

Differing Deference: Social Perceptions of Elderly Canadians
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the social perceptions of the elderly within both the larger Canadian and Canadian Aboriginal cultures. The development of an age conscious society has resulted in the inception of a form of discrimination commonly referred to as ageism. Examining aspects within the larger Canadian culture, such as derogatory language terms, the negative portrayal of the elderly within the media, stereotypes and attitudes, this paper presents some of the social ramifications associated with the subjection of negative perceptions of the aged, including low status and the notion of the elderly as a minority group within Canadian society. Canadian Aboriginal groups, however, demonstrate a greater degree of deference to their elderly incorporating them within prominent and important roles within their communities. This paper attempts to mediate the different manners in which these two Canadian groups treat their elderly considering the demographic differences, such as social, political, and economic factors.

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PREFACE

My interest within the area of the treatment of the aged and aging process is threefold: first, I have a fundamental concern with the treatment of the elderly. As substantial contributors to the community, and based upon my own experiences with them, I feel they are devalued and are granted minimal social significance. Second, I love my parents and want to ensure the best possible care and treatment for them as they age. And finally, I am conducting this research so that I may examine some of the stereotypes and myths affiliated and associated with the elderly in Canada in hope of improving their quality of life by means of providing a better general understanding. I believe that Canadian society at large may only benefit from a better understanding of Native wisdom, tradition and practice with reference to the treatment of their elderly. By means of contrasting Native and non-Native societies, I hope to demonstrate that the elderly are not only a valuable resource within communities (as educators, caregivers, decision makers, etc.), but also that they possess valuable knowledge and experience fundamental to our well being and survival.

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Differing Deference: Social Perceptions of Elderly Canadians

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore Canadian attitudes toward aging as expressed by the population toward the aged and by the aged themselves within our language and the media. Furthermore, this paper will outline not only the cultural construction of old age, including the social and psychological ramifications often imposed upon the aged; but also will focus on the status and treatment of the elderly, and how different groups enhance or demean the cross-cultural phenomenon of aging. In order to demonstrate the diversity which exists within Canada concerning conceptions and perceptions of old age, this paper will examine attitudes, myths¹, and stereotypes associated with the aged and aging process within not only the larger Canadian society, but also within Canadian Aboriginal societies.

Aging is a process that spans our lives from our first breath until our last and being old is an ascribed status which faces us all (Petty 1979: 1). Although aging is a universal phenomenon, the treatment of the aged and the subsequent consequences of such treatment differ within distinct societies. Within many cultures, growing old is a process associated with the natural acquisition of a valued status; an elder is often perceived as an experienced and valuable source of information and wisdom.

"In this country [the United States and by extension, Canada], however, old age has

¹ For the purpose of this paper, myth is simply defined as widely held, but false notions. This contrasts with the anthropological perspective in which myth is defined as traditional stories usually involving supernatural or imaginary persons and embodying popular ideas on natural or social phenomena. The reason that I make this distinction relates to the fact that myth in an anthropological context implies a long standing tradition passed from one generation to another; whereas, myths commonly associated with the aged and aging process are a relatively new phenomenon.

quite another social meaning. It is, for example, accompanied by a diminution of power and status" (Petty 1979: 1). The aged within the larger Canadian population are often characterized and defined in terms of low status and low political and economic worth; a common notion within industrialized societies. Perceived as expenditures rather than as contributors, the aged are often devalued and disregarded. Our language and descriptions of elders and the aging process, for example, include a number of pejorative and depreciating terms and references. If the natural and inevitable process of aging is commonly associated with a negative status, unpleasant circumstances and a general devaluation of elders, then, one must assume these occurrences are supported by widely held perceptions and attitudes.

In contrast with the experience of the elderly within mainstream Western culture, Canadian Aboriginal groups place a much greater emphasis upon the value and importance of elders within their communities (Elliot 1999). The roles of elders within Native groups are of utmost importance and significance in reference to group survival and cultural continuation: both of which may be perceived as a challenge in terms of acculturation to the larger contemporary Canadian society. Furthermore, it is my contention that Native elders' high status and the subsequent respect that it engenders is honoured within the larger Canadian population. This may be due to the portrayal of Aboriginals Elders within the media as being wise and knowledgeable in the ways of the world; and thus, their status is both recognized and maintained within the larger Canadian population.

As stated by Elliot (1999: 142), the elderly are generally respected in traditional Aboriginal circles. They may be regarded as having special healing power or may be pipe carriers, who are responsible for taking the burdens for their people. Tribal elders are often decision-makers, advisors and negotiators. They normally provide leadership and guidance

and are called upon when disputes erupt. To rise to the position of the "respected elder" the individual ideally should have been respectful throughout life. It is believed within many Aboriginal societies that the elder who holds this esteemed position sits closer to the spirit and is thus given special powers.

In order to account for the differences which exist between the larger Canadian population and Aboriginal societies, this paper will draw upon cultural, political and economical factors which influence the deference and subsequent treatment of the aged. Demographic differences, the importance of traditions with reference to Aboriginal identity and political objectives, participation of the aged within the community, and the weight assigned to occupation substantially contribute to the distinct manner in which these groups perceive and behave towards their aged. Although a number of complexities exist within Aboriginal groups, including the differences that exist among Status, non-Status, Métis, and Inuit people; urban and rural populations, and idealizations and realities with reference to the treatment of the aged, Rogers and Gallion (1978) suggest that there are some characteristics common to most Native tribes that make them different from mainstream society. These include deep-rooted loyalty to and identification with the family and tribe, rather than loyalty to the self; a great respect for the elderly and their traditional values and lifestyle; a feeling of stress as a result of acculturation and contact with mainstream society; and a population that is increasing rapidly, and in which, the elderly make up a smaller and smaller percentage of the total Native population. It becomes apparent then, that the difference which exists between Aboriginal groups and the larger Canadian population is much more significant than the differences among Aboriginal societies.

