18.5A: The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

The symbolic interactionist perspective posits that age is socially constructed and determined by symbols resembling social interactions.

Learning Objectives

• Argue that the perception of aging is better either in the United States or in Japan, using Goffman’s theory of social presentation

Key Points

• The notion of age is socially constructed, meaning that it has no universal value. Rather, various cultures ascribe aging with different meanings and values.

• In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman argued that people try to control or guide the impression they create on other people by comporting themselves in specific ways.

• 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 suggest a Goffmanian understanding of social presentation.

• Social value is highly dependent on context and culture. Many Eastern societies associate old age with wisdom and value old age much more than their Western counterparts.

Key Terms

• **Erving Goffman**: Erving Goffman (June 11, 1922 – November 19, 1982) was a Canadian-born sociologist and writer. The 73rd president of American Sociological Association, Goffman’s greatest contribution to social theory was his study of symbolic interaction in the form of dramaturgical analysis. This began with his 1959 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 
Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.

- **socially constructed**: The social construction of age means that there is no inherent cultural meaning to the biological process of aging.

## The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective and Aging

According to the Symbolic Interactionist Perspective, old age, and aging, are socially constructed and determined by symbols that resemble aging in social interactions. While aging itself is a biological process, the Symbolic Interactionist Perspective posits that the *meaning* behind being “young” or “old” is socially constructed. This means that there is no inherent cultural meaning attached to the biological process of aging. Rather, cultures imbue youth and age with particular meanings. 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 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?

Aging is perceived differently around the world, demonstrating its social construction. Frequently, the average life expectancy in a given region impacts what age counts as “old.” For example, in the United States, where the average life expectancy is over 78 years, one isn’t considered “old” until he or she is in their sixties or seventies. However, in Chad, the average life expectancy is less than 49 years, and people in their thirties or forties are therefore already considered middle-aged or “old.” These variations in people’s perceptions indicate that notions of youth and age are culturally constructed, and that there is no such thing as a universal age at which point one becomes old.
Japanese Perceptions of Aging

In addition to defining terms differently, cultures treat their elderly differently and place different values on age. Many Eastern societies associate old age with wisdom and value old age much more than their Western counterparts. In Japan, adult children are expected to care for their aging parents in different ways than in the United States. 65% of Japanese elders live with their children, and very few live in nursing homes. In Japan, if a youth was to put an aging parent in an assisted living home, the behavior would be considered tantamount to neglect. Cultural norms suggest that parents should move in with their children when they are unable to care for themselves. The Japanese celebration of old age is further illustrated by the existence of Respect for the Aged Day, a national holiday to celebrate elderly citizens.

Western Perceptions of Aging

Japanese perceptions of elders diverge markedly from public perceptions of old age in the United States. Western societies tend to place such an increased value on youth that many people take extreme measures to appear young. A desire to look younger is frequently the impetus for cosmetic surgeries that can hide the physical effects of aging. These surgical practices, combined with huge expenditures on makeup and clothing, suggest 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. Thus, individuals take sometimes drastic action to control the appearance of their age so that others will perceive them as 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.

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