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Historical and Cultural Aspects of Aging

Chapter Overview

Understanding the historical and cultural differences experienced by older adults across the life course is essential if we are to meet their needs in later life. The meaning of aging, the situation of being older, and the processes of aging vary at different periods in history, as well as in different places, even in the same society. Although there are some universal commonalities in the aging process, cultural and sub-cultural differences are vital to our understanding of aging. Sensitivity to cultural differences is essential for ensuring that all members of an increasingly diverse older group of Canadians will receive equal and relevant services and be treated without discrimination or ageism.

Diversity in Aging across Time and Place

The process of aging and the characteristics of the aged vary dramatically across different cultures and over different time periods. Cultures provide values and norms that affect many aspects of life. *Values* are criteria used to judge behaviour, and *norms* are expectations of behaviour (e.g., older people should relinquish their jobs). Values and norms tend to be fairly homogeneous within cultures but heterogeneous across cultures. One central element of aging that is affected by cultural values and norms is the

status of the elderly in society. It has been argued that some cultures appear to value and respect their elderly more than others. The textbook examines in detail aging in a multicultural society such as Canada, and overviews the multiple dimensions and meanings of culture, including definitions of values, norms, beliefs, ethnocentrism, and other key concepts.

Historical and Comparative Approaches to Understanding Aging Processes

A comparative cultural approach highlights differences and suggests reasons for them. The problem in doing an effective analysis is that there have been relatively few comparative studies that investigate issues such as the status of the elderly or definitions of aging. A global analysis of cultural differences typically takes the form of one of the following models: a historical comparison of early versus later societies (pre-literate to post-modern); a comparison of two or more somewhat similar societies at a given point in time (e.g., Japan versus Canada versus Sweden); a comparison of “Eastern” versus “Western” societies (Japan versus Canada); and, finally, a comparison of “developed” (Canada) versus “developing” (Somalia) regions or countries throughout the world.

An Intersectionality Lens to Cultural Experiences and Identity

Recently, an intersectionality lens has been applied to understanding how minority-group status and marginalization shape the experiences and identity of individuals based on the interaction of culture, age, gender, social class, and other salient domains that influence inequality. This approach considers disadvantage (and privilege) as fundamentally tied to the intersection of multiple inequalities that are fluid over the life course and reinforced in social structures (e.g., pension, health- and/or community-care systems). It moves beyond the notion of advantages or disadvantages accumulating through life, but rather, how race, ethnicity, gender, etc. operate concurrently and interact with the others. Understanding the intersectionality of cultural inequalities can shed light on the ways that culture interacts with other salient dimensions of aging to affect a range of experiences of aging at the individual level, the ways in which these are embedded in our social institutions, and how identities are formed and reshaped.

The Modernization Hypothesis and the Changing Status of Older People

One theoretical approach that has been useful in understanding differences or changes in the status of the elderly across cultures and over time is the modernization hypothesis. It has been used to document a number of societal changes that occurred as the result of the industrial revolution. The principal hypothesis relevant to this course is the inverse association between modernization processes and the status of the elderly. That is, as societies become more modern, the status of the elderly is reduced. Several factors are involved:

- increases in industrial production, specialization, and related technology that cause the skills of older people to become obsolete;
- the movement of the workplace from the home into the factory, which increases the emphasis placed on work and decreases the emphasis placed on family;
- automation and industrial competition, which have led to the need for retirement policies;
- increases in life expectancy, which have led to more people living longer, but which have also led to a greater risk of disability and frailty;
- urbanization and the nuclearization of the family, which have resulted in changes in family relationships and support networks; and

- the rapid spread of new knowledge, which has an impact on the value of older people's wisdom.

This approach, however, has been criticized for several reasons. First, some researchers argue that the status of the elderly has actually increased since industrialization, rather than decreased. Others contend that the association between status and modernization is curvilinear, arguing that it was high before modernization as well as after societies became modern, but it was low during the early stages of industrialization. Still others believe that the status of the elderly has decreased due to the shift in responsibility for elders from the family to the government, and not due to modernization. As the burden for care of older persons moves from the family to the government, there is a tendency for their status to decrease in society. Some also claim that the modernization experience is very different for different countries, especially in comparing the European experience with that in developing countries, such as Brazil or Egypt. Thus, the hypothesis is deemed too simplistic to be useful for all societies, and therefore we must investigate specific groups at specific points in time.