Considering the center-margin theory (Innis 1995) and the relative high status of

Aboriginals Elders, the larger Canadian population can learn from the experiences of Aboriginal peoples with reference to the treatment of the aged. Although there are a number of factors that may challenge the process (i.e., social and demographic differences), this transfer of knowledge may be accomplished by incorporating specific and relevant knowledge into pre-established and existing social networks. The multicultural nature of the larger Canadian population suggests that indeed this is not a new phenomenon; such a process has been in existence for generations. In the past, various aspects of marginal or peripheral cultures have been incorporated into the larger Canadian population's frame of reference. Canada, as a nation of immigrants, has regularly adopted cultural traditions of new Canadians and made them part of the broader perspective. The arrival of Asian immigrants in the 1970s, for example, resulted in an interest in Eastern traditions such as Buddhism and Asian cuisine. They are now considered relatively mainstream in most urban centers.

Research for this paper consists primarily of examining the literature concerning the aged and aging process within Canada. These secondary sources have included: surveys concerning attitudes, stereotypes, and perceptions of the elderly within Canada; statistical reports and analysis of historical and cultural factors, such as population trends, traditional roles and technological advance; books and journal articles concerned with theory and previous research in the area of retirement, elder abuse, status change, social problems, and Aboriginal cultural studies. As considerable research has been conducted on a variety of gerontological issues, numerous sources are available for consultation and consideration. In order to attain a comprehensive overview of aging and the aged and the related social processes however, it has been necessary to consult several diverse areas of

expertise, including but not limited to the disciplines of gerontology, sociology, and anthropology. Research and literature in each of these disciplines has contributed to the creation of an overall understanding of the situation of the aged within Canadian and Canadian Aboriginal societies.

As very little information is available concerning the aged and aging process within Canadian Aboriginal groups, it has been necessary to consult numerous sources, including the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), and a variety of Aboriginal cultural studies conducted over the past seventy years, in order to attain a comprehensive image and understanding of the diverse social issues which affect the aging and aged process within these societies. Referring to, and examining past anthropological studies and statistics of Canadian Aboriginal groups has enabled the process of comparing the social roles, status and value of the elderly within these societies during a period of rapid cultural change.

Chapter One introduces the area of research by providing not only a definition of 'aged' and related terms, but will discuss some of the cultural constraints and influences upon the aging process. Further, this chapter will explore not only the presence of the aged in terms of sheer demographic numbers within the Canadian population, but will also discuss the historical development of aging and age consciousness, demonstrating the timely importance of exploring current Canadian attitudes toward the aged. As the proportion of aged individuals dramatically increases within the population, the aged and the aging process have been referred to as becoming an increasingly important social problem. Examining the situation of the aged as a social problem, this chapter will present some of the social and psychological ramifications affiliated with the subjection of negative

perceptions of the aged, including the notion of the elderly as a minority group within Canadian society, and the prevalence of "ageism".

Chapter Two presents and explores some of the theoretical perspectives and recent research concerning aging as a social process. Many of these theories however, are problematic and are often inapplicable in reference to the aged and aging process of Canadian Aboriginal peoples because of cultural and demographic differences; therefore, a separate section within this chapter will examine relevant theories and research concerned with Aboriginal societies. Theories of aging and the aged, including but not limited to Modernization Theory, Minority Group Theory, and Disengagement Theory provide a means of creating a framework for organizing a review of the literature. Following this chapter it will be possible to engage in a discussion of aging and related social processes considering the larger Canadian population in Chapter Three; followed by a discussion of Canadian Aboriginal societies in Chapter Four.

Chapter Three presents a comprehensive examination of social perceptions, roles and the status of the elderly within the larger Canadian population. It should be noted that the existence of diverse cultural and ethnic groups within Canadian society will be considered. Exceptions, as in all cases, do exist. It is remarkable, however, that there seem to be more similarities than differences among these groups, excluding Aboriginal Canadians, supporting the notion that it is possible to assert some generalizations concerning the Canadian population's treatment of the elderly. Included in this chapter will be a discussion of several stereotypes and myths commonly associated with the aged and aging process. It is my contention, based upon past experience and recent research that the aged within the larger Canadian population are devalued. Furthermore, this section will

provide some evidence demonstrating the devaluation and negative perceptions of the aged and aging in the larger Canadian society, by examining the presentation of the aged within the media (for example within literature, television etc.), and language employed in describing the aged and the aging process.

Chapter Four, following the pattern of the previous chapter, presents a comprehensive and historical examination of social perceptions, roles, and the status of the elderly with Canadian Aboriginal groups. It should be noted, here too, that diversity exists among Canadian Aboriginal groups. For this reason, I have selected a number of Aboriginal groups that are geographically well dispersed. As within the larger Canadian population, exceptions do exist; however, a number of striking similarities, with reference only to the treatment of the elderly, do allow for the assertion of some generalizations.

