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Dept. of Anthropology  
Fall Semester

## **AGING AND CULTURE**

Anthro 339-34000

“Old age is not a disease -- it’s a triumph.” -- Maggie Kuhn, Founder of The Gray Panthers

“Why ‘stay young’ when adventure lies in change and growth?”  
-- May Sarton, American writer

“Genius is childhood recaptured.” -- Charles Baudelaire, French Poet

“At first we want life to be romantic; later, to be bearable; finally, to be understandable.”  
-- Louise Bogan, American poet

“Growing old is not so bad when you consider the alternative.”  
-- Mark Twain, American writer

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### **TEXTS:**

Conrad Arensberg: THE IRISH COUNTRYMAN (Ireland)

Barbara Myerhoff: NUMBER OUR DAYS (Eastern Europe, United States)

May Sarton: AS WE ARE NOW (a novel about an American nursing home)

Joel Savishinsky: BREAKING THE WATCH:

THE MEANINGS OF RETIREMENT IN AMERICA (US)

READER for AGING AND CULTURE (Abkhasia, China, Japan, India, Singapore, Italy, Bolivia, the Pacific, South Africa, Zaire/Congo, US, Bahamas, Canada, Uganda)

### **THE SCOPE AND ORGANIZATION OF THE COURSE:**

Aging is a universal experience, but the meaning of late life, and the positions of the elderly, differ dramatically among various cultures. For example, people in the Abkhasian region of the former Soviet Union

reputedly live past 100 years and enjoy good health. Traditional rural Ireland has been described as a “gerontocracy,” in which elderly parents possessed considerable power, property and prestige compared to younger generations. Some American retirement communities have been called “false paradises” by anthropologists, while similar housing developments in France and England have been described as vital, vibrant places. Many Western and non-Western cultures segregate people by age -- East African “age villages” and American college campuses are two examples -- but only Western societies place large numbers of the frail elderly in institutions. These are just some of the differences that emerge from comparing the aging process in various societies. How much longevity people enjoy, how much power and wealth they control in late life, how active or isolated they remain in community affairs, how other family members treat them, how aging affects individuals of different gender, how ethnicity impacts on the aging process, and how the elderly themselves feel about retirement, later life, and human mortality -- these are some of the factors that show great variation from one culture to another.

To examine these and related issues, this course is organized into four sections. **PART I on AGING, CULTURE AND THE LIFE CYCLE** begins by identifying some of the major cross cultural questions that need to be considered in a serious study of the aging experience. It opens with “best case” and “worst case” scenarios. The first is a study of the rich and meaningful lives of elderly people in the Bahamas, and a comparison of their situation with that of American caregivers. Next, using a novel by May Sarton, and an ethnographic study of pet therapy programs, we will confront one of American society’s worst fears about late life -- that of having to move to a nursing home. The following unit on the life cycle explores how the entire spectrum of human experience -- from birth through childhood and maturity to death -- is handled differently in select cultures of South and Native America, Africa, Asia, Europe, the Pacific, and the United States.

Having established a cross-cultural framework in the first section, **PART II** focuses on **POWER, HEALTH, AND THE SOCIAL ROLES OF ELDERS**. It first considers the status and reputation of older individuals among South and Central African peoples, the hunter-gatherer !Kung Bushmen of South Africa, and the Suku of Zaire/Congo. These cultures will expose us to the traditional African concepts of “ancestors as elders” and

“elders as ancestors.” The following unit examines the relationship between cultural support, health and longevity. Using material from Soviet Georgia, Ireland, the US, and India, it considers some of the major social and environmental factors that promote a long life span. Here we will also survey some of the major biological changes that occur for people in later life. The next section explores the considerable power exercised by elders in a European society, that of rural Ireland. We will also examine factors that have reduced that power in recent decades. The last unit in this section takes a different approach to the image of the elderly by exploring how poetry serves as an expression of cultural ideas about aging and older people.

The focus in **PART III** shifts to a concern with **THE FAMILY, GENDER AND AGING**. It begins by examining the life of a family from North India whose senior members retain a considerable amount of authority and respect. We will try to identify the cultural forces which allow this to happen, and ask whether older women and men exercise their influence in the same way. For comparative purposes, we will then study the lives of a group of elderly East European Jewish immigrants in America, among whom gender differences are also apparent. From examining these Indian and American cases, can we say anything about whether women or men deal with aging more successfully? The following unit on Italian-American and Singaporean elderly raises comparative questions about aging and ethnicity. Why does the family situation of elder people vary so much from one ethnic group to another? We will conclude this section by considering theories about some of the psychological changes that characterize the aging process.

