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Historical and Cultural Aspects of Aging

Chapter Overview

Understanding the historical and cultural differences experienced by older adults across the life course is essential if we are to meet their needs in later life. The meaning of aging, the situation of being older, and the processes of aging vary at different periods in history, as well as in different places, even in the same society. Although there are some universal commonalities in the aging process, cultural and sub-cultural differences are vital to our understanding of aging. Sensitivity to cultural differences is essential for ensuring that all members of an increasingly diverse older group of Canadians will receive equal and relevant services and be treated without discrimination or ageism.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to do the following:

- Understand the multiple ways in which our life course is influenced by the period of history and the society in which we live.

- Explain how culture influences the challenges, experiences, and outcomes of the aging process.
- Elaborate on the ways in which modernization and other technological advances have altered the status of elderly people in different cultures and at different times.
- Critique the usefulness of Modernization Theory in explaining differences in the status of older people across time and societal context.
- Describe the intersectionality of aging, culture, and other dimensions of aging.
- Understand the experiences of growing old in different cultures, past and present.

Key Facts

- According to the 2016 Canadian census, 1,673,785 Canadians reported an ethnic identity as one of the Indigenous Peoples of Canada—including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit—of which 121,665 (7.3 per cent) are aged 65 and over.
- Understand to what extent and why aging elders of Indigenous ancestry are disadvantaged in Canadian society.
- In 2016, about 22 per cent of Canadians were foreign-born (approximately 7.5 million people), and approximately 22 per cent of all immigrants were 65 and over; most of them were members of a visible-minority group.
- In 2016, about 31 per cent of persons aged 65 and over were foreign-born. This higher rate than for the total population reflects significant immigration from Europe around the time of the Second World War.
- Canada admitted about 1.2 million new immigrants between January 2011 and May 2016; 4.4 per cent of these new immigrants were 55 to 64 years of age, and 4.6 per cent were 65 years of age or older.

Key Terms

acculturation A process in which individuals from one cultural group, through contact with another cultural group, learn and internalize the cultural traits of the other group. (p. 46)

beliefs Socially constructed and shared views that influence the perceptions and behaviour of people. (p. 46)

ethnic subculture A subgroup within a larger society in which members have a common ancestry and an identifiable culture, including customs, beliefs, language, dress, foods, or religion (e.g., Cubans, Indigenous Peoples of Canada, East Indians, Italians, Portuguese). (p. 63)

ethnocentrism A tendency for individuals or groups to consider their own culture superior to others and as the ideal standard when evaluating the worth of those from other cultures, societies, or groups. (p. 46)

filial piety A felt need, duty, or moral obligation to honour and care for one's parents in their middle and later years. (p. 44)

Indigenous Peoples of Canada The original or indigenous inhabitants of Canada who normally include three general categories of people, as defined by the Government of Canada: Status Indians (First Nations), Métis, and Inuit. (p. 57)

marginalization UNESCO states that “marginalization occurs when people are systematically excluded from meaningful participation in economic, social, political, cultural and other forms of human activity in their communities and thus are denied the opportunity to fulfill themselves as human beings.” (p. 45)

modernization A shift from an agricultural to an industrialized economy or from a “traditional” primitive, rural social system to a “modern” industrialized, urban social system. (p. 50)

norm A commonly accepted formal or informal rule about how an individual or group is expected to act in a specific social situation. (p. 46)

racial subculture A subgroup within a larger society in which biological physical appearances, along with cultural commonalities, combine to define the boundaries of membership (e.g., African Canadians, Indigenous Peoples of Canada). (p. 62)

subculture A set of unique and distinctive beliefs, norms, values, symbols, and ideologies that guides the thinking, behaviour, and lifestyles of a subset of the larger population. (p. 57)

values Cultural or subcultural ideas about the desirable goals and behaviour for members of a group. These internalized criteria are employed to judge the appropriateness or inappropriateness of individual and group actions. (p. 46)

Study Questions

See below for answers.

1. Compare and contrast the differences and similarities of Western and Eastern societies approach to aging and treatment of older people.
2. Drawing from the experiences of elders and seniors in the Anishinabe of Georgian Bay, Japan, and Israel, select two examples and compare and contrast their experiences of modernization and the impact on seniors and elders.

Additional Resources

Articles

Helene H. Fung. 2013. Aging in Culture, *The Gerontologist*, Volume 53, Issue 3, Pages 369–377, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnt024>

Ng E, Lai D, Rudner AT, Orphana H. (2012). [What do we know about immigrant seniors aging in Canada? A demographic, socio-economic and health profile.](#) CERIS Working Paper Series.

Yves Carrière, Laurent Martel, Jacques Légaré and Jean-François Picard. 2016. [The contribution of immigration to the size and ethnocultural diversity of future cohorts of seniors](#), *Insights on Canadian Society*, Statistics Canada.

Videos

[Round Up](#) by Narcisse Blood. 2010. (18 minutes) National Film Board of Canada.

Excerpt taken from website: This short film traces Pete Standing Alone's personal journey from cultural alienation to pride and belonging. As a spiritual elder, teacher, and community leader of the Blood Indians of Southern Alberta, Pete works with youth to repair the cultural and spiritual destruction wrought by residential schools. At age 81, he has come full-circle in his dedication to preserving the traditional ways of his people.

[How societies can grow old better](#) by Jared Diamond. 2013. (18 minutes). TEDTalk.

Excerpt taken from website: Jared Diamond looks at how many different societies treat their elders—some better, some worse—and suggests we all take advantage of experience.

[The Role of Indigenous Elders](#) by Doreen Spence. 2017. (7:28 minutes). *The Walrus* Talks Mobility.

Websites

Health Canada, First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fniah-spnia/index-eng.php

International Association for Indigenous Aging, <http://iasquared.org/wordpress2/>

Study Questions—Answers

1. Following are some of the findings of the differences between Eastern and Western societies:
 - Filial piety (respect and a feeling of responsibility for one's parents) is embedded in Eastern cultures; such a general guiding principle is not found in the West.
 - Rapid population aging occurred in modernized Western societies in the twentieth century; it will occur in developing Eastern societies in the twenty-first century. (It has already happened in Japan.)
 - In Eastern cultures, the eldest son and his wife are usually responsible for caring for his parents (often in a multi-generational household); in Western cultures, a daughter or a daughter-in-law is more likely to be responsible.
 - In Western cultures, state-supported economic assistance, housing, and health care for older adults are common; these programs are just beginning to appear in Eastern cultures.

Some of the similarities in Eastern and Western societies' treatment of elderly persons include the following:

- The family is the primary support system for the daily lives of older adults.
 - With population aging, an increasing number of older adults are economically dependent on the state and/or their families for survival in later life.
 - Fertility rates are declining, and smaller families, including some with no children, are more typical than in the past.
 - Debates about the relative responsibility of the state and the family for providing support to older adults are common in both cultures (p. 44).
2. Answers will vary depending on the examples chosen (pp. 54–56).