Chapter Five will attempt to determine the reasons for, and the implications, of the difference between the larger Canadian population and Canadian Aboriginal groups with reference to perceptions and treatment of the elderly. Analyzing the data from an anthropological perspective, and considering not only the historical factors which have contributed to the negative perception and devaluation of Canadian elderly, but also the present trends, demonstrates the need for immediate awareness and action. What can we learn from each other? What social processes, if any, contribute to the negative perception and devaluation of the aged? What are the practical implications of the cultural construction of the dependency and low status of the elderly? Moreover, as Canadian Aboriginal groups are further integrated² into the larger Canadian population, members of Aboriginal groups adopt many Canadian social values, norms, and behaviors. Based on this

²Please note that I am not referring to an assimilation or enculturation of Aboriginal groups into the larger Canadian population; but rather, I am referring to the interaction between these two groups, and the exchange of ideas, which often ensues.

contention, the analysis of Canadian Aboriginal culture(s) presented in Chapter Four will be further analyzed within this chapter in order to demonstrate this trend. What are the consequences of an integration, then assimilation of Aboriginal societies to the norms of the larger Canadian society? It is my contention that the adoption of mainstream attitudes and practices regarding the elderly is not only unwise, but may have detrimental effects on their elderly population, as the occurrence of elder abuse is increasing at an alarming rate. In this chapter, I advocate for the larger Canadian population to refer to Canadian Aboriginal societies, including their traditional values, norms, and behaviors with reference to the elderly as a role models.

In the conclusion of this paper I suggest some areas in need of further research and examination.

CHAPTER ONE

The Development Of Age Consciousness: Aging As A Social Problem

The existence of millions of older persons in the world today is a fairly new phenomenon. Studies of population trends demonstrate massive increases in both the absolute numbers and percentage of our aging population. By the year 2030, 25% of the North American population will be older than 65 years. The aging Canadian Aboriginal population, as will be discussed in Chapter Four, is increasing at a phenomenal rate of three times that of the general population.

The definition of the elderly, aged, or 'senior citizen' has been subject to a great deal of debate over the years. The Government of Canada employs the age of 65 as the basis of its definition. Selecting a specific age assists with policy and, hence, decisions concerning retirement and the eligibility of receiving national and provincial government support, pensions, and services. Many communities have different age criteria for different programs. For example, within many towns and cities an individual may enjoy recreational programs designed for 'seniors' after the age of 50 or 55 (Elliot 1999). Although chronological age may be widely used to define the term of 'senior' citizen, it is important to note that age alone reveals nothing concerning the health status, cognitive capabilities, goals, dreams, interests, wants, needs, or preferences of the individual (Elliot 1999: 41). Furthermore, there are a number of factors, for example cultural differences, which influence not only the aging process but also the location and status of the aged within Canadian societies. The following section will examine some of these contributing factors.

Cultural Constructs- Defining Old Age

How an individual deals with his or her old age is conditioned by the social order that exists during his or her lifetime (Blau 1981: 8). Aging is a cultural as well as a biological process. Culture is a design for living, the shared understandings underlying a shared way of life- cognitive and precise as well as symbolic and ambiguous. The essential attributes of culture are that it is shared, and that it provides a vocabulary of symbols to express and assign meaning to various aspects of shared social life. As stated by Foner (1984: 1):

Although everyone grows older, the particular ways individuals are and the meanings they attach to the life course are not universal. Also the way the life course is divided including the markers that delineate old age is highly variable. Our own cultural conceptions of age and aging are just that: our own.

Culture provides a symbolic order and a set of shared meanings to social life and is composed of material and nonmaterial elements. Nonmaterial elements include norms, customs, values, beliefs, knowledge, and sanctions (McPherson 1983). These are symbolically represented through material elements such as laws, language, art, dress, technology, literature, ceremonies and games. Those elements which are highly valued are transmitted from one generation to the next through the process of socialization.

Values and norms are of particular importance in understanding the social life and processes of a society. Values are the internalized criteria by which members select and judge their own and other's goals and behaviours in society. Values tend to be trans-situational in that they are reflected in all institutions within a society (McPherson 1983). They include principles such as democracy, equality of opportunity, freedom, achievement competition and respect for the elderly. Norms are derived from and are closely interrelated

to basic values. Norms are shared expectations of behaviour which serve as guidelines to acceptable, culturally desirable and appropriate behaviour within specific social situations (Marshall 1998). For example, many norms concerning how we dress or spend our leisure time are related to age or to the social positions we occupy.

Review of research on age in social and cultural contexts demonstrates, first, great diversity in the significance of old age, beginning with its very definition. Second, specific characteristics of social and cultural settings have been identified that affect strategies available to older persons for maintaining well-being. These include subsistence base, types and degree of social differentiation, residential stability, value placed on ethnic heritage, and formalization of age relations. Third, mechanisms through which such characteristics interact with age to affect the circumstances of older people have been suggested- for example, seniority makes years lived advantageous, ritual participation is not limited by physical frailty, and lifelong membership reduces the effects of present functionality on perceptions of personhood (Keith 1990: 105).

Cowgill and Holmes (1972) identified eight universals of aging, although aged persons are always a minority group within the total population. This is not to say that they are dominated by the majority; but rather that aging is a key characteristic used by members of a society to define themselves and others, even though the age groups could vary from one group to another. The aged in one society could be defined as everyone over 45, while in another society the aged might only include those over 70 years. It is possible, however, that the definition of age category in North America could change in the years to come, as the number of people over 65 increases. Cross cultural studies indicate that age is not destiny, and that the social definition of age fluctuates (O'Reilly 1997: 17).

As suggested by Clark and Anderson (1967), old age may be defined in functional or formal terms. In societies where old age is defined in *functional* terms, it is the onset of biological deterioration (i.e. mobility, strength, or other abilities required in adult work) that signals the end of active adult status. Defined in *formal* terms however, old age corresponds to other factors; such as an external event which is arbitrarily invested with symbolic significance (e.g., becoming a grandparent).

