

GETTING
WISE
ABOUT
GETTING
OLD

DEBUNKING MYTHS
ABOUT AGING

Edited by
Véronique Billette,
Patrik Marier,
and Anne-Marie Séguin



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Introduction

Multiple Perspectives on Diverse Aging Experiences

Anne-Marie Séguin, Véronique Billette, and Patrik Marier

Aging is sometimes depicted as a demographic disaster or as a heavy social and financial burden on younger generations. In a society that places a high value on image and speed, slowness and other effects of the passage of time on the human body may be considered pathological or undesirable, while attachment to the past is viewed as old-fashioned. Population aging and old age are often subject to negative portrayals and persistent stereotypes – so much so that denying or fighting against aging is commonplace and even a regular part of everyday conversation.¹ The anti-aging industry has exploited this situation (and probably contributes to it as well) with a gamut of natural products, anti-aging creams, hair dyes, aesthetic treatments, medications, injections, surgical procedures, and other “remedies.” This global market, now worth an estimated US\$140.3 billion, is clearly booming!²

Are these negative portrayals of aging well founded? This book examines numerous commonly accepted myths, or false beliefs, about aging. To obtain an accurate portrait of seniors, experts from many different fields and disciplines were asked to describe a specific myth and then analyze all of its facets. Without compromising scientific integrity, the short and accessible articles in this book are designed to enable readers to explore many of the social issues that lie behind the common myths. The aim of this exercise is to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges – and advantages – of an aging society.

This book was written prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had unprecedented and widespread impacts around the world. Unfortunately, older adults have been particularly affected by the spread of the virus and by the governmental measures enacted in concert with public health officials. The majority of COVID-19 deaths have been in residential long-term care centres, and confinement measures have been the most restrictive for seniors. Consequently, the myths illustrated in this book have been under a far more intense spotlight. It is our hope that this book will contribute positively to enhance societal discussions in the aftermath of the pandemic.

What Is Meant by “Population Aging”?

More and more Quebecers are joining the highly diversified sociodemographic category called “seniors,” which generally includes people 65 years of age and older, as well as, in some cases, adults over the age of 50 in particularly difficult circumstances (for example, people who are homeless, in prison, or living with HIV). Like all of Canada and many other countries, Quebec can be described as an aging society. A few statistics clearly substantiate this phenomenon. In 1970, 6.7 percent of the total population of Quebec consisted of people 65 and older, as opposed to 40.6 percent younger than 20. By 2016, the older age group had grown to 18.1 percent of the total Quebec population, and the younger group stood at 20.6 percent.³ According to the Institut de la statistique du Québec, the proportion of seniors in Quebec will continue to climb, reaching 25.9 percent by 2036. The aging of Quebec’s population will thus continue to accelerate over the next 20 years. This trend, which began several decades ago, is caused by many factors, including a lower birth rate that can be partly attributed to women’s increased participation in the labour force and access to more reliable contraception. Population aging also results from longer life expectancy thanks to better overall living conditions, medical and technological advances, and improved understanding of health determinants.

The Social Issues of Aging

Old age is a diverse and complex stage of life that takes many forms and multiple paths. Numerous factors in the past and present lives of individuals affect their experience of growing old. Collective or social factors also affect older adults’ experiences and living conditions. These varied social parameters of aging are central to the field of social gerontology, which takes

a multidisciplinary approach to the phenomenon – one that stresses the complex and varied dimensions of human aging and the social factors that influence both how older people are portrayed in society and their living conditions. Many social gerontologists around the world, including in Quebec, other Canadian provinces, and the UK, have analyzed aging from the standpoint of social exclusion.⁴

Growing Old and Social Exclusion

In many societies, old age is perceived as the antithesis of beauty, efficiency, productivity, autonomy, and social utility, and seniors are often described in terms of vulnerability, dependency, apathy, and frailty. Such social representations can easily lead to the infantilization or social exclusion of seniors (for “convenience’s sake” or “for their own protection”). In Quebec’s public consultations on seniors’ living conditions, held in 2007, many seniors stated that they were ignored, treated as children, or subjected to long-standing prejudices – in short, they were victims of ageism.⁵

Although seniors do not make up a homogeneous, excluded population subjected to generalized ageism, many older individuals experience exclusion and discrimination in various aspects of their lives. Examples include recognition of their place in society and their social roles; social participation and the exercise of citizenship; access to necessary care and services; mobility in their daily environments; the ability to make choices and act on them until the end of their lives; having sufficient income and other resources to meet their needs; and growing older without rejection or mistreatment.⁶

Recognition: A Key Ingredient in the Social Inclusion of Seniors

How can society be made more inclusive for its seniors? Inclusion requires respect and recognition, for a start. This requirement is highly relevant when we consider the insidious nature of the myths that tend to portray seniors in negative or reductionist terms. According to German philosopher Axel Honneth, lack of recognition of certain social groups can undermine societal values such as respect, integrity, justice, and ethics.⁷ Recognition allows for every member of a society to be treated as a full-fledged partner in the life of that society, regardless of individual differences.⁸ This concept can also be used to explore and better understand issues such as each person’s need to feel acknowledged, respected, and fairly treated. Recognition also requires taking individuals’ needs into account by offering them access to society’s resources: financial means; appropriate, adequate, and timely care and other services, such as accessible spaces; affordable and adequate housing; and

equal rights.⁹ Indeed, talking about the recognition of seniors without provision of resources and capabilities needed for their health, well-being, and social participation would be an empty and misleading discussion.

