1 Aging as a Social Process

Chapter Overview

The older population is growing rapidly in Canada and throughout the world, and will continue to do so for the next several decades. As individuals and as society, we cannot ignore the challenges of population aging and the needs of older adults. The effects of population aging permeate all spheres of social life—work, family, leisure, transportation, politics, public policy, economy, housing, and health care.

The aging process is influenced by the social, economic, and age structures of a society, and also by social, political, and economic changes within a given culture. These factors influence both individual and population aging, and they interact with biological and psychological factors to shape social opportunities and social behaviour throughout the life course.

In this chapter, you will gain an understanding of the concept of aging as a social process. This will be achieved by learning the distinctions between individual and population aging, why it is important to study aging and the major issues associated with it, and the implications of an aging population for society. You will also be introduced to the life course perspective as the principle theoretical framework upon which this book is based. Finally, critical issues and challenges for an aging society will be introduced.

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain the concept of aging as a social process, including distinctions between individual and population aging.

- Explain why it is important to study aging and understand several major issues addressed in *Aging as a Social Process* (in particular stereotypes and ageism).

- Describe some implications of an aging population for society.

- Understand the life-course perspective as a principal theoretical framework to describe the aging process.

- Understand the development of the discipline of gerontology to help you place the knowledge into a broader perspective.

Key Facts

- In 2016, almost one in six Canadians was 65 or older (5.99 million people), representing about 16.9 per cent of the total population.

- There were 8230 Canadians 100 years of age or older (i.e., centenarians), according to the 2016 census.

- In 2011, baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1965), comprising about 30 per cent of all Canadians, began to turn 65. As a result, between 2011 and 2016, the 65 to 70 age group was growing most rapidly, followed by centenarians.

Key Terms

age cohort A group of individuals born in the same year (e.g., 2008) or within the same period of time (e.g., a 5- or 10-year period). (p. 5)

age discrimination The unequal treatment of someone because of his or her age. This can be preferential but differential treatment, by age, or exclusion from some right on the basis of one's age. It often arises where ageism is present. In some jurisdictions, age discrimination, such as mandatory retirement at age 65, is prohibited by law. (p. 20)

age identity Shaped by social observations and interactions with others, people define themselves through speech, dress, behaviour, and thoughts as being younger or older than others. (p. 25)

ageism Discriminatory attitudes or actions toward others on the basis of negative perceptions or beliefs about the actual or perceived chronological age of an individual or group. (p. 20)

agency A process in which individuals construct and shape their biographies across the life course and determine their personal experience of aging (within a unique class, race, or gender structure) by acting or choosing, as opposed to letting events or situations happen to them without being proactive or reactive. (p. 14)

age strata Age groups used in a classification system in which individuals are grouped according to chronological age (e.g., 10–19, 20–39, 40–59, 60–9, 70–9, 80+). (p. 17)

attitudes Learned positive or negative evaluations and responses (verbal or behavioural) toward persons (others or oneself) or situations that are relatively persistent and consistent and that include an emotional component. (p. 24)

baby boom The large birth cohorts comprising those born in Canada between 1946 and 1965. (p. 4)

biological aging The rate and incidence of biological changes in the muscular, skeletal, reproductive, neural, sensory, and cardiovascular systems that influence the number of years a person is likely to live. (p. 16)

centenarians Persons aged 100 years or over. (p. 6)

chronological age norms Expected patterns of behaviour that are based on the chronological age of individuals in a particular society or subculture. These rights and/or responsibilities are assigned or earned by reaching a specific age or stage in life. (p. 15)

chronological aging The passage of calendar time from one birthday to the next. (p. 15)

community A geographical space defined by political, municipal, or national geographic boundaries; and/or a concentrated settlement of people with a group identity based on living and interacting with others in the neighbourhood, town, or region or in a religious and ethnic group. (p. 5)

concepts An abstract, generalized idea about an object or a phenomenon that provides a common meaning. (p. 22)

culture A set of shared symbols and their meanings that are passed on to subsequent generations within a society. Some cultural elements are language, dress, art, literature, music, laws, folklore, ceremonies, rituals, sports, and games. (p. 18)

deconstruction A critical perspective concerned with examining the relationship between language use and meaning. (p. 22)

ethics An objective and reflective way of thinking about how we should debate and resolve moral or social issues, taking into account the best interests of all involved in the decision or its outcome. (p. 32)

fertility rate The average number of births per woman through the "normal" childbearing years from 14 to 49. The replacement level to maintain a consistent population is assumed to be 2.1 births per woman. (p. 7)

functional age How well an individual performs specific physical, cognitive, or social tasks at a given age, compared with age norms or the average performance for the task. (p. 15)

gender The cultural definition of what it means to be male and female. Gender-related behaviour and attributes are linked to the social roles of men and women and to the cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity, which are learned and perpetuated within a culture or a subculture. (p. 5)

geriatrics A sub-specialty of medicine that focuses on the physical and mental diseases of later life and on the clinical treatment and care of elderly patients by specialized physicians. (p. 28)

gerontology The scientific study of old age, the process of aging, and problems faced by old people. (p. 28)

individual aging The structural, physical, sensory, motor, cognitive, and behavioural changes within an individual over a period of years. (p. 11)

leisure Freely selected activities during the time not required for work or for mandatory personal or domestic responsibilities. (p. 5)