In the last section of the course, **PART IV**, the main concern is with the relationship between **CULTURE CHANGE AND LATER LIFE**. We begin by exploring how the extension of the life course in the US in the last century has created “retirement” as a new stage of life. We will read about a group of retired women and men from a rural New York town, and find out how the reality of retirement matches their ideals and expectations. We will also compare their image of retirement with that of elderly “**sannyasins**” or spiritual “renouncers” in India. Then we will turn to a study of how the impact of modernization and urbanization have affected and undermined the traditional role of elderly people in Japan. Why, in many modern nations, do elderly people have such high rates of suicide? And is it simply a matter of

modernization? We will use an exercise, called the ‘lifeline analysis,’ to probe people’s life expectations. The introduction here of some comparative material, and a role play on late life among the Inuit (Eskimo), will also help us to address these questions. Relevant too in the study of aging and modernization is the issue of how much responsibility the community, the state and governments should have for helping older people. This section’s units take that issue on by exploring services provided for and by the elderly in the People’s Republic of China, India, Singapore, the US, Argentina, Uganda, Cambodia and Egypt. One reading examines both the traditional place of China’s elderly, and their treatment under Communism. The course ends with a unit and film on death and dying, and a consideration of “the future of aging.” Was the poet Robert Browning right when he said: “Come, grow old with me/ The best is yet to be”? If not, what can we do to make it turn out that way?

### **SPECIAL EVENTS:**

We will have one field trip this semester to Longview, an assisted living facility for older adults which borders the college. In addition, students will be asked to attend special lectures given by presenters in the Gerontology Institute’s Distinguished Speakers’ series (time and dates to be announced). In addition, on Thursday, September 21<sup>st</sup>, students should plan on attending the keynote address to the Institute’s day-long conference, “Livable Communities.” It will be given by anthropologist Dr. Philip Stafford, one of the founders of the innovative Evergreen Project for elders in Bloomington, Indiana.

### **METHODS OF EVALUATION:**

For this semester, these will include:

- ~ Three exams (45% of grade)
- ~ Class participation: oral participation, one short paper, involvement in seminars, debates, role plays, and exercises (20%)
- ~ Seminar presentation: oral presentation and written summary (20%)
- ~ Term paper project (15%)

There will be separate handouts on the seminar and term paper assignments.

## **COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

1. To help students understand their own culture's assumptions about the aging process and late life.
2. To explore the sources and the kinds of power, authority, and respect accorded older people in various non-Western and Western societies.
3. To understand the impact of modernization, industrialization, and social policy in the cultural treatment of the elderly.
4. To examine cultural differences in inter-generational relations and in the way older people experience and feel about late life.

## **Course Outline**

### **PART I. AGING, CULTURE AND THE LIFE CYCLE**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION: THE SCOPE & ORGANIZATION OF THE COURSE**

#### **2. AN AGENDA OF ISSUES**

Readings: D. Gelman: "Who's Taking Care of Our Aging Parents?"  
(in Reader)

J. Sokolovsky: "Background to Comparative Sociocultural Gerontology" (in Reader)

#### **3. A BEST CASE SCENARIO?**

##### **THE LIVES OF EDLERLY PEOPLE IN THE BAHAMAS**

Reading: J. Savishinsky: "A New Life for The Old: The Role of The Elderly in The Bahamas" (in Reader)

Slides: From Cat Island, The Bahamas

Exercise #1: A Caregivers' Dialogue

#### **4. A WORST CASE SCENARIO?**

##### **LIFE AND WORK IN A NURSING HOME**

Readings: May Sarton: AS WE ARE NOW

J. Savishinsky: "Pets and Family Relationships Among Nursing Home Residents" (in Reader)

Film: IN GOOD COMPANY  
Paper: Did she have the right to do it?  
(2 page response paper, by groups of 4 students, with  
haiku)

**5. THE ELDERLY AND THE LIFE CYCLE: CULTURAL MODELS  
FROM AFRICA, ASIA, LATIN AMERICA &  
THE UNITED STATES**

Readings: R. Crapo: "The Life Cycle" (in Reader)  
W. Oswalt: "Aging and Death" (in Reader)  
Exercise :#2: Small group presentations: "Rites of Passage and The  
Life Course"  
Fieldtrip: To Longview, a residential facility for older people in Ithaca

**PART II. POWER, HEALTH AND  
THE SOCIAL ROLES OF ELDERS**

**6. THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF OLDER PEOPLE:  
THE ELDERLY OF AFRICA**

Readings: M. Biesele & N. Howell: "The Old People Give You Life:  
Aging Among !Kung Hunter-Gatherers" (in Reader)  
I. Kopytoff: "Ancestors As Elders in Africa" (in Reader)  
Debate #1: Mandela & Mao, Reagan and Clinton:  
Should Elders Be Leaders?

