

IMAGES OF AGING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Department of Gerontology
College of Health and Human Services
San Diego State University

Gerontology 370
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Thursdays 4 – 6:40 P.M.
PSFA 325

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INTRODUCTION

The process of aging involves personal changes and it is also impacted by historical and social events and values. Unfortunately, there are too many stereotypes that tarnish the great potential and the many contributions possible during the most creative years of our lives. Age discrimination, ageism, is still quite common in our society.

How the aged are viewed and treated in any society is based on the traditions, expectations and values of that particular group. Cultural attitudes and values are reflected in art, advertising, marketing, and media such as literature, movies, newspapers/magazines, radio, television, musical recordings and web sites. There is a need to study, understand, and, sometimes, question the accuracy of the images of aging we are presented with. Similarly, we should get involved in changing unacceptable portraits of any group (the elderly, in this case) in our society.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The primary goal of the course is to *sensitize* students to the fact that personal attitudes toward older people and their outlook on the aging process are shaped by the constant, and sometimes negative, images presented through various media sources. A secondary goal is to enable students to *understand* the role of media in shaping societal attitudes toward the aged and to begin examining ways of changing the potentially negative impact of media on values and cultural attitudes that impact the aging processes. A final goal is to *recognize* that the quality of life for people of all ages depends largely on choices made by the individual and the society.

Objectives: Students will:

1. Understand that increased longevity presents opportunities as well as problems for our society, depending on how the challenges are perceived and met.
2. Learn practical ideas to construct a sense of passion and meaning in later life for self and for other older persons.
3. Be exposed to practical situations involving the media treatment of older people and learn how to distinguish between facts and stereotypes.
4. Develop a framework for understanding and analyzing the implications of negative or positive media presentations.
5. Be able to explain the main components of successful aging.

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE CLASS

Readings and lectures are the basis for the course, and students are expected to become involved in class (question, disagree, bring articles, pictures, etc.) and share views on readings, observations and personal experiences (the portion of the grade “attendance & participation” will reflect absences and class involvement). Portions of the class will also include exercises, review and discussion of articles from newspapers and magazines, and viewing videos. Experts in different media and related professions will be invited to share views about the state-of-the-art in their respective professions and organizations as they relate to issues of aging.

It is the student’s responsibility to access the “blackboard” site for this course at least on a weekly basis. Required readings, reference web sites and media materials will be posted there. Blackboard will also include advanced copies of the powerpoints presented in class. Note that the powerpoints will not be complete so that students have to be in class and take notes.

1. ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Attendance - Regular attendance is necessary to fully benefit from all aspects of the class. Each student is expected to attend class with no more than 3 absences, and to actively participate in class discussions and activities (leaving at break time will count as ½ absence). After three absences the student will be withdrawn from the class and will be assigned an F in their final course grade. In cases of medical or personal emergency the student is required to contact the instructor beforehand and request for leave of absence. The instructor has the right to request documentation.

Poor attendance and limited participation will have a negative impact on the final grade, 10 points will be taken off for every absence (recorded under “attendance/ participation”), and perfect attendance will earn 10 additional points.

Class Participation - Students are expected to complete all exercises, assignments and tests as identified in the syllabus. If students miss a class when an assignment was due or a test was scheduled, they are responsible for rescheduling and taking the assigned task before the end of the course. Note that for **late assignments** there will be a deduction of 10 points from the maximum possible 100 points assigned to that task, and after 2 weeks, the deduction will be 20 points. If you miss the final exam, your final grade will be determined from the other exams and other assigned tasks and class participation. There will be no retro-grading after the final session/final exam. **THERE WILL BE NO MAKE-UP FINAL EXAMS.** Job related excuses and other exams or conflicting schedules are not acceptable. Students are responsible for arranging their schedules around classes.

Incompletes - University policy on "incomplete" is restricted to situations where a student is doing passing work in a course, but is unable to complete course requirements due to significant, documented circumstances beyond the student's control. If, during the semester, students experience serious work, family, or medical problems that might affect their ability to complete the course requirements, students are required to contact the instructor as soon as possible. There are strict guidelines and you are responsible for understanding the requirements.

2. ESSAY ON “A Good Old Age”

Write an essay on what you think will constitute “a good old age” for you (or, more generally, “positive or successful” aging). Write 4 – 5 pages, double spaced, 12-point font, 1 inch margins. Critical components to complete the project successfully:

- a) First, interview three or more older persons (70 or older, who are not friends or family members; no need to give their real names) about their perceptions of the aging process.
- b) The essay should combine all their views with your opinions –as a result of all the interviews and personal reflection- and be related to the specific topics being discussed in this class (Note that the essay is not a summary of responses to the interview! but do include some worthwhile quotes, “pearls of wisdom,” to support your opinions).
- c) *The focus should be on how you’ll age*; what’s essential for you; what’ll give meaning to your life in old age.
- d) Make sure the paper has an introductory paragraph, next the narrative and support for your ideas, and a concluding paragraph. This is not a research paper. Do not quote from books or magazines (only from the older persons you’ve interviewed).

