

Anti-Oppression, Pastoral Care and Aging
Rev. Dr. Devorah Greenstein, Fall 2009

Our dominant cultural paradigm ignores systems of privilege and difference in our society and encourages caring professionals to understand aging-related issues as individuals' personal problems. This basic misapprehension lessens our ability to be effective in our ministries.

After successfully completing this course, students will have a broader perspective and will be able to examine and understand aging-related issues both as individual circumstances, and as clear manifestations of the broader societal context in which these individual situations and problems are situated.

Weeks 1 and 2: Theoretical frameworks

This introductory section will introduce theoretical models, including (but not limited to): social ecological models; stages of human development; models of privilege and power; conceptual age-related issues of race/ethnicity, gender, class, disability; equality and inequality.

On completion of this section, students will:

- share a common vocabulary to discuss aging-related issues throughout the course
- be familiar with theoretical frameworks – those that exist, those that are missing
- be able to discuss some of the layers of meaning wrapped around some of the current and popular theories

Weeks 3 and 4: Role changes

In this section we will look at the way people's roles change as they age, including (but not limited to): elders with children who once were dependent, but who are now independent adults (and elders who did not have children, and the implications of childlessness); self-definition by profession/work role, and the implications of retirement; aspects of physical aging in a culture obsessed with youthful appearance.

On completion of this section, students will:

- be aware of the overall ways in which changes in role affect people as they age
- understand useful pastoral care strategies for congregational settings
- be able to discuss the societal layers of inequalities and cultural experiences that shape and influence individuals' changes in role

Weeks 5 and 6: Spiritual development

This section will give students an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the term "aging with grace" (however each of us personally defines the word "grace"), becoming acquainted with works of contemporary thinkers and spiritual leaders. We will juxtapose personal introspection, our work as religious professionals, and the impacts of the society in which we live.

On completion of this section, students will:

- have an understanding of individual spiritual development needs in later life
- know how to foster elders' spiritual development in a congregational setting
- be able to discuss some of the inequalities and societal challenges facing elders' spiritual development

Weeks 7 and 8: Movement from independence to dependence/interdependence

Ask most people, and they will say they want to live a long life and ultimately die quietly in their sleep, but for most people their elder years include a shift toward relying on others for some portion of their personal needs. This section will focus primarily on the systems that shape the ways in which elders' increasing personal needs are met or unmet.

On completion of this section, students will:

- have a general sense of the recent history of elder policy in the US
- be able to discuss the inequalities of distribution of resources to elders
- have some knowledge about how to advocate for individual elders with personal care needs

Weeks 9 and 10: Caregivers/relationships/disabilities

Clearly, increased personal needs directly affect the lives of elderly people, but they also directly affect the lives of other members of the family. The role of caregiver is *never* simple, but without support caregiving can be personally overwhelming. As with so many situations in the United States, elders can find themselves without resources and caregivers can find themselves without support.

On completion of this section, students will:

- be aware of situations that make the most demands on caregivers (and which may be denied or hidden) with emphasis on Alzheimer's and other dementias
- know about successful congregational-based caregiver support models, and about ways to find existing community supports
- understand the inequalities of caregiver support resources in the US and be able to advocate for creating community caregiver support programs

Weeks 11 and 12: Congregational support structures

Building on the work from the last section (weeks 9 and 10), students will use their own congregational experiences and contexts as reference points to explore existing structures and think about new structures that can be created to support the needs of elders in the congregation, their caregiving family members, and their families' children/youth/teens whose needs should not be overlooked.

On completion of this section, students will:

- know about existing congregational programs, including ways to obtain information about programs
- have thought about their own congregation's support needs and have gathered information about one potentially useful program
- be aware of elder-related children's/youths' support needs and programs that can be designed to address them

Weeks 13 and 14: Wrap-up and review

In the last two sessions the class will re-focus on “the big picture” – coming back to the anti-oppression framework, and asking students to share specific examples from the semester's topics from current newspaper and magazine articles that have been collected throughout the semester—and to share these examples with the rest of the class. Time will be taken to reflect together about current situations and about our thoughts for the future.

On completion of this section, students will:

- have a solid understanding of aging in a contextual, anti-oppression perspective
- be able to apply the course material to situations in individual congregational settings
- be informed about anti-oppression work that needs to be undertaken to shape and direct change in current aging-related policies