The definition of old age in contemporary Western culture is increasingly a formal one, and is essentially temporal in nature. As a temporal concept, old age is determined by carefully kept records, social policy, and calendrical reckonings (i.e. retirement at age 65). A social definition of old age based on chronology becomes ever more removed from the realities of physical disability, especially considering technological advances in medicine and public health which provide the individual with a longer healthier life.

In societies with functional definitions of old age (such as the mainstream Canadian society during pre-industrial history), culture specified the tasks of senescence. As stated by Clark and Anderson (1967),

The aged were expected to relinquish adult responsibilities and powers in preparation for death, so that cultural continuity might be preserved. Thus, the old man's job was in those times to groom his successors, share his esoteric knowledge, and designate heirs so that they would be prepared to assume control of his wealth, authority, or power.... This was essential, to assure preservation within the group of traditions, knowledge, skills, and social institutions (1967: 8-10).

Within present Western societies however, adult responsibilities are relinquished relatively early, resulting in the life of the majority of older people being devoid of social meaning for extended periods of time. Thus, aging is accompanied by a loss of social prestige. According to Clark and Anderson (1967: 13-17), this loss of prestige may be influenced by

four principal historic factors. The first of these reasons is affiliated with the weakness of kinship ties. As Simmons (1945: 177) notes:

Social relationships have provided the strongest securities to the individual, especially in old age. With vitality declining, the aged person has had to rely more and more upon personal relations with others, and upon the reciprocal relations with others, and upon the reciprocal rights and obligations involved.... Throughout human history the family has been the safest haven for the aged. Its ties have been the most intimate and long-lasting, and on them the aged have relied for greatest security...[and have discovered] in family relationships opportunities for effective social participation well into senility.

The pattern of European settlement and colonization of North America however, has devalued the retention of close kinship ties among generations. Furthermore, nuclear families are perceived as the ideal, as divorce and remarriage have created new forms of family.

A second factor that mitigates against the definition of roles for the aged is the occurrence of rapid industrial and technological change. The aged, are in a sense, the carriers of a dying generation as the content of our culture proceeds to significantly change. Technological progress has made obsolete the technical skills and knowledge they possess. With rapid social change and an emphasis on progress, 'traditional knowledge' lacks relevancy. Increasingly, elderly citizens find themselves excluded from productive work, and quite often accept society's appraisal of them as being of little value in modern Western life.

The third historical factor affecting the status of the aged is the phenomenal increase in the proportion of older persons in our society. Industrial society has created a new large social group, yet the culture which spawned this group's existence has yet to determine a manner in which it can incorporate such an enlarged group within the present societal

system.

The proportion of the elderly in Western industrialized societies has increased considerably since the nineteenth century. In 1901 only 5 percent of the Canadian population was aged sixty-five and over, but by 1981 this figure had risen to 10 percent (Statistics Canada, April 1984). By the year 2031, some demographers predict that 20 percent of the Canadian population will be elderly (Martin 1982: 147). Declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy are the major reasons for population aging in Canada (Baker 1988). But immigration and internal migration have also led to regional pockets of elderly people. The actual population distribution by age and sex for 1981, as well as future predictions may be seen in Figure 1.

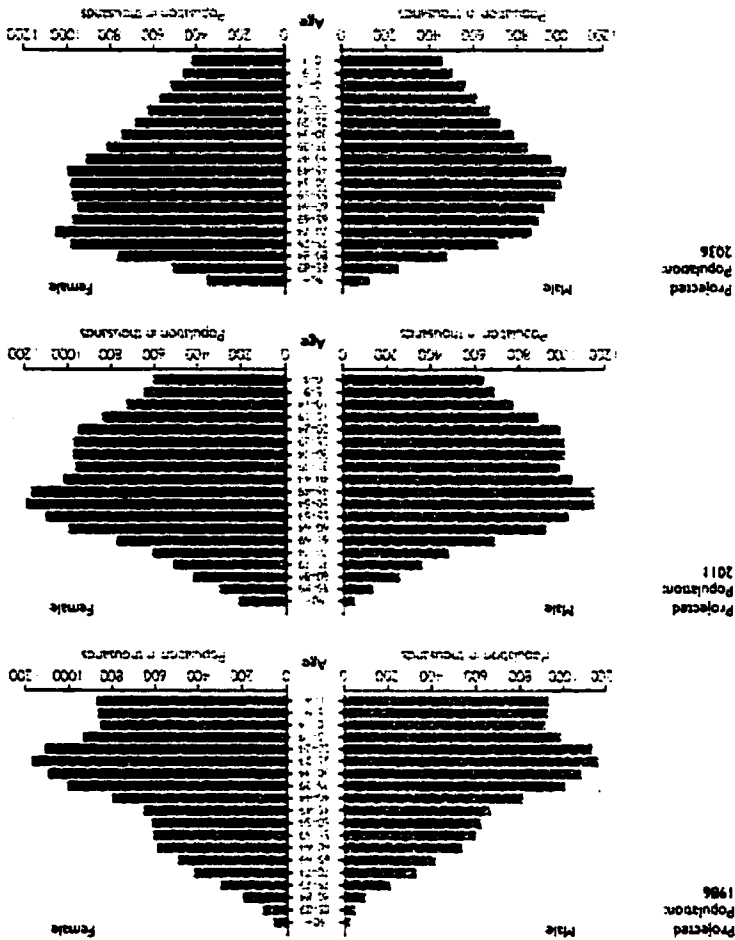
The fourth factor influencing the status of the aged is the dominant emphasis in Western culture concerning the value of productivity in industrial terms. As individuals age, they begin to experience physical and cognitive changes which impair their speed and endurance in the performance of certain occupations (McFarlane 1965). Whereas the productivity of older Canadian Aboriginals is defined and measured in terms of the elder's ability to share knowledge, or serve as witnesses to past knowledge; the value placed on work and productivity in the larger Canadian population, and the implementation and expression of this value through social sanctions, constantly impinge upon the population's perception of the aged. These factors, when combined, influence the culturally constructed negative image and perception of the elderly. Moreover, these negative perceptions are further exacerbated by the changing demographics of the larger Canadian population.