Aging in Pre-Industrial Societies

Until the Industrial Revolution, the life expectancy of people was below 40 years of age, and it fluctuated depending on famines, food quality and availability, war, epidemics, hygiene, and so forth. Definitions of old age were therefore affected by the high mortality rates of the time. An older person during the pre-industrial period might be an individual who reached the age of 48 or 50.

Generally, research suggests that the treatment of the elderly during this time period was the result of a combination of economic conditions, religious beliefs, family structure, control of property, and the system of government. There were six major functions that elderly persons performed in preliterate societies: (1) hosts of feasts, games, and visiting groups; (2) consultants on survival skills or rituals; (3) decision-makers for groups; (4) entertainers; (5) arbitrators of disputes; and (6) teachers of the young. One important factor that appears to be associated with the status of the elderly among preliterate societies is whether or not the group was nomadic (i.e., migrating during certain seasons in search of food). As observed in Highlight 2.3 (p. 52), historical research shows that tribes in which the status of the elderly was low tended to be nomadic tribes since the movement of the tribe entails certain risks to frail individuals of all ages, but especially the elderly. Additionally, older persons have had a higher status if there was a viable system of food production or a system of religion in which older persons were thought to be able to communicate with the gods, as is found among many North American Indigenous groups.

It has also been discovered that older people have been afforded greater status in societies in which there is little writing or in which illiteracy is common. Elders in these societies play a central role in passing on important cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. Overall, cultures that are non-nomadic and family-based and those in which elders are viewed as having special skills or powers tend to give higher status to their elders.

Instructors may wish to cover the status of older people in other ancient cultures highlighted in *Aging as a Social Process*, such as the ancient Hebrews, Romans, and Greeks, and those in medieval England and colonial America (Highlight 2.4, p. 54).

Aging during Modernization

The onset of industrialization and modernization after about 1750 led to a number of demographic, economic, and social transitions that affected patterns of fertility, morbidity, mortality, and migration. These transitions increased the demand for health and social services, especially by older peo-

ple, who were more likely to live their last few years in poor health, with disabilities, and with some loss of independence.

The onset of industrialization and modernization occurred very differently across societies and cultures. The text provides some examples of modernization and its impact on the diversity of aging in three different societies: the Anishinabe of Georgian Bay, Japan, and kibbutzim in Israel (pp. 54–57).

Aging in Subcultures

A subculture is a group of people within a specific society who share a set of attitudes, values, norms, and behaviours that are different from those accepted by the larger society. A subculture may have a different language or culture, or it may develop in opposition to mainstream society. Examples of subcultures are First Nations communities, other ethnic enclaves found in urban environments, retirement communities, punk rockers, and so on. Often, voluntary or involuntary separation from mainstream society contributes to the development of in-group solidarity. Groups such as the Mennonites are considered to be persistent subcultures because they maintain a totally separate and unique identity and lifestyle.

Subcultures based on ethnicity or race are also known as minority groups. Minority groups are subcultures within society that experience significant discrimination and blocked opportunities. Acculturation occurs when a subculture adopts the values and norms of the dominant society. Assimilation is the end result of acculturation processes. Convergent subcultures are those that have assimilated into Canadian society, such as Italian Canadians. The Indigenous Peoples of Canada as an example of indigenous subculture is described in detail in this text.

