

Differing Cultural Perspectives on Ageing: Western, Eastern, & Indigenous

Indigenous

Indigenous society's perspectives on ageing are very positive and differ vastly from the dominant Westernized cultural perception. Indigenous people's understandings of the life course are rooted in the point of view that life is circular rather than linear.

Thus, there is a continuation after death in the spirit world and through the life of one's descendants (Pace & Grenier, 2016). Elders and older persons tend to be highly valued and respected within Indigenous communities as they are perceived to be the most wise and knowledgeable members. Elders have distinguished roles within a community and are entrusted with positions of leadership, governance, performing ceremonies, and teachings about life, culture, and spirituality. As Elders grow older their roles often shift from community governance to providing spiritual teachings and preparing for the afterlife (Anderson, 2011). This enables Elders and older individuals to actively engage in society throughout the life course. I would like to note that this is a very broad account on ageing and Indigeneity in Canada, comparing only some commonalities among the many differing Indigenous communities and cultures.

Western

Ageing from a Western cultural perspective is often associated with negative attitudes and beliefs. There is an ingrained societal value that glorifies youthfulness and associates it with enhanced well-being and attractiveness. Whereas, old age tends to be linked with a loss of independence, respect, health, beauty, and impending death (Azulai, 2014). There is also a tendency within Western culture to view the ageing process from a purely physical standpoint. This limited perspective on ageing neglects to acknowledge the many positive aspects of ageing and the other important factors involved in successful ageing, such as emotional, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual well-being. Such perceptions can create a narrow social perspective on individuals in old age, forming a basis for stereotypes which can sustain and perpetuate ageism. This process of treating older individuals as a homogeneous group can lead to negative social impacts, especially in terms of providing relevant opportunities and services. Thus, it is necessary to challenge the dominant discourses on ageing that are prevalent in Westernized societies.

Eastern

In my discussion on Eastern cultural perspectives, I want to acknowledge that this is a very limited analysis that is focused on ageing in a Taiwanese setting. My research includes an interview with a Taiwanese local named Jansen, who is retiring in the near future and our conversation consisted of his thoughts on retirement and his expectations for growing older in Taiwan. My intent is not to suggest a universal experience of ageing in the East but rather to broadly contrast ageing perspectives between Taiwan and Canada.

One of the main differences I found in my research was the traditional concept of filial piety. Filial piety is an important Chinese cultural value rooted in Confucianism which promotes a virtue of respect for one's parents, elders, and ancestors. This cultural value within Taiwanese society puts forth an expectation that children will assume responsibility for their parents in old age and ensure they are treated well (Hsu, 2007). However, as Taiwanese society has become more open to Western influences and global capitalistic forces, it is becoming more common that older individuals do not expect their children to take financial responsibility for them. This societal change has increased the expectations of older individuals in Taiwan for further development into the old age social security system (Hsu, 2007). With a consistent gradual decline in family caregivers, the pressure for this is high. Taiwan is an ageing population and currently 14% of its citizens are aged over 65. My interview with Jansen and subsequent research into societal views of ageing from an Eastern Asian cultural perspective, revealed that there tends to be a more positive perception of ageing in Taiwan (in comparison to Canada) with a high emphasis placed on tradition and respect.

Implications for Practice

It is important to consider cultural perspectives on ageing in practice so as to provide culturally competent services. It is also necessary to challenge the extensive ageist beliefs and attitudes within our society. I believe that it is imperative to address ageism from an intersectional framework as the negative social impacts produced by ageist beliefs and practices can be compounded by other forms of oppression and marginalization.

It is also crucial to acknowledge how dominant Westernized perspectives on ageing can be disruptive to cultures who revere those in old age and place honor on maintaining cultural traditions surrounding ageing. As an emerging social worker living in Canada it is critical that I confront my own personal biases on ageing and question how they may interfere in my practice with older clients (Azulai, 2014). It is also important to recognize that cultural perspectives on ageing are socially constructed and can lead to damaging stereotypes and stigmatization rather than proper care and respect but are also possible to change. Thus, in practicing from an anti-oppressive and socially just standpoint it is important to acknowledge and honor differing cultural perspectives on ageing so long as they are not harmful. In addition to, advocating for older individuals who are experiencing ageism and promoting their right to access services and opportunities. An important aspect of creating tangible change must include service providers taking the initiative to lead by example (Azulai, 2014).

References:

- Anderson, K. (2011). *Life stages and Native women: Memory, teachings, and story medicine*. University of Manitoba Press.
- Azulai, A. (2014). Ageism and future cohorts of elderly: Implications for social work. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 11(2), 2-12.
- Hsu, H. (2007). Exploring elderly people's perspectives on successful ageing in Taiwan. *Ageing and Society*, 27(1), 87-102. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X06005137>
- Pace, J., & Grenier, A. (2017). Expanding the Circle of Knowledge: Reconceptualizing Successful Aging Among North American Older Indigenous Peoples. *The Journals of Gerontology*, 72(2), 248-258. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1093/geronb/gbw128>