Not only has there been a phenomenal increase in the proportion of elderly individuals within the larger Canadian population, but also, the older population itself has

been getting older. An increase in the average life span is largely due to advances in technology in the areas of medicine, agriculture, nutrition, etc.; but this gift of longevity may be a mixed blessing in our society (Blau 1981: 9). Although old age has always been a problem for a few, it now has become a social problem for many (Petty 1979).

Figure 1

Population Pyramids by Age Group and Sex, Canada, 1986
 (Census, 2011 and 2036 (Projection 1)
 (Projection 1 [1986 Census], Low Growth Scenario,
 Total Fertility Rate = 1.20, Net Immigration = 140,000 per year



Source: Adapted from J. Perrault, *Population Projections for Canada, Provinces and Territories, 1990-2011*, Statistics Canada, Cat. No. 91-520 (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1990), Figure 5. Reproduced with permission of the Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1991.

Ageism as a Social Problem

A social problem may be defined as a social condition over which there is a disagreement concerning desirability. As stated by Cuber (1963: 655), "Different groups are usually differentially affected by, and related to, a given social condition, and hence a clash of value judgment regarding the condition gives evidence of the existence of the social problem through popular discussion". In other words, the disagreement over what constitutes a social problem consists of differing definitions and judgments concerning the equitable and fair treatment of a group of individuals; and may in fact include questions concerning social priorities. Thus, what may be a problem for some is not for others. A societal condition may be demonstrably harmful to one class or group, but have no direct or discernible harmful effect on another (Cuber 1963: 638). As the elderly have always been present within Canadian society, why then, is it that their presence is *now* considered a social problem?

As suggested by Loether (1975: 8), the treatment of the aged and the aging process is becoming an increasing social problem within Canadian society in terms of their representation in sheer numbers. At the turn of the century the aged did not constitute a social problem; however, since then, the proportion and number of people aged sixty-five and over has increased dramatically, and is now growing faster than those under sixty-five years of age (Atchley 1972, Julian 1977). Furthermore, social problems are closely interrelated with social change, some of them being a direct result of such change (Cuber 1963: 651). The process of modernization, as discussed in Chapter Two, has brought about not only substantial social change in the manner in which we perceive the elderly as contributing and valuable members of society; but also, technological and medical advances

dramatically affecting the length and quality of life.

A second reason for the contention that the aged are a social problem lies in the concept of ageism. Butler and Lewis (1973: ix) defined the term as "a systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old". Covertly, ageism is demonstrated in the slowness of our society in providing meaningful work or non-work roles for older people; raising their status as an age group; directing a significant percentage of the welfare dollar toward services for the elderly; and in developing research on aging in the social and biological sciences (Neugarten 1970). Ageism has allowed the younger people in this society to view older people as different- perhaps less human than themselves- and consequently to ignore their problems (Butler & Lewis 1973).

Third, several gerontologists have identified and classified the aged as a minority group in our society (Barron 1963, Palmore & Whittington 1971). Minority has been defined "as a group of people who because of physical or cultural characteristics are singled out from others in the society in which they live, for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination" (Barron 1961: 61).

As a minority group (or quasi-minority group), the elderly are highly visible -they are easily distinguishable from younger people both physically and behaviorally. The aged have little real power because of their relative size in the population and because few people seek their participation or advice about anything. Furthermore, it should be noted that referring to the aged as a minority group encompasses not only actual numbers and percentages of elderly within society, but also serves as a useful term with reference to the existence of privilege, or its lack.

As suggested by O'Reilly (1997: 22), this would imply the existence of

corresponding dominant groups with higher social status and more important privileges, and the exclusion of the minority group from full participation in society. Barron (1961) believed that the aging person's overt physiological characteristics rendered them susceptible to discrimination, similar to that which affects racial or sexual minority groups. Discrimination, as suggested by Barron (1960) is therefore facilitated, because the aged have no socially valid function, role, or activity pattern to fulfill. Finally, "older people are dominated (discriminated against) because little value is attached by the rest of society to the latter stages of maturation. We have, in effect, placed the elderly 'on the shelf' or put them 'out to pasture'" (Petty 1979: 4).

Maddox (1973: 62) refuted this theory "because of evidence which indicates that the aging are less disadvantaged than was once assumed". In addition, membership in the group known as aging is neither permanent nor exclusive. If anyone lives long enough they will join the group. According to Weinberger and Millham (1975: 62), "The physical appearance of the aging is not enough to justify discriminatory treatment by others." For example, people who appear old are highly respected when they function as judges, physicians, legislators and in other prestigious positions. The idea that the aged are a minority group is not a useful framework for describing their status in society.

