18.2A: The Social Construction of Aging

The social construction of aging entails the creation of social norms and symbols that encapsulates the aging process.

Learning Objectives

• Discuss the cultural treatment of aging in the U.S. versus Japan, employing Goffman’s argument in "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life"

Key Points

• Age is socially constructed because notions of age vary around the world.
• Different cultures fix age with different meanings and different values.
• Eastern cultures tend to highly value age and wisdom, while Western cultures tend to highly value youth.
• In Western societies, people take pains to appear younger than their biological age. These measures follow Erving Goffman’s ideas of self-presentation in that people are trying to get others in society to perceive them as young.

Key Terms

• social construction: A concept or practice that is the construct (or artifact) of a particular group, meaning that the concept or practice is understood differently by various groups and institutions.
Aging as a Social Construction

While aging itself is a biological process, what it means to be “young” or “old” is socially constructed. This means that there is no inherent cultural meaning to the biological process of aging. Rather, cultures imbue youth and age with meanings. Aging is perceived differently around the world, demonstrating its social construction.

Frequently, the average life expectancy in a given region bears on what age counts as “old.” For example, in the United States, where the average life expectancy is over 78 years, people are not considered “old” until they are in their sixties or seventies. However, in Chad the average life expectancy is less than 49 years. People in their thirties or forties are therefore already middle-aged or “old.” These variations in people’s perceptions of who should or should not be considered elderly indicates that notions of youth and age are culturally constructed. There is thus no such thing as a universal age for being considered old.

Cultural Treatment of Aging

Is this Incongruous?: Given the socially constructed nature of age, there are certain behaviors that people typically associate with certain age groups as being “appropriate” or “acceptable.” Is this old woman challenging any conventional perceptions about how women of a certain age should behave?

Cultures treat their elderly differently and place different values on old age. Many Eastern societies associate old age...
with wisdom, so they value old age much more than their Western counterparts. In Japan, adult children are expected to care for their aging parents in ways different than in the United States. Sixty five percent of Japanese elders live with their children and very few live in nursing homes. Japanese cultural norms suggest that caring for one’s parents by putting them in an assisted living home is tantamount to neglect. When unable to care for themselves, parents should ideally move in with their children. The Japanese celebration of old age is further illustrated by the existence of Respect for the Aged Day, which is a national holiday to celebrate elderly citizens.

Japanese perceptions of elders diverge markedly from public perceptions of old age in the United States. Western societies tend to place an increased value on youth such that many people take extreme measures to appear young. The desire to look younger than one’s biological years is frequently the impetus for cosmetic surgeries that can hide the physical effects of aging. These surgical practices, combined with the huge expenditures on makeup and clothing in younger fashions, incorporate a Goffmanian understanding of social presentation.

Erving Goffman was a sociologist writing in the mid-twentieth century. His most famous work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) argued that whenever individuals come into contact with other people, they will attempt to control or guide the impression that others might have of them by intentionally comporting themselves in different ways. Individuals thus take sometimes drastic action to control the appearance of their age so that others can perceive them to be younger. Significantly, these social interactions occur in a social milieu that values youth. In this light, people try to appear younger to increase their sense of social value. Of course, interactions involving the perception of age must then vary by culture, as different cultures ascribe the notion of age with different values.