lifestyle Patterns of thought, behaviour, dress, work, and leisure pursuits that represent personal or group expressions of values, attitudes, orientations, identities, and norms. It represents the outcome of interaction among structural factors, personal resources, and agency (perceived choices and decisions). (p. 12)

life-course perspective A perspective that considers the timing and order of major life events and the dialectical interplay between biographies and population aging, as well as the interplay among the individual, age cohorts, and a changing social structure. (p. 12)

life chances Variation in educational, occupational, and leisure opportunities in early life and mid-life that are influenced by social structural attributes, such as gender, social class, religion, race, ethnicity, and place of residence. (p. 12)

life course A social construct that reflects our personal biography across the time we live. (p. 5)

life expectancy The average number of years of life remaining at a given age (e.g., at birth, at age 65). (p. 6)

lifespan The theoretical maximum number of years an individual can live. (p. 6)

medicalization of aging Defining and treating normal aging processes as primarily medical problems. (p. 31)

minority group A group having subordinate status in the social, political, or economic sense rather than in the numerical sense. Such groups are blocked from full and equal participation in some or all phases of social life because of their age, gender, ethnicity, or race. (p. 24)

personality The characteristic style of thought, feeling, and behaviour of an individual, as measured by multi-dimensional traits. (p. 27)

population aging A demographic phenomenon in which, because of decreased fertility and longer life expectancy, an increasing percentage of the population is made up of older people. (p. 4)

psychological aging Changes in learning ability, memory, creativity, and cognition across the life course, as well as changes in psychological states (moods, attitudes) as a result of personal losses (a job, a spouse) or stressors in one's life. (p. 16)

public policy The outcome of a decision-making process that leads to laws, procedures, regulations, or programs that help individuals and society to cope with current issues or problems. (p. 5)

retirement The process of withdrawal from the labour force, normally at or around 65 years of age. (p. 5)

social aging A process whereby social structures, social norms and values, and social institutions influence how we move across the life course and how we are influenced in our actions by social timetables and by our interactions with other age cohorts. (p. 17)

social institution A cultural product that persists across generations to provide values, norms, beliefs, traditions, and a social structure. (p. 5)

social stratification The differential ranking or evaluation of persons in a society or group based on social attributes that are either ascribed (e.g., age, gender, class, race, ethnicity) or achieved (e.g., social class, education). This creates a social structure in which some people are considered superior to, or more worthy or valuable, than others. (p. 18)

social structure Patterned relationships that differentially rank or distribute individuals according to socially evaluated characteristics (e.g., age, race, gender, social class, ethnicity, education, wealth). (p. 13)

stereotypes A set of usually biased generalizations about a group that tends to portray an unfavourable and inaccurate image about a person or group who holds some of the observable characteristics (gender, age, race, religion, ethnicity). (p. 19)

Study Questions

See below for answers.

1. What is the difference between lifespan and life expectancy? What are the expected trends for each in the next decades?

2. What is the life course perspective?

Additional Resources

Articles

Alkema, G. and D. Alley. 2006. Gerontology's Future: An integrative model for disciplinary advancement. *The Gerontologist*, 46 (5): 574–582.

American Society on Aging. October 2015. Ageism in America: Reframing the Issues and Impact. *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging.*

Cox, C. 2015. *Social Policy for an Aging Society: A Human Rights Perspective.* New York: Springer.

Meisner, B.A. 2012. A meta-analysis of positive and negative age stereotype priming effects on behavior among older adults. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences, 67(1)*, 13–17.

Revera. 2012. Revera Report on Ageism and Revera Report on Ageism: A Look at Gender Differences.

Videos

A Sunday at 105 by Daniel Léger. 2007. (13 minutes). National Film Board of Canada.

> In French with English subtitles, this NFB film follows a 105-year-old Acadian woman, Aldéa Pellerin-Cormier, one Sunday as she goes about her daily routine. Filmed by her great-grandson, Mrs. Pellerin-Cormier explores living life and growing old.

Websites

McMaster Optimal Aging Portal: https://www.mcmasteroptimalaging.org

Old School: A Clearinghouse of All Things Anti-Ageism: https://www.oldschool.info/

#Disrupt Aging: Redefining what it means to age: https://www.aarp.org/disrupt-aging/

Study Questions—Answers

1. Lifespan is the fixed, finite maximum limit of survival for a species (about 120 years for humans). The maximum lifespan for humans is unlikely to increase to any great extent in the immediate future because there are natural limits that are embedded in genetic, lifestyle, and environmental factors that cannot be easily altered.

    Life expectancy is the average number of years a person is projected to live at birth or at a specific age (in Canada, 83 years for women and 79 years for men). Average life expectancy has increased in the past 60 years and will continue to increase

2. The life-course perspective examines the interplay among individual life stories, our social system and institutions, and environments, and also looks at the effect of specific historical events at particular times in the life course of individuals or age cohorts. Through this approach, we understand how the problems, advantages, disadvantages, needs, and lifestyles of later life are shaped by earlier life transitions, decisions, opportunities, and experiences within specific historical or cultural contexts. The life-course perspective provides a framework for understanding age-related transitions that begin with birth and entry into the school system and conclude with retirement, widowhood, and death in later life. This perspective reflects the heterogeneous, fluid, and interrelated nature of life transitions. It also recognizes that transitions can be reversible.