Canadian Indigenous: In 2016, 1,673,785 million Canadians reported their identity as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit, an increase of 42.5 per cent since 2006. Furthermore, while Indigenous peoples comprise 4.9 percent of the total population, only 7.2 percent of this population is 65 and over, versus 17 percent in the non-Indigenous population. This is mainly because of sustained high fertility and a lower life expectancy. However, these demographic factors are changing, such that population aging will increase in the near future among Indigenous people. The definition of elders in Indigenous culture tends to emphasize wisdom and status rather than a specific age. In fact, some argue that we should use 55 and over instead of 65 and over to designate Indigenous elderly populations, since there is almost a 10-year gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

About half of Canadian Indigenous live in urban areas. Those living on reserves and more remote areas constitute a more definitive subculture. The author notes several attributes that are common among many Indigenous subcultural groups:

- a large-knit network with strong family ties and orientation;
- a close-knit community, sometimes suspicious and resentful of mainstream society;
- a respect for elders, who are a source of tradition and wisdom;
- a preference for informal support from kin over formal care from public services and facilities;
- a wide variety of spiritual beliefs that guide everyday life;
- a preference to remain in the community in later life, versus institutionalization or residency in another community; and
- an adherence to traditional healing practices and beliefs.

In general, most Indigenous communities experience lower educational attainment and income level, higher unemployment rates, higher rates of disability, and a lower life expectancy than non-Indigenous peoples, in addition to other forms of inequality. Yet, it should be noted that there is

considerable diversity across communities with respect to the conditions and supports for Indigenous elders, and there have been improvements in many of these social indicators over time. Furthermore, the Canadian Constitution recognizes three groups of Indigenous people (Indians, Inuit, and Métis), each of which has its own history, languages, cultural practices, and belief systems. Overall, however, all three of these subcultural groups have experienced different life chances and lifestyles than non-Indigenous Canadians and constitute an important group for social research and social policy.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to do the following:

1. Understand the multiple ways in which our life course is influenced by the period of history and the society in which we live.
2. Explain how culture influences the challenges, experiences, and outcomes of the aging process.
3. Elaborate on the ways in which modernization and other technological advances have altered the status of elderly people in different cultures and at different times.
4. Critique the usefulness of Modernization Theory in explaining differences in the status of older people across time and societal context.
5. Describe the intersectionality of aging, culture, and other dimensions of aging.
6. Understand the experiences of growing old in different cultures, past and present.

Key Terms

acculturation (p. 46)

beliefs (p. 46)

ethnic subculture (p. 63)

ethnocentrism (p. 46)

filial piety (p. 44)

Indigenous Peoples of Canada

(p. 57)

marginalization (p. 45)

modernization (p. 50)

norms (p. 46)

racial subculture (p. 62)

subculture (p. 57)

values (p. 46)

Discussion, Debate, or Activity Ideas

1. Using examples, discuss the difference between norms, values, and beliefs. How do you think these change over the life course?
2. Have students give examples of the way they show respect for their elders in their interactions. Why do they do this? What is the basis of these displays of respect?
3. Have students list examples of modernization in their communities (e.g., weakening of family ties, decline in the power of tradition, etc.). How has modernization influenced the status and quality of life for older people?

4. Have students identify some of the challenges of Canada's ethnically diverse older population. What are some strategies that could address these challenges?
5. Have students discuss how they could apply an intersectionality lens to a topic related to aging in Canada.
6. What is marginalization? Why is it important to analyze how ethnic or racial groups experience marginalization differently throughout the life course?
7. Can we think of older Canadians as a subculture? Explain why or why not, providing examples.
8. If you were a policymaker, how would you confront the issue of inequality in aging? Choose a jurisdiction to frame your discussion—municipal, provincial, federal, or international. See below for OECD multimedia resources on the topic.
9. Chapter 9 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) on research ethics sets out expectations for research involving the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada (see below for a link to the policy). Have the students review the chapter, paying specific attention to expectations for contact with Indigenous elders. What does the TCPS tell us about the role of Indigenous elders in the community and research? How does this relate to chapter content?
10. By discussing the cultural, social, and historical experience of societies' elders, the chapter examines the relationship between elders and younger generations. How has this relationship changed over time and across cultures? See below for a short news video on an Indigenous elders gathering in Canada that can be used as a conversation starter.