The status of the elderly as a minority group, however, may be best conceptualized with reference and in comparison to another group perceived as a minority within society: teenagers. Although the elderly and teenagers do not comprise groups that would be considered within the 'classical' definition of a minority group (usually understood as ethnic difference), both of these stages in life are marked by the existence of a factor that creates difference: dependency based upon age. What separates the elderly and teenagers

from ethnic minorities is the fact that these stages in life are unavoidable, and are marked by discrimination. Modernization, as will be discussed in the following chapter, has created categories in which importance is calculated and measured based upon buying power. The importance of both groups is measured through their financial contribution and participation within society. Whereas teenagers increase in capacity until they have reached the final stages of blending within society; the elderly decrease in capacity until their eventual demise. In the process of reaching these 'goals', both groups are perceived as dependent, and thus, are not only mirror images of one another, but are deemed as of little importance.

As increasing public attention is being focused upon the elderly and because of the interest in understanding how a population feels about its elderly and how it might assist them in maintaining their independence, there is a need to explore current attitudes toward older people. An equally important need is to determine conditions under which these current attitudes are held (Petty 1979). As noted by Perry & Perry (1976: 510),

It seems a whole new set of social attitudes toward old age is needed... The basic point, however, is this: the elderly constitute a substantial and growing minority group in our society. Only a small number of this minority group reaches retirement with sufficient funds to live out their retirement with dignity. The remainder eke out a living on Social Security and other pension funds. They receive inadequate health care, are poorly nourished, live in drab surroundings, and are almost totally homebound because of poor public transportation. Some go to die, forgotten and lonely, in "old folks" homes. Not only are these circumstances morally disgraceful, but in addition, as a society, we are wasting a precious natural resource. None of us will escape old age and death, so it is to our advantage to promote understanding and change on behalf of our old people.

Historical Development of Aging and Age Consciousness

As stated by Chudacoff (1989: 4), we live in an age conscious society and,

Every person has an age; it is a direct, objective measure of the

duration that someone has lived. Though we sometimes try to alter or distort age, it is an inescapable attribute of life; ultimately we cannot change or manipulate it as we change our weight, hair color or even sex. But in the past century or so, age has come to represent more than a chronological, biological phenomenon. It has acquired social meaning, affecting attitudes, behavior, and the ways in which individuals relate to each other.

The concept of age consciousness has developed and evolved in relation to the demographic transition that took place in North America at the end of the nineteenth century along with industrialization and urbanization. The demographic transition, as explained by Novak (1996: 53), refers to the changes in population that led to a higher proportion of older people among the developed nations. Three notable stages within this transition outline how European and North American societies shifted from a youthful to an older population structure.

Prior to 1750, the first of these three stages, the population of European ancestry had been relatively stable: high birth rates were balanced by high death rates. French studies of the seventeenth century estimate that children made up 45 percent of the population and relatively few people lived to old age in pre-industrial societies. A listing of counties in England from 1599 to 1796 indicates a meager 1.4 to 6.4 percent of the population was 65 years of age or older (Laslett 1965). According to Chudacoff (1989: 4), prior to the nineteenth century people talked of old age, but in a different context than in the present sense. North Americans identified stages of life; but actual demarcations between the stages to categorize people were of little importance. Age was not a significant marker in people's lives, and people were apt to forget their age as birthdays were rarely celebrated. Children worked side by side with adults, and single room schoolhouses were filled by children of varied ages.

The second stage, from 1750-1850, three phenomena caused rapid population growth in Europe, and therefore changed the ratio of young and old people in society. First, the death rate decreased due to fewer war fatalities and epidemics, improved hygiene within the cities, enforced border controls halting the spread of disease, and an increased access to subsistence leading to better nutrition. Second, the birth rate remained proportionately high, and in some cases increased; and third, people were living to an older age, resulting in an increase of the proportion of older people in the population.

The third stage from 1850 to the present was marked by a decrease in both the birth rate and death rate due to urbanization and industrialization; completing the transition to an aging population (Stearns 1967).

By the end of the nineteenth century, schools began to set age limits, and pediatrics was established as a medical specialty. Concurrently with these changes, old age was identified as a separate stage of life, marked by special age boundaries. Furthermore, new advances in medicine identified variations in health patterns of individuals. Many of the deteriorating illnesses occurred during the later years of life, including cognitive impairment. Finally the term "senile" emerged; a societal label identifying degenerating brain efficiency. Gradually, differences between life span stages began to evolve. Aging people were set apart from the rest of society, as it was assumed that they could not keep up with the demands of a scientifically progressive society (Chudacoff 1989). The opinion and expertise of the elderly was no longer necessary. The medical community now associated deterioration of the mind (senile dementia) and physical deterioration of body organs as a normal occurrence of aging; especially in individuals who lived past seventy years. This concept led to the establishment of old age homes. Although only a small percentage of

older people lived in these homes; it created barriers from the world they formerly enjoyed.

In the early twentieth century, age norms increased, especially for the young. Age-peer organizations were becoming more and more popular; such as the gender-specific scouting organization. After WWI, middle age was identified as a separate age norm in North American culture; and heightened consciousness of distinct stages of adulthood contributed to age grading (O'Reilly 1997: 13).

Concurrent with these patterns, life expectancies resulting from better medical care created new age grade systems in the social structure. According to O'Reilly (1997: 13), currently at least two age grade categories are recognized, the young aging, consisting of retired but energetic people generally up to 75 years; and the frail elderly, those above 75. Media attention began to focus on incurable, chronic ailments such as Alzheimer's disease; contributing to the formation of negative stereotypes associated with aging. Newspaper and magazine articles began to focus on the problems of aging. Organizations and magazines for an aging population began to emerge, such as *Canadian Association for Retired Persons* (CARP).