Structure of the Book

This book has six parts, each of which addresses a major theme. In Part 1, social representations of aging are compared with its realities. This section begins with an exploration of the various terms used – seniors, older adults, elders, and so on – in various societies. The authors also challenge the use of the term *aîné* in Quebec society to designate seniors, given the low consideration and lack of respect shown to seniors in general in that society (Olazabal and Simard). The myth that seniors are wealthy is then examined; the finding is that although poverty among seniors has dropped significantly, most of them are not financially well-off (Marier et al.). The blanket labelling of seniors as conservative is challenged in the following chapter by an analysis that reveals a wide variety of political leanings (Simard and Olazabal). The view that growing old is bound to be associated with loss of interest in the technologies that are increasingly predominant in society is then examined in depth (Sawchuk et al.). In the last chapter in this section, the latest research about age-related loss of memory and other cognitive functions is discussed, and the idea that all seniors suffer rapid linear cognitive decline is challenged (Lussier et al.).

In Part 2, seniors' living environments are explored. Many myths about living environments and specific senior populations are dispelled or debunked. For a start, the myth that most seniors live in residential long-term care facilities does not stand up to analysis (Séguin et al.). Maintaining seniors in their own homes, an approach advocated by seniors and public authorities alike, raises the question of the related adaptive measures that need to be taken in cities, towns, and villages. Although *Municipalité amie des aînés*, the Quebec government's age-friendly municipalities program, is often presented as favouring these adaptive measures, its effectiveness is open to scrutiny (Joy et al.). Given that many seniors still drive and try to keep their licences for as long as possible in order to maintain their independence, it might be assumed that they are somewhat obsessed with their vehicles; the accuracy of this view is explored (Negron-Poblete and Séguin). The last two chapters shed light on two groups of seniors who are largely invisible or subject to severe stigmatization: homeless seniors and

older prison inmates. The first describes how, contrary to popular opinion, homeless seniors, whose numbers are growing, present a wide variety of profiles and life histories (Burns). In the second, the view that prisons provide older inmates with living conditions that compare favourably with long-term care facilities is countered by an accurate portrait of the little-known world of older prison inmates (Gagnon and Dunn).

Part 3 focuses on the diversity of aging experiences. Seniors constitute a highly diversified population group: there is a huge difference between being 65 years old and being 100. Each senior has a life history with all its accompanying baggage. We age as we have lived throughout our lives – with our individuality, relationships, and community involvement; in other words, the diversity of our individual pasts is coupled with that of our individual futures as a result of the various events that continue to occur in our lives. Growing old with a diagnosis of mental illness or living with recent mental health problems at an advanced age triggers a host of prejudices, as explained by Aubin and Dallaire. The myth of the eternal child attached to individuals with an intellectual disability or a pervasive developmental disorder is explored, as is how older individuals in this group are perceived now that they have a much longer life expectancy (Dickson). The sexual life of seniors is the target of many myths and prejudices. For example, it might be assumed that HIV/AIDS poses no issues for older people, whereas the syndrome has serious repercussions for the lives and health of those living with it (Wallach). Another myth – that of the sexuality of the older women known as “cougars” – is also explored (Alarie). Since the life experience of some seniors involves difficult situations of violence, two chapters are devoted to violence, which is perpetrated mostly against women and persists with age. These chapters examine, respectively, false beliefs about sexual assault (Couture et al.) and spousal violence (Israel et al.).

Part 4 deals with myths related to social roles. The term *seniors* often evokes stereotypical images – of retirees, low-performance workers, and people who engage in a wide range of recreational activities. This section begins with an analysis of recent changes in the labour market, revealing that the dependency ratio of retirees to the working population is far from being as catastrophic as has been portrayed in the media (Carrière et al.). Although the labels applied to workers aged 50, 55, or older are often negative, these workers possess knowledge and experience that can largely offset the effects of growing old. The question of whether they should be retained in their jobs and given appropriate working conditions is examined (Lord

and Therriault). Although old age and free time are often associated, the daily reality of many seniors involves severe time constraints due to factors such as numerous medical appointments, schedules imposed by medication, and a slower pace in performing domestic chores or getting around (Wiebe et al.). The last two chapters, which cover volunteering (Castonguay et al.) and social participation (Raymond et al.), describe the pressures on seniors to participate in volunteering or other social activities in order to “age well.” These two chapters also explore whether it is possible to live a “full life” in old age without succumbing to these pressures and whether steps are being taken to help seniors participate in society in appropriate and satisfying ways.

