%) (where, as we have seen, Africans predominate) are household heads. Widowed and divorced older women are much more likely than others to be heads of their household than any other marital groups. A possible reason for the preponderance of African and Coloured female-headed households, may be the earlier mentioned larger likelihood of widowhood among these racial groups as a result of the death of their husbands due to AIDS or other causes (Mba, 2003). Another potential reason, may be the effect of the above noted apartheid policy, which forced men to leave behind their wives and chil-

dren in the rural areas (US Bureau of the Census, 1994) and many of which do not return in old age.

In contrast to what pertains for women, as Table 7 shows, widowed, divorced or never married older males are somewhat less likely than the other marital groups to be household heads, and more likely to be in other categories, such as father, brother and grandfather, possibly indicating moves to join family members in expectation of receiving support. As with older women headed households, older male headed households are more likely to be found in rural than in urban areas.

Lastly, an interesting finding to note as indicated in Tables 6 and 7 is that a percentage of older people (albeit a very small one) appear to live with their parents or grandparents (not shown). While this result may be a reflection of data quality (Mba, 2004b), it may also to some extent reflect a cultural reality: among Africans, heirs, whatever their age, often act as household heads and are often classified as parents or grandparents (IFE Conference, 1987). A relatively small number of older persons live with non-relatives (less than 2 percent, overall).

Discussion

The present study has provided a descriptive analysis of the basic gender and geographic distributions of South Africa's older population, using micro data from the 1996 census of South Africa.

Table 7. Percent Distribution of Relationship of Elderly Men Aged 60 and Above to the Household Head by Selected Characteristics, South Africa, 1996

Characteristics	Head	Husband	Son	Brother	Father	Grand-father	Other relatives	Non-relatives	Institutions	Total
Age										
60–64	81.79	4.76	1.96	1.96	1.96	0.99	1.96	1.96	2.67	100.00
65–69	83.55	4.76	0.99	0.99	2.91	0.99	1.96	0.99	2.86	100.00
70–74	82.85	3.85	0.99	0.99	3.85	0.99	1.96	0.99	3.53	100.00
75–79	80.92	3.85	0.99	0.99	3.85	1.96	2.97	0.99	3.48	100.00
80 +	70.50	3.85	1.96	0.99	6.54	3.85	3.85	0.99	7.47	100.00
Place of residence										
Urban	81.06	2.91	0.99	0.99	3.85	0.99	2.91	1.96	4.34	100.00
Rural	81.58	5.66	1.96	1.96	2.91	1.96	1.96	0.99	1.02	100.00
Racial group										
Africans	80.58	5.66	1.96	1.96	2.91	0.99	1.96	0.99	2.99	100.00
Coloureds	74.68	2.91	0.99	1.96	4.76	0.99	5.66	2.91	5.14	100.00
Asians	78.35	0.99	0.99	0.99	10.71	0.99	4.76	0.00	2.22	100.00
Whites	85.63	1.96	0.00	0.00	2.91	0.99	1.96	0.99	5.56	100.00
Marital status										
Never married	45.95	3.85	10.71	10.71	3.85	2.91	10.71	5.66	5.65	100.00
Married (civil or religious)	90.80	3.85	0.00	0.00	1.96	0.00	0.99	0.00	2.40	100.00
Married (traditional)	85.49	6.54	0.99	0.00	2.91	0.99	0.99	0.99	1.10	100.00
Living together	81.38	12.28	0.99	0.00	0.99	0.00	0.99	1.96	1.41	100.00
Widowed	74.87	0.00	0.00	1.96	9.91	3.85	5.66	1.96	1.79	100.00
Divorced	70.06	1.96	1.96	5.66	5.66	1.96	6.54	5.66	0.54	100.00
Others	8.26	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99	84.81	100.00
Total	81.27	3.85	0.99	0.99	2.91	0.99	2.91	0.99	5.10	100.00

Source: Computed from the 10 percent micro-data sample of the 1996 Census of South Africa.

