

What is old?

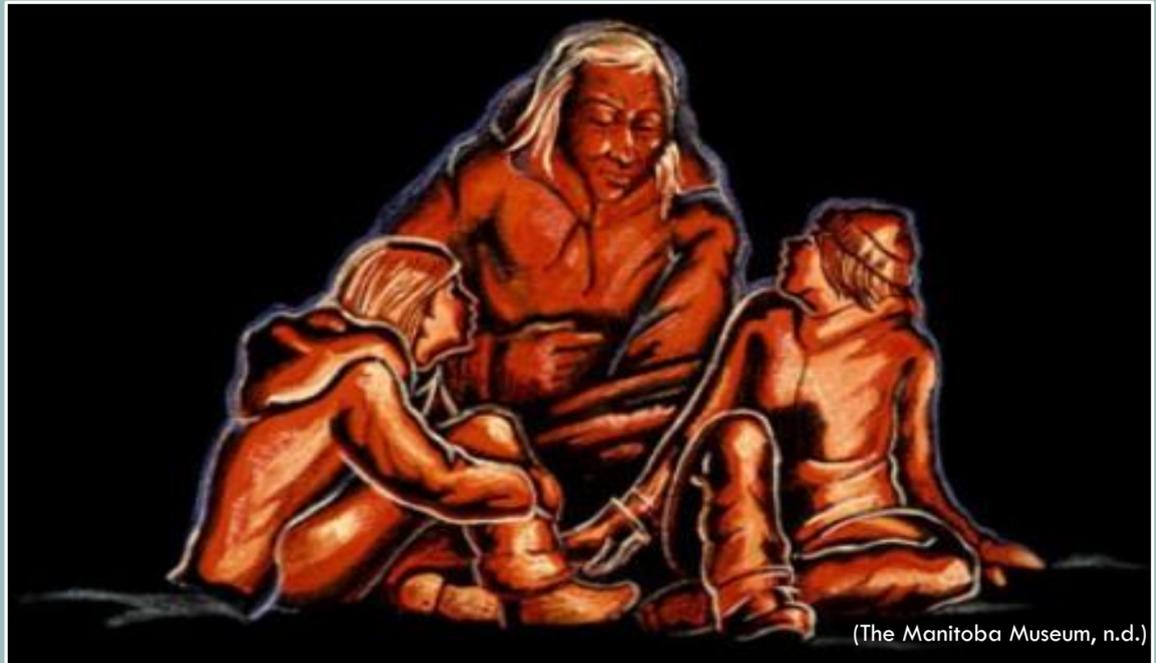
In our society we have socially constructed life stages based on psychohistories of development from popular theorist such as Freud and Erikson (Agronin, 2014). Their focus was mainly on early childhood development and the latter effects into adolescence and early adulthood (Agronin, 2014). The concept of 'old age' was poorly developed, and highly stigmatized, labelling it as a time of hopelessness; loss of autonomy, self, recognition, and power (Agronin, 2014). These perceptions have become embedded norms, stereotyping aging as a negative phenomenon. Individuals try to avoid this label of old age through their age identity, where they 'determine their age' on how they view themselves, often influenced by physical and social changes (Rozario & Derienzis, 2009).

My mom, who was just promoted to grammy, views herself as an 'old timer,' which was highly influenced by this social change of her first grandchild being born (Salsman, personal communication, Oct 2020). She also experiences a significant number of physical limitations, and body aches and pains, due to arthritis and fibromyalgia, which has made her feel much older than her chronological age (Salsman, personal communication, Oct 2020). Our western society has highly shaped how she views the process of aging, dreading her 'early onset' into her elder years.

My mom also expressed her dreaded concern of being placed into a senior's home (Salsman, personal communication, Oct 2020). This disconnection to autonomy and the community is a constant fear of hers due to her positionality; highly shaped by being a single, low-income, woman, with a growing disability (Personal communication, 2020). Ageism has influenced her to feel disempowered, disconnected, and undignified in growing old (Azulai, 2014). She feels she is becoming an unserving member of society (Personal communication, 2020) due to these stereotypes that are assuming "...a homogeny among humans that simply does not exist" (Azulai, 2014, p. 3).

An indigenous perspective

In Indigenous culture, elders or old ones, are valued and recognized (Anderson, 2011). Aging is not feared as it is in western societies as old ones are cherished for their wisdom and are given the power and responsibility in their community to maintain and oversee its health and well-being (Anderson, 2011). Historically, Indigenous ways of knowing have found balance in growing old, where old ones were able to maintain active and moderately independent lives "...because of the complementary roles of others in the community" (Anderson, 2011). Colonization has negatively impacted this Indigenous value of community and relationships. It has disconnected Indigenous Peoples from their land, language, and cultures. As Anderson identified, the assimilation of western values has disfigured an Indigenous Person's sense of self, that was once reinforced through the knowledge of their elders (2011). The value in aging is not what it had once been.



Practice Implications

We have socially constructed ageism, allowing for the stereotyping and negative attitudes of the older population (Azulai, 2014). This institutionalization of ageism has resulted in structural oppression and discrimination towards the elderly (Azulai, 2014). This is reflected through the limited resources provided and disconnect from the physical and social community. This patronizing of aging has affirmed eternal youth (Azulai, 2014), and the 'ageless self' (Rozario & Derienzis, 2009), where the aging population sees terror in identifying as old. Through colonization, this western perspective has also broken the harmony between the young and the old in Indigenous communities, where the elders were once treasured.

There is significant value in learning from the Indigenous way of knowing, and the history behind the significance of elders. Moving towards reconnecting the young and the old, filling these generational gaps, and normalizing what it means to grow old, should reduce ageist attitudes and reclaim the dignity in aging (Azulai, 2014).

AM I DOING AGE RIGHT?

(Azulai, 2014)

Ageism as a social construct
and its negative
implications

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