Part 5 of the book explores death and bereavement. The first chapter explores the successive bereavements of friends, acquaintances, and family members experienced by seniors and challenges the mistaken belief that, because death is such an integral part of seniors’ lives, it has less impact on them (Bourgeois-Guérin et al.). The topic of end of life is then covered in an attempt to understand why so few seniors have access to palliative care, and the question of whether seniors’ deaths are more peaceful and freer of suffering because of their age is also analyzed (Van Pevenage et al.). Lastly, the idea that all seniors want – and are able – to die at home is challenged. The current conditions available to them at the end of their lives are evaluated, as is whether they are really given comfort and respect at this stage of their lives (Van Pevenage et al.).

The last part of the book addresses issues relating to caregivers and the support provided to seniors and their family and friends. The first chapter debunks the myth that seniors are regularly abandoned by their families (Van Pevenage et al.). The next chapter addresses various concepts of independent living and highlights the role of evaluation tools used by professionals in decisions regarding the provision of services (Gilbert et al.). The last two chapters cover sources of support and care for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender seniors (Beauchamp et al.) and for immigrant seniors and their families (Ferrer and Brotman).

Conclusion

In the current social context, with its floods of simplified and contradictory information, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between myths and false beliefs, on the one hand, and the many nuanced realities of aging, on the other hand. This is why it is necessary to take stock of and carefully

analyze the social issues of aging. The purpose of this book is to stimulate thought about various approaches to these issues based on the varied expertise and knowledge of its authors in their respective fields. This book can thus serve as a tool not only for seniors but also for students, professionals, researchers, and all those who strive every day to ensure that society is more welcoming, inclusive, and kind toward all of its citizens, regardless of their age or identity.

Notes

- 1 Amanda Grenier and Ilyan Ferrer (2010), “Âge, vieillesse et vieillissement. Définition controversée de l’âge,” in Michèle Charpentier, Nancy Gubennan, Véronique Billette, Jean-Pierre Lavoie, Amanda Grenier and Ignace Olazabal (eds.), *Vieillir au pluriel. Perspectives sociales* (Quebec City: Presses de l’Université du Québec), 35–54.
- 2 Zion Market Research (2016), *Anti-Aging (Baby Boomer, Generation X and Generation Y) Market, by Product (Botox, Anti-Wrinkle Products, Anti-Stretch Mark Products, and Others), by Services (Anti-Pigmentation Therapy, Anti-Adult Acne Therapy, Breast Augmentation, Liposuction, Chemical Peel, Hair Restoration Treatment, and Others), by Device (Microdermabrasion, Laser Aesthetics, Anti-Cellulite Treatment and Anti-Aging Radio Frequency Devices): Global Industry Perspective, Comprehensive Analysis, Size, Share, Growth, Segment, Trends and Forecast, 2015–2021*, <<https://www.zionmarketresearch.com/sample/anti-aging-market>>, accessed July 5, 2017.
- 3 Institut de la statistique du Québec (2014), *Tableau statistique, Effectif et poids démographique des grands groupes d’âge, scénario A – Référence, Québec, régions administratives et régions métropolitaines (RMR), 2011 et 2036*, <http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/docs-hmi/statistiques/population-demographie/perspectives/population/age_reg_14.htm>, accessed March 22, 2017; Institut de la statistique du Québec (2016), *Tableau statistique, Population par groupe d’âge, Canada et régions, 1er juillet 2016*, <<http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/statistiques/population-demographie/structure/104.htm>>, accessed July 12, 2017.
- 4 Véronique Billette and Jean-Pierre Lavoie (2010), “Vieillissements, exclusions sociales et solidarités,” in Michèle Charpentier, Nancy Guberman, Véronique Billette, Jean-Pierre Lavoie, Amanda Grenier, and Ignace Olazabal (eds.), *Vieillir au pluriel. Perspectives sociales* (Quebec City: Presses de l’Université du Québec), 1–22; Thomas Scharf and Norah Keating (eds.) (2012), *From Exclusion to Inclusion in Old Age: A Global Challenge* (Bristol: The Policy Press).
- 5 Lucie Gagnon and Annie Savoie (2008), *Préparons l’avenir avec nos aînés, Rapport de la consultation publique sur les conditions de vie des aînés* (Quebec City: Gouvernement du Québec – Secrétariat aux aînés), 26.
- 6 Billette and Lavoie (2010), op. cit.; Chris Phillipson (2012), “Globalization, Economic Recession and Social Exclusion: Policy Challenges and Responses,” in Scharf and Keating (eds.) (2012), op. cit., 17–32; Jane Jensen (2004), *Canada’s New Social Risks: Directions for a New Social Architecture*, Research Report F 43 (Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks [CPRN]).

- 7 Axel Honneth (2006), “Les conflits sociaux sont des luttes pour la reconnaissance,” interview with philosopher Axel Honneth, *Sciences Humaines*, electronic edition, No. 172, June, <https://www.scienceshumaines.com/articleprint2.php?lg=fr&id_article=14475>, accessed August 30, 2017.
- 8 Nancy Fraser (2005), *Qu'est-ce que la justice sociale? Reconnaissance et redistribution* (Paris: La Découverte).
- 9 Ibid.

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