**\*\*\*\*\*EXAM # 1\*\*\*\*\***

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**7. CULTURAL SUPPORT, HEALTH, AND THE FAMILY:  
THE ELDERLY IN RUSSIA, IRELAND, INDIA & THE US**  
Reading: S. Benet: ABKHASIANS: THE LONG-LIVING PEOPLE

OF THE CAUCASUS (excerpts, in Reader)

Seminar #1: Biological Aspects of Late Life

Film: MEDICINE AT THE CROSSROADS: LIFE SUPPORT  
(India, United States, Ireland)

**8. GERONTOCRACY IN IRELAND:**

**ELDERLY POWER IN RURAL COMMUNITIES**

Reading: C. Arensberg: THE IRISH COUNTRYMAN

Seminar #2: Between The Generations: Holding and Losing Power

**9. AN INTERLUDE OF POETRY: LITERARY EXPRESSIONS OF  
LATE LIFE FROM VARIOUS CULTURES**

Reading: Poems from Ireland, England, Egypt and China (handout)

Exercise #3: Analyzing the Poetic Image and Imagery of The Elderly

**PART III. ETHNICITY, GENDER AND AGING**

**10. THE FAMILY LIFE OF OLDER WOMEN AND MEN:  
A CASE FROM INDIA**

Reading: Paul Hiebert: "Old Age in A South Indian Village"  
(in Reader)

Film: DADI'S FAMILY (on a 3-generation farm family)

**11. AN AMERICAN COMPARISON:**

**11 THE LIVES OF ELDERLY JEWISH IMMIGRANTS**

Reading: B. Myerhoff: NUMBER OUR DAYS

Film: NUMBER OUR DAYS

Debate #2: Do Women or Men Age More Successfully?

**\*\*\*\*\*EXAM # 2\*\*\*\*\***

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**12. ETHNICITY AND LATER LIFE:**

**ITALIAN-AMERICAN & SINGAPOREAN EXPERIENCES**

Reading: Colleen Johnson: “Interdependence and Aging in Italian Families” (in Reader)

Seth Mydans: “A Tribunal To Get Neglected Parents Smiling Again” (Singapore) (in Reader)

Seminar #3: Psychological Aspects of Late Life

**PART IV. CULTURE CHANGE AND LATER LIFE**

**13. RETIREMENT: PASSION, PURPOSE & SPIRITUALITY**

Reading: Joel Savishinsky: BREAKING THE WATCH:  
THE MEANINGS OF RETIREMENT IN  
AMERICA

Exercise #4: Imagining An Ideal Retirement

Exercise #5: The Volunteer and The Sannyasin: An American-Indian  
Dialogue

Film: ROAM SWEET HOME (on nomadic American retirees)

**14. MODERNIZATION: DOES IT IMPROVE OR DIMINISH  
THE QUALITY OF OLD AGE? LESSONS FROM THE  
INUIT, JAPAN, EGYPT, UGANDA, ARGENTINA,**



**CAMBODIA, INDIA & THE UNITED STATES**

Readings: D. Plath: “Ecstasy Years’ -- Old Age in Japan” (in Reader)

L. Guemple: “Growing Old in Inuit Society” (in Reader)

Sheryl WuDunn: “The Face of the Future in Japan”  
(in Reader)

Film: PORTRAITS OF AGE (Egypt, Cambodia, Uganda,  
Argentina, India, US)

Exercise #6: The Suicide of Tunit and Sedna

**15. SHOULD THE STATE BE RESPONSIBLE FOR ITS ELDERLY?  
SOME ANSWERS FROM THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA**

Readings: P. Olson: “The Elderly in the People’s Republic of China”  
(in Reader)

Exercise #7: Lifeline Analysis (based on an idea from Maggie Kuhn)

**16. DEATH, DISENGAGEMENT & INTEGRITY:  
CULTURAL ALTERNATIVES IN DYING**

Film: CHILLYSMITH FARM (aging and death in rural America)

**PROJECT REPORTS**

**\*\*\*\*\*EXAM # 3\*\*\*\*\***

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**MATERIALS ON RESERVE IN THE LIBRARY**

Arensberg, Conrad            THE IRISH COUNTRYMAN    GN585 .I7 A68

Benet, Sula                    ABKHASIANS                    DK34 .A2 B46

Butler, Robert                    “The Life Review”            Photocopy

Crandall, Richard            GERONTOLOGY            HQ1061 .C67 1991

Crandall, Richard	“Biological and Physiological Aspects of Aging”	Photocopy
Crandall, Richard	“Sexuality in Old Age”	Photocopy
Crandall, Richard	“Psychology of The Aged”	Photocopy
Myerhoff, Barnara	NUMBER OUR DAYS	F869 V36 M9 1980
Savishinsky, Joel	BREAKING THE WATCH: THE MEANINGS OF RETIREMENT IN AMERICA	HQ1063.2 U6 S39 2000
Scheper-Hughes, Nancy	SAINTS, SCHOLARS, & SCHIZOPHRENICS	RC450 .I732 C637 2001
Sokolovsky, Jay	THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF AGING, 2nd ed.	HQ1061 .C79 1997
Sokolovsky, Jay	GROWING OLD IN DIFFERENT SOCIETIES	HQ1061 .S6538 1983