Here are some examples of basic questions that might help you in getting relevant/useful information from older persons:

- How old do you feel? Do you fear aging/or the thought of getting old?
- What’s the best -and worst- part of growing old?
- If you could be any age, what age would you like to be again and why?
- Does society need to change anything to make the lives of older persons more satisfying?
- What advice would you give to today’s youth about life and successful aging?

Probe for more, if needed, by asking “why” after any of the questions above.

Assignment is due on or before March 27.

3. CLASS PROJECT

Complete a “special project” on a specific area of images of aging in society. This project is a written paper, but it is different from a strict research paper in that it involves personal creativity and active involvement in a specific issue (in addition to reading and summarizing some research articles). Students should think of original ways to approach their chosen subject area. Two person projects will be considered for complex subjects (but each one has to prepare a separate/complementary paper). When the subject for a project is chosen you should notify the professor, this will avoid having several people pick the same subject. Projects will include a paper of 7 up to 9 pages, not counting cover, attachments and supplementary information (double spaced, 12-point font, 1 inch margins) that includes items such as the following:

- Why the subject area was chosen, relevance/relationship to the course;
- The history of that area’s treatment of the elderly and/or background information from literary/research sources; give bibliography and references (at least 5 scholarly sources).
- Project design and development: what was done and how. This includes “items” (people’s views, pictures, etc.) from real life that can either confirm, validate, or question, illustrate... what research and experts say;
- Examples of negative and/or positive impact on attitudes toward the elderly;
- A summary of problems, and recommendations for new directions, policies (mostly based on

- reading and research articles);
- Appendices (references, pictures, tables/charts, supporting documentation, etc..).

As you work on your project and write your paper, keep on asking yourself: “what does this have to do with, how does it relate to, images of aging?”

Papers will be graded based on originality/ creativity, content, work difficulty, and course relevance (spelling & grammar also count).

A related option is to share the project with the class during one of the last two sessions in a professional presentation. Each presentation should last about 10 minutes (reading parts of the paper is not a professional presentation!). Visual aids (powerpoint –preferred!, videos, posters) or other educational supports such as handouts are required. Quality of presentations will be graded, along with the written paper. In this case, the written paper might be only 4-5 pages (with no requirement for references/research); it should include a copy of the visual aids used in the presentation. Students wishing to take this option should notify the professor by March 27. Due date is on or before May 8.

PROJECT EXAMPLES:

- Collection of poetry regarding aging issues
- Book of relevant advertisements and commercials
- Book of cartoons with commentaries
- Survey of attitudes of professionals or students in other disciplines regarding aging.
- Collection of interviews with advertising and marketing executives
- Review of children’s books on the elderly.
- Design a media campaign to promote “positive aging”
- Analysis of portrayals of the elderly in classical paintings/photographs or lives of famous artists as they grew older.
- Aging related songs, with narrative background information and analysis, and CD.
- Tape/DVD with examples and analysis of TV commercials or shows.
- Development of an aging specific web site (or a new magazine!) to address some of the ageism issues discussed in class.

4. REQUIRED TEXT AND READINGS

There is not a formal textbook required for this course. The required readings will all be posted on blackboard ahead of the class dates. The total compilation of articles posted will constitute a highly comprehensive “reader” for this course.

A recommended book on this subject that addresses most of the themes in the class is:

Erdman B. Palmore, Laurence Branch, Diana K. Harris, Ed. (2005), Encyclopedia of Ageism, The Haworth Press, Inc. Binghamton, N.Y.

TESTS: There will be two tests: a mid-term and a final (March 13 & May 15).

GRADING: Be assured that I want students to learn and to receive the good grades you deserve. So please make an appointment with me should you have undue difficulty with your

work in the course. Don't wait till it's too late. Final grades are the result of several components that you put together during the semester. I will not adjust the final grade.

University guidelines, as spelled out in the grading system of the current catalog will be followed (A = 95 to 100; A- 90 to 94.99; B+ = 86.66 to 89.99 and so forth). Proportions of the final grade:

Attendance/Participation	10%
Paper/ Essay	15%
Class Project	25%
Tests	50%

IMAGES OF AGING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY COURSE OUTLINE

- Jan. 24: Course Overview. Introduction
- Jan. 31: Definitions. Stereotypes and Types of Ageism
- Feb. 7: The Meaning of Age
- Feb. 14: Individual and Social Sources of Ageism
- Feb. 21: The Power of Culture. Social Influences and Sources of Ageism
- Feb. 28: Marketing. Advertising. Impact of Media
- March 6: Aging in TV/Movies, Songs and Literature
- March 13: Mid-Term.
- March 20: Consequences of Ageism for Society and for Elders
Employment and New Meanings of Retirement
- March 27: Family, Intimacy, Abuse (*Essays due*)
- April 10: Ageism in Health Care Delivery
- April 17: Changing the Person. Productive/Positive Aging. Reminiscence
- April 24: Changing the Structure (Community). Elders as Resources
- May 1: Project Presentations
- May 8: Project Presentations. Project Papers Due
- May 15: Final Test

