

An Abstract of the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis of:

Joan Rockwell

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The Meaning of Old Age from Native American Haudenosaunee (Iroquois)
Women's Perspective: Then and Now

This thesis looks at the difference between the roles of Native American Haudenosaunee elder women and their Euro-American white counterparts. In the extensive research on aging and the many theories of what aging is and how to do it successfully, there is little about how any other culture of elder women see themselves and what role they have in their society and culture. The Haudenosaunee culture is egalitarian and matrilineal where each person is thought of with equal worth. The clan of the mother is passed on to the children and the mother's clan is never the same as the father's clan. The women have always had a major role in their culture and the elder women have an even greater role and gain great respect. The elder women are the leaders of the community as well as the family. It is the elder women's role to pass the culture, language and customs on to future generations. Therefore the elder women look forward to old age as a time of great respect and honor. In contrast, most white elder women do not play a major role in their society and are often thought of as no longer useful except to be a grandmother and spoil the grandchildren. Elder white women go to great lengths to retard aging and also to cover it up whereas the Haudenosaunee women are proud of their status and their age. Because they have such a prominent role in their society, the elder Haudenosaunee women appear more peaceful and seem to age more gracefully than the majority of white elder women. This is because they still are a very important part of the society, play a continued large role, and are respected by all of their culture. Successful aging is said to be that age in which, while you may be retired from a previous position, you are still a useful and contributing member of the society. Elder Haudenosaunee women fit that description and are able to age with the dignity, grace, and peace that all elder women should have. Much more research needs to be done to explore more fully the role of the elder Haudenosaunee women in their culture. White elder women could learn from this different culture and perhaps gain some new insight into the meaning of old age.