As suggested by Chudacoff (1989), the entry of the term ageism in the common vocabulary signaled the advent of widespread stereotyping of people because of their chronological age. Introduced in 1969 by Robert Butler, ageism is defined as another form of bigotry, similar to racism and sexism. He has more recently defined it as "a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old" (1987: 22). In Canada, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) outlaws discrimination based upon age in all programs and institutions receiving federal funds, unless the program was originally designed for a special age group. It will become obvious in Chapter Three,

however, that although discrimination based upon age is illegal in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, ageism is perpetuated and ever present within Canadian society, and may be illustrated through an examination of common stereotypes, attitudes, language terms, and representations of the elderly within the media.

CHAPTER TWO

Theoretical Perspectives

In the previous chapter some aspects of aging in Canadian society were noted. Of particular importance was the emergence of 'ageism' and its relevance within society, as well as what it means to those discriminated against. In order to provide the necessary conceptual tools, this chapter will describe the methodological approaches and concerns to be addressed when examining the process of aging; and will illustrate the major theories and conceptual frameworks that have been used to explain social phenomena associated with aging and the aged. In addition, some studies concerning the consequences of 'ageism' will be examined.

As will become readily apparent, there is not at present one theory, nor is there likely to be in the near future, a single theory which explains how an individual or a population ages, or the consequences of such a process (McPherson 1983). A number of both competing and complementary perspectives have been proposed to provide understanding of social or physical phenomena related to the aging process.

As stated by Babbie (1995: 40), theory has three purposes for research. First, on good days it prevents us from erring in reference to causation. If we may come to understand the reason and causation of an occurrence (i.e. why it happened), we may anticipate the possible future occurrences. Second, theories make sense out of observed patterns so as to suggest other possibilities. Finally, theories may shape and direct research efforts, pointing in the direction of likely discoveries through empirical observation.

As theories organize and explain our observations, one must assume that there is a variety of manners and methods by which we make sense of things. Social scientists have developed a number of paradigms in order to understand social behavior. The focus of this research is at a micro level of analysis. Micro-theory is concentrated upon issues of social life at the level of individuals and small groups, and tends to be an intimate view of social life (Babbie 1995: 41).

This chapter brings together the relevant literature and theoretical perspectives on aging -particularly as it relates to evaluations of old people. A number of theories concerning the place and status of older individuals of our society have been put forward and a number of studies describing their allocation in society have been carried out. These will be discussed in the sections which follow.

Of the numerous studies designed to examine the attitudes of various groups toward old people, only a few have demonstrated generally favorable sentiments; most have indicated unfavorable (negative) feelings characterized by such things as physical infirmity, mental deterioration, unhappiness, uselessness, etc. The following studies demonstrate something of the range of attitudes toward old people that has been revealed by a variety of respondents.

Selected Theories of Aging

As with any social phenomenon, there can be no single all-encompassing theory of aging, but rather different theories emphasizing aspects of the aging experience or the status of the elderly (Baker 1988). Although social scientists have searched for such a theory, they are now more likely to realize that the elderly are not a homogenous group, but vary considerably by gender, class, ethnicity, geographic location, age, and state of health.

Growing old has similar physiological characteristics throughout the world, but it is a different experience depending on many social, political, and economic conditions (Baker 1988).

Activity theory is the oldest and probably the most widely accepted theory on aging. Essentially this theory states that the greater the activity of the individual, the greater the life satisfaction, and that this is true for individuals of all ages. For the aging person this is even more important, as their health and social well-being are dependent upon remaining active. The theory holds that since the norms for old age are the same as those for middle-age, persons should maintain the activities and attitudes of their middle years as long as possible and then find acceptable substitutes for those activities which they must relinquish (Havinghurst & Albrecht 1953, Maddox 1970).

Activity theorists believe people find the meaning of life through interaction. In essence, they stress the importance of people maintaining adequate levels of social activity if they are to age successfully. In addition, this will enable the individual to achieve a positive self-image and greater life satisfaction (O'Reilly 1997: 20). The aging process, then, is a continuous struggle to remain middle-aged. Should a person be forced to retire, he should find a substitute for work; if he must resign from a club or association, he should find substitutes for those activities; if friends and family members die, he must find others.

Activity theory grew out of the concept of a 'roleless role' of the aging (Burgess 1960). In essence, Burgess viewed retired people as having "no vital function to perform" (1960: 60); he believed this role was imposed on them at retirement, and they eventually accepted the role. The research on the relationship between activity level and life satisfaction however, is contradictory and complicated by gender and class differences.

Having intimate relationships seems to be more important than the number of relationships or activities (Roadburg 1985), and the type of activity in old age is closely related to former occupational and class-based activities (Baker 1988).

Disengagement theory (Cummings et al. 1960; Cummings and Henry 1961) argues that, contrary to activity theory, it is normal for aging people to decrease their level of activity and gradually drop out of active participation in society. As stated by Cummings:

This theory starts from the commonsense observation that...the old person is less involved in the life around him than he was when he was younger and proceeds without making assumptions about the desirability of this fact. Aging in the modal person is thought of in this theory as a mutual withdrawal or disengagement which takes place between the aging person and others in the social systems to which he belongs...When the aging process is complete, the equilibrium which existed in middle life between the individual and his society has given way to a new equilibrium characterized by a greater distance and an altered type of relationship (Havinghurst 1963: 68).

Disengagement does not suggest a rocking chair for aging people; rather it suggests that they decrease their activity as they adapt to the normal changes of the aging process. Atchley (1972) discusses disengagement as an inevitable process in which individuals reduce their number of interpersonal relationships and alter those which remain. The fundamental point is that all persons must eventually die and disengagement is a means to affect an orderly transfer of power from older to younger persons. Disengagement theory was presented in a functionalist framework, which was built upon previous research. These theorists saw people moving toward disengagement as they age, that is, they are gradually phased out of important roles in order for society to function; by doing this their death is not disruptive to the normal functioning of society (O'Reilly 1997: 20).