On a broad level, the findings clearly show the predominance of older women in the older population, in particular among older ages, thereby confirming a pattern, which has been found globally and likely reflects the greater female longevity (United Nations, 2001a; 2001b). The older population as a whole is roughly equally distributed between rural and urban areas, but this masks important gender and racial patterns, in particular the overwhelming likelihood of Whites, Coloureds and Asians (and particularly males) to be concentrated in urban areas, and the predominance of Africans, in particular older African women in rural areas.

In addition to these broad patterns, the study has provided evidence on the racial and sex differences in family status and living arrangements among South Africa's older people. Such information provides a crucial starting point for illuminating older people's family support structures and situation. It is often intuitively assumed that for older people, a widowed, divorced, or never married status implies limitations in the supply of kin to provide support to them. Similarly, residence in extended and to a lesser extent nuclear households is seen as indicating an availability of family members and support, with positive impacts on the older person's well-being.

It is clear, however, as others have pointed out, that household structure and kin co-residence by themselves tell us very little about the need for, or supply of,

support to older people. On the one hand, residential separation may obscure the proximity and availability of younger kin who live close. Vice versa, co-residence says nothing about the ability or willingness of co-resident younger kin to provide support or about the adequacy of such assistance (Hermalin, 2000; Aboderin 2005). Furthermore, effects of living arrangements may vary for different dimensions of family support. For example, whilst reduced physical presence or competing time demands may indeed affect the availability of kin to provide care-giving or domestic help, they may have no bearing, or even positive effects on other support dimensions such as material or emotional support (Aboderin, 2005).

This notwithstanding, the present study has documented significant patterns in relation to older people's family and living circumstances, which must be considered and further explored. First, on a broad level, it has shown the considerable heterogeneity that exists across gender and racial groups and that must be taken into account in the formulation of policies. Second, within this heterogeneity, it has highlighted specific constellations that point to potential limitations in support availability for older people, which need to be addressed.

For all older people, the study has highlighted the substantial proportions (around 20–30%), among all racial groups, of older men and women who are either widowed, divorced or never married and thus might

have attenuated family support networks or resources to draw on, either emotionally, physically or materially. For white older people, the high proportion of those without a spouse or partner is accompanied by a high proportion (1 in 5 overall and almost a third for those aged 80+) who live alone, which may compound the lack of family support, although, at least in material terms, this may have a lesser impact on the older person's welfare, given the marked socio-economic advantage bestowed on Whites by the apartheid rule.

In contrast to Whites, only a very small proportion of older Africans, Coloureds and Asians live alone. The large majority, especially among Africans, live in extended family or augmented households. However, this may not translate into an availability of extended family support, in particular not in material terms. Most, as a legacy of the apartheid era, live in contexts of entrenched poverty, in which younger kin are less likely to have sufficient economic resources to support their older kin. Indeed, their resource constraints – and inability to afford separate housing – may be a factor compelling their extended or augmented household arrangements. The fact that a majority of older Africans – both women and men – are heads of their households possibly suggests, moreover, that rather than being in receipt of material support from younger kin, they may be responsible for the household's livelihood and share their meagre resources with their younger kin – as has been shown by other, smaller-scale studies (HAI/IDPM, 2003)

Most of these older person-headed households are in rural and deprived areas – in which generally speaking health and social services and support structures are less available than in cities, possibly compounding unmet need among the old.

In order to clearly elucidate what specific impacts family and living arrangements have on support needs and supply among older people there is a need for research to build on the evidence on family and residential structure and provide more in-depth information. First, on the exact composition of kin co- and near residence; second, and crucially, on the nature, quality and dynamics of the support relationships within family and household structures, and on the socio-economic and structural context in which they unfold. Such research must be sure to make careful and clear distinctions between different dimensions of support, and must place a specific focus on investigating the rapidly emerging issues related to the older persons' care of their children and grandchildren due to the impact of HIV/AIDS.

The generation of evidence on these areas is vital if South Africa is to be able to find policy responses to the various needs, vulnerability and circumstances of its older population. Most of all such responses must be found for the large African majority of older people who deserve a redress of the socio-economic imbalance and disadvantage imposed on them by apartheid.

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