Multimedia Resources

1. *Medicine Walk with Elder Walter Lavallee (2009)*. [11:38 min]
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4EBgVyML1M>

This video was filmed during the spring of 2009 on Piapot First Nation in Saskatchewan. Elder Walter Lavallee is Cree from the Piapot First Nation, Saskatchewan. Elder Walter shows different plants, how to recognize them, and how they are used by First Nations and Métis people in traditional healing practices. The video identifies unique cultural values, beliefs, and practices that influence the quality of life for an elderly person.

2. *Life on the Reserve: An Inside Look at What It's Really Like (2011)*. First Nations Films. [24 min]
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evw-jXLczlo>
<http://www.firstnationsfilms.com/index.html>

This documentary highlights the significant challenges that people living on reserves have to deal with, as well as the hope they have for their communities. The film documents the impoverished conditions in Northern Ontario at Gull Bay First Nation reserve. Although Gull Bay is only one reserve, it has similarities to them all. Please note: the first link connects to a trailer for the doc-

umentary. The second link connects to the retail site where the documentary can be purchased. Your institution's library or media services office may be able to retrieve a copy of the documentary as well.

3. ***Indigenous Cultural Safety: Health Determinants and Health Status (2012)***. Anishnawbe Health Toronto, Cultural Safety Initiative. [6:05 min]
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VisEU8H5Ys4>

This video looks at demography, health determinants, and health statuses of Indigenous people in Canada.

4. ***United Nations – Ageing***. Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD) and Department of Economic and Social Affairs. [web content].
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/>

Ageing is the focal point within the United Nations system on matters related to aging. Its mission is to facilitate and contribute to the creation of a society for all ages. Their website contains information on such issues as the challenges and opportunities of an aging world population, research agendas for aging in twenty-first century, and policy implications of an aging society.

5. ***Inequality (2018)***. OECD. [2:12 min]
<http://www.oecd.org/social/inequality.htm>

Preventing Ageing Unequally (2017). OECD. [report]
<http://www.oecd.org/health/preventing-ageing-unequally-9789264279087-en.htm>

The short video clip discusses inequality more broadly across the globe and challenges policy-makers and citizens to look for solutions to inequality. The report goes into much greater detail by examining “how the two global mega-trends of population ageing and rising inequalities have been developing and interacting, both within and across generations. Taking a life-course perspective the report shows how inequalities in education, health, employment and earnings compound, resulting in large differences in lifetime earnings across different groups. It suggests a policy agenda to prevent, mitigate and cope with inequalities along the life course drawing on good practices in OECD countries and emerging economies.” These resources can inform content for discussion activity #7 (see above for details).

6. ***TCPS 2 Chapter 9: Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada (2018)***. Government of Canada. [website]
<http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/chapter9-chapitre9/>

The Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS) is a joint policy of Canada's three federal research agencies—the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The policy is a set of guidelines designed to promote the ethical conduct of research involving humans. Academic researchers in Canada are generally required to follow these guidelines when conducting

research with human subjects. This resource can inform content for discussion activity #8 (see above for details).

7. ***Indigenous Elders from across Canada Gather in Edmonton* (September 11, 2017). Global News. [1:54 min]**
<https://globalnews.ca/video/3735883/indigenous-elders-from-across-canada-gather-in-edmonton>

The video describes a national gathering of thousands of Indigenous elders in Edmonton, a first of its kind in Canada. While the event was created for elders, the interviewees discuss why it is important for youth to be involved, speaking specifically to the changing relationship between Indigenous elders, youth and community. This resource can inform content for discussion activity #9 (see above for details).

8. ***Intersectionality 101* (May 18, 2016). Teaching Tolerance. [3:03 min]**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6dnj2IyYjE>

This brief video clip explains the basics of what the intersectionality lens is in general. The video uses student-friendly examples to show how this lens can be applied to both intersecting forms of privilege and oppression.

9. ***LIFE (PART 2) / Ethnicity, Race and Aging* (January 13, 2010). PBS. [3:29 min].**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5DeRZ9yfbk>

This brief video clip speaks to some of the challenges raised in the textbook related to ethnicity and aging. Notably, the video relates to the challenges some families face in finding adequate healthcare for aging elders, linguistic and other cultural barriers, and issues surrounding “burden”.