

## Cultural Motifs: Aging and the Human Condition

(Anth/Soc 300, Fall 1998)

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Office hrs: Mon & Wed 1-3pm; Tue & Thur 9:30-11am (C107, #3932)

### Course Statement

This topics course is a newly developed seminar in the area of social gerontology and the phenomenology of aging. Aging is a condition of being human, yet in our culture aging is constructed as a negative experience and has consequently become the subject of fear, loathing and denial. The consequences of our cultural displacement of aging are profound and are evident at the social and existential levels of experience. Self alienation, devaluation, and age-based discrimination are among the consequences of our collective misunderstanding of aging.

This seminar examines the phenomenon of aging in order to demystify its various dimensions. Our objective is to clear a rare discursive space in which to study and discuss topics most of us are encouraged not to talk about. We will clear such a space nonetheless, and we will examine the good, the bad and the ugly dimensions of aging in order to locate the significance of aging for our personal and collective life journeys.

Perhaps the most exciting feature of this seminar will be its intergenerational composition. Beginning September 2nd we will be joined by Mrs. Sally Thomason, an independent scholar and elder who is designing a Ph. D. course of study in the area of self perception and adult development. Mrs. Thomason will participate in the seminar, assist with discussions, and lead the seminar on November 11th.

In addition to Mrs. Thomason, we will have several "midlifers" (I include myself in this category) in the seminar. The age-diversity of the seminar will thus be considerable and will provide an unusual range of perspectives during seminar discussions.

We will meet Wednesday evenings from 6-9pm. Each week you will be given a fairly lengthy reading assignment, and a writing assignment in response to an essay question, field exercise, or experiential experiment. There will be 11 such assignments, all of which must be completed. Your final grade will be based on an averaging of your ten highest grades.

On December 9th, each student will give a 15 minute presentation to the seminar in order to share the main insights attained during the semester. This presentation will not be graded for it is intended to be an informal, "capstone" experience that will bring closure to the seminar. We will discuss in more detail the nature of the presentations as we move through the seminar.

- 8/26            Orientation
- Read for 9/2: Handout on *Agism*, (McGowan);  
pp. xv-xxxv in Cole; pp. 1-13 in de Beauvoir;  
chapter 1 in Atchley.
- 9/2             Personal positionings and aging
- Read for 9/9: Chapters 4 and 5 in Atchley;  
pp. 17-37 in de Beauvoir; and pp. 191-226 in Cole  
Assignment 1 is given
- 9/9             Physiology, psychology and the medicalization of aging
- Read for 9/16: Chapters 2, 3 and 16 in Atchley;  
and pp. 3-31 in Cole.  
Assignment 2 is given
- 9/16            Demography and history of aging
- Read for 9/23: pp. 38-214 in de Beauvoir  
Assignment 3 is given
- 9/23            Aging across cultures and time
- Read for 9/30: Chapters 13, 14, 15 & 17 in Atchley                    Assig
- 9/30            Social structure and the quality of aging
- Read for 10/7: Part 1 in Myerhoff  
Assignment 5 is given
- 10/7            Toward the interior experience of aging
- Read for 10/14: Part 2 in Myerhoff  
Assignment 6 is given
- 10/14                    Adaptation, narrative and self identity
- Read for 10/21: Chapters 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 in Atchley  
Assignment 7 is given
- 10/21                    Contemporary aging
- Read for 10/28: pp. 283-360 in de Beauvoir  
Assignment 8 is given
- 10/28                    Autobiographical laments on aging
- Read for 11/4: pp. 361-543 in de Beauvoir  
Assignment 9 is given
- 11/4            The existential dimensions of aging

Read for 11/11: Readings assigned by Sally Thomason  
Assignment 10 is given

11/11                    Self perception and the embodied experience of  
aging

Read for 11/18: pp. 32-190 in Cole  
Assignment 11 is given

11/18                    The cultural construction of aging

Read for 12/2 pp. 227-251 in Cole

11/25                    Thanksgiving break

12/2                    Aging in a postmodern world  
For 12/9: Complete work on presentations

12/9                    Final seminar meeting: Student presentations