

The Cultural Context of Living in Canada

Canada is a capitalist society with a long and strong democratic tradition. Although often compared with the United States as less individualistic and materialistic, it would unquestioningly be grouped with other Western countries in comparison with more collectivist, holistic values of many Asian countries. The norms, as reflected in the statistics revealed in the preceding section, are for seniors not to live with their children. Once their spouse dies, they tend to live alone. The emphasis on autonomy and independence of the individual in Western capitalist society, together with a youth focus, has led to concerns that Western countries such as Canada, devalue their senior citizens and evidence ageist attitudes. Seniors, no longer primarily employed in paid labour and with visible signs of declining physical prowess, it is believed, are largely alienated from their families, especially from their children and excluded from mainstream society (Wernick, 1995; Turner, 1995).

It is true that most seniors in Canada are not employed in paid labour and ageist attitudes are evident, for example in media portrayals of elderly individuals, among school age children, and among health care professionals (Achenbaum, 1995). There are major problems for older workers who become unemployed due to ageist attitudes among employers (McDonald & Wanner, 1984). However, this does not mean that they are, by and large, lonely, isolated and put in long-term care institutions whenever possible. Indeed, research that began in the 1970s and continued in the 1980s in both Canada and the United States documented the types, the extent, and the sources of support for elderly individuals. Despite widespread belief at the time that the nuclear family abandoned their elders to long-term institutional care, and that seniors were isolated especially from their families, social gerontology established the falsity of these assumptions and debunked the myth of the abandoned elder in North America (Antonucci, 1985; Chappell, 1990; 1992). The phrase 'intimacy at a distance' conveys the fact that seniors, as well as their children, prefer not to live with one another, but rather prefer to live independently while maintaining close and intimate ties with one another. Most seniors are embedded in social networks and most live near at least one child.*

When their health deteriorates, whether physical, mental**, or some combination of the two, it is the informal network of family and friends who tend to provide care; who are the first resort of care. Caregiving from kin and friends is the primary source of assistance for seniors in contemporary Western society. In the 1980s, it was established that 90% of non-institutionalized Canadian seniors, receiving any assistance, do so from informal networks. A review by Kane (1990) of all scientific studies throughout the Western industrialized world established that the informal network provides the vast majority of care, estimated at between 75% and 85% of all personal care to seniors, irrespective of whether or not the country has universal health care. That is, the family has traditionally provided and continues to be the major source of interpersonal support. When health fails, it is the family who comes to the aid of the elderly member.

* It can be noted that while the higher prevalence of seniors living with their children in some Asian countries has often been interpreted as an indication of closer familial bonds than in North America, this interpretation has been criticized as wrong. Ikels (1990) for example argues it is more often the result of children living with their parents (not parents living with their children) and is out of economic necessity.

** While prevalence of cognitive impairment increases with age, it is not a necessary consequence of ageing. The Canadian Study of Health and Aging estimates Canada's prevalence rate for dementia among seniors at 8% (comparable to other Western societies); a clear minority of seniors.