Section Three: Systemically Related Humiliation

Our Elders: At High Risk for Humiliation

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This paper focuses on our views of the aging process and the prejudicial way in which elderly people are treated. Recommendations for change are discussed.

KEY WORDS: Humiliation; elderly; ageism.

MYTHS ABOUT THE PAST

Most of us have heard about the “good old days” in America when the elderly were respected just because they were old, and knowledge accumulated through life experience was always respectfully heeded. Unhappily, the “good old days” never really existed, and there was only a very short period in the life of the United States when age and sagacity were counted as linked traits: Colonial America before 1790.

American attitudes toward the elderly, and aging itself, have continually changed throughout our relatively short history. According to Fischer (1978, p. 85) “The pattern of change itself, was changed sometime between 1790 and 1850.” Previous patterns of slow social variation gave way to permutation, a change in the basic order of social hierarchy. Before 1790, the median age was 16 years. Anyone who made it to elderhood, reportedly less than 2% of the population (p. 3), was accorded high status, especially if the person was male, and had a livelihood. In meetinghouses all over New England, elders were ranked by age, wealth, power, race and sex. Among all the many distinctions detailed by Fischer, none was more important than age (1978, pp. 38-40, 78-79).

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1790 is seen as pivotal in age relations because it was the end of the ancien regime, a world run by old and powerful institutions, headed by old and powerful men. The costumes, inheritance laws, language and social mores reflected a veneration of the powerful elderly. White wigs were worn to mimic elder wisdom (Charles & DeAnfransio, 1970, pps. 118-127), and paunch-like vestments showed the world that one was not only old but well fed (Kybalova et al, 1968, pps. 189-221). Not much mention was made of the elder poor. Most did not survive long enough to be a burden, and if they did, they were usually treated as classless beggars (Fischer, 1978, pps. 60-63). Haber has noted that even before the social revolutionary period of the late 1700's, scores of elderly persons no longer possessed the means of integrating themselves into society. These were the men and women who lacked strong ties to family, occupation and property. In many ways, this was a foretaste of aging in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, since the same factors tend to shape the nature of old age in this society. “The retired, the childless, the widowed, and the poor often found themselves segregated from society in their last years. Few bonds existed to define their roles or solidify their status. Without these links, the prestige and power of old age disappeared” (Haber, 1985, p. 17).

POST REVOLUTIONARY ATTITUDES

After 1790, many meeting houses, the religious focal point of social status, changed their seating patterns to reflect wealth and political placement; people stopped powdering their hair; the rights of primogeniture (inheritance by the first born male) were changed to placate a growing body of landless young men; and language began to reflect a harsher climate for the American over 60. Pejorative words for old women were always in use, but now the elderly male was a target. For example, the term “fogy” meant a wounded military veteran in the vocabulary of the early 1700’s; by 1800, it became a disrespectful name for an old man (Fischer, 1978, pps. 86-99).

The American and French Revolutions, in doing away with the ancien regime, had changed the way the elderly were seen and treated. The subsequent increased longevity due to more peaceful revolutions in medical care and sanitation, creating the modern dilemma of resource management in an aging society, added to the negative view of elderhood in America.