



What's the role of our elderly in our society?

Many times they are neglected, ignored or underestimated... The elderly are mistreated in Western societies, which eternally praise the youth. Why does this happen? How are they valued in other cultures? Why is it so hard for us to give them the treatment they deserve?

Every time I walked by, I'd see Raul sweeping the sidewalk. I was always impressed by the extreme tidiness of the front of his house. I wasn't sure whether I was going crazy or he painted it every day. . I never would have imagined that, apart from sweeping the floor, that 86-year-old man spoke English and some Greek, was a devoted reader and visited rest homes because, according to him, happiness is found by helping others.

Many times, young people's relationship with the elderly narrows down to giving them their seats on the bus. That's a traditional social action in some countries , but we can't talk about a social relationship, in terms of interaction, that allows us to bond with the other.

Just like everyone else, old people need to express themselves and want to play a useful social role, which we -as a society- many times don't allow: for the current economic model, an old person is no longer a productive force. According to sociologist José María Serbia, in the current system the elderly can only participate as consumers.

Old age

In academic terms, we can talk about the "old age" or "senior citizens" when referring to people aged above 65. Apart from the objective parameter, there's a significant portion of subjectivity: today, someone aged 65 doesn't look old, at least in most cases. Going back to the bus seat, we all have different criteria to determine when a person is "old". We have parameters for everything.

The concept of being "old" has varied throughout the years. If we lived in the Neolithic period, at the age of 26, I would be living the last years of my life. If we got on a time machine and traveled up to the Middle Ages, we'd think dying at 40 is normal, since we couldn't resist the deadly epidemics. Today the number is closer to 80, although there are a few surprising cases. So what's the right parameter?

The old wise man

Today, old people are considered beings of the past, out-of-date individuals. However, this wasn't always like this. In other civilizations and history periods they were deemed sources of wisdom and this gave them a significant role within the everyday life of the societies they belonged to.

Anthropological studies reveal that, during prehistory, the elderly were respected and were highly praised for the mere fact of surviving. It isn't strange then that shamans, wise men in hunter-gatherer societies in charge of practices such as healing, many times were old men.

In the Egyptian civilization, the elderly represented experience and wisdom: they played a significant social role as educators and guides for the youth. In the case of the Hebrews, the elderly had an essential function.

Throughout Ancient History, the Middle Ages and the Modern Era, the social function of the oldest men in their societies has changed in countless times. They are not positively valued in most contemporaneous societies.,

Back in my day, things were different!

Many senior citizens use this phrase when talking about “their days”. And it’s true. Time leaves the legacy of history and each age has its own social and cultural context. Anyway, a phrase like this causes prejudice among young people regarding older generations.

Yolanda doesn’t want to tell me her age, and I prefer not to insist. She tells me that, when she was young, everyone would tell her that her oral skills would make her a perfect lawyer. She chose to get married at 19. She criticizes the present: she says today we’re full of pride, selfishness and lack of love. She says that back in her times, relationships and friendships among neighbors were very important matters. Yolanda used to have a grocery store, and the tax authorities closed it down, leaving her out of business. Her neighbors helped her overcome those difficult times and even brought her food. After listening to her story, I wonder what happened to society. Throughout the years, the way people relate to each other has changed a lot, especially in the main urban populations. Apart from the economic factor, many other aspects have influenced people’s participation in the different social fields.

The Japan case

Japan has the highest elderly population rate in the world. In these Eastern lands, respecting old people is a cultural matter and it even has its own holiday: in 1965, the third Monday of September was declared “Respect for the Aged Day”. Celebrations and special events are held during the whole day.

The health system works through a universal insurance mechanism that provides services to the whole population and is financed with taxes deducted from employees and employers. Japanese citizens are interested in helping senior citizens to remain independent and productive. From a rather Western point of view, we could say it’s easy to recognize these practices in more primitive societies, but Japan is one of the most industrialized countries in the world.

Relegating the elderly in our society is much more than just the result of modernity: it’s a cultural practice we accept naturally.

It’s never too late to learn

For senior adults, education allows increasing their abilities, helping them re-enter a society that used to look at them through the eyes of the past. Not only do senior citizens have a cultural potential to develop, but they’re great information sources as well. We will probably not agree with all of their appreciations of life, but talking to an 80-year-old person is talking to someone who’s witnessed history since 1928!

Building a solidary society

Discovering Raúl is much more than an old person; it means knowing what he thinks, what he feels. This change doesn’t require a lot of planning. It’s about building a stronger, inclusive and solidary society where each person has a significant role. It’s every day, it’s today.

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