The disengagement theorists acknowledged that although the process is inevitable,

variations occur because of biological differences. The theorists believe that high levels of satisfaction are associated with the aged's reduction of their roles. Since the inception of the theory, a lot of controversy has prevailed in the literature over its relevance and usefulness. In the last decade, this theory, as well as the activity theory, have been supplemented by the age stratification and phenomenological theories of aging.

Critics have demonstrated that the disengagement process, which is supposed to be universal, actually depends on previous activity level and social class and is often forced on elderly people through retirement policies and lack of social services. Disengagement is also found to be possible in one aspect of life, such as work, while the person remains active in other aspects (Streib and Schneider 1972).

Moreover, contrary to the views expressed by Burgess (1960) and Cummings and Henry (1961) that later life constitutes a 'roleless role', or a disengagement from activity, aging in the later years is now considered to be characterized as a role involving transitions leading to a revised role set. This role set may be either reduced or expanded, with a common pattern being a decline in formal roles and an increase in informal roles. This increased opportunity for role-playing has been enhanced by a changing age structure, wherein greater numbers of older adults live longer in better health, and by changing social norms and enhanced lifestyle opportunities for older adults (McPherson 1990). Research in the 1980s has documented that the elderly continue to play such primary kinship roles as parent, grandparent, and spouse, although the nature of the role behaviour may have changed due to divorce, smaller families, and increased mobility by the oldest generation (McPherson 1990). In terms of secondary roles in such domains as work, voluntary associations, religion, politics, and leisure, considerable change is occurring. Increasingly,

adults are continuing the work role well beyond the customary age of retirement (65), primarily because of legislation and personal desires or opportunities to pursue alternative work roles (McPherson 1990)

Similarly, the scope of leisure roles available to older adults has expanded greatly, and these serve as a major source of life satisfaction in the later years. Although most of these roles involve role relationships with other older adults, many involve interaction with the younger generations through foster-grandparent programs, as teaching assistants in elementary schools, as consultants for young professionals in a number of fields, and as students in university courses. Clearly, role opportunities for the older population have been expanded to create a more diverse social world (McPherson 1990).

Phenomenological and ethnographic theories of aging emphasize the meaning attributed to growing old by the elderly (Gubrium 1973; Jacobs et al. 1975, Marshall 1975; Decker 1980). Critics of this case study approach suggest that, "[t]he meaning these researchers are concerned with differ[s] from the meaning social gerontologists attribute to aging" (Decker 1980: 146). Whereas the disengagement theory uses a generalized process that is applicable to everyone, the phenomenological method individualizes the aging process; it perceives persons as assigning their own meaning to aging, not that everyone has a unique view of aging. Many researchers recognized that we construct our meanings while interacting with others, and thus are influenced by them, but it does not make people active participants in constructing and negotiating the meaning of aging. "The message for researchers is that we must be sensitive to the various settings and circumstances in which society assigns meaning to the aging process" (O'Reilly 1997: 21).

These micro-level theories, which emphasize social interaction and personality,

have only been partially successful in explaining aspects of the aging process as they do not seriously consider external variables such as cultural norms, social policy, and economic trends. By emphasizing individual attitudes and personality traits, they have not attempted to compare the elderly with other age groups or examine historical changes in the aging process or status of the elderly (Baker 1988).

Macro-level theories of aging, which employ entire societies or segments of society as units of analysis, have generally compared the elderly to other age categories in society.

Age stratification or exchange theory, views society as composed of various age groups (Riley, Johnson & Foner 1972), and suggests that as people age, they lose their bargaining power compared to younger age groups. With increasing modernization, social structures and processes change so that there is likely to be a separation of family and societal roles. This leads to a greater division of labour, with more dependence on achieved rather than on ascribed roles. In addition, there is greater stratification on the basis of age, education, occupation, and social class. The transition from middle age to old age is thought to result in a loss or weakening of major social roles that were sources of power, status and prestige. This 'role emptying' (Rosow 1985) places the elderly in an unfavourable exchange position, and they are perceived to have a devalued or marginal status. This social loss is further enhanced by the onset of physical changes that make persons appear old to others, and by the presence of ascribed negative stereotypes that lead to unequal treatment or discrimination on the basis of age.

As noted previously, however, members of a given age cohort are not a homogenous group, except with respect to chronological age. Thus, while the elderly lose some institutionalized roles, they do not abandon all social roles. Indeed, increasingly the

elderly are exhibiting a diversity of roles. Therefore, while some role loss is inevitable due to declining involvement in some institutions, individual status may be retained within a more restricted social world, such as the family, even while the status of the age cohort declines. More important, however, is the need to consider the variation in norms and values by class, education, sex, and race. These interact with age to determine the status of a particular cohort (McPherson 1990). Some elderly persons possess status characteristics (being male, white, wealthy, a member of the upper class, or having a higher level of education or occupational prestige) that enable them to retain power.

To summarize, the age stratification system may allocate unequal amounts of power, prestige, and privileges within and among different age cohorts (Dowd 1980; O'Rand 1990). With increasing age, individuals may lose strength and attractiveness and may be excluded from occupying many institutionalized roles. With consideration to their interaction with others, particularly with those in younger cohorts, the elderly often have less power and occupy a weaker bargaining position (McPherson 1990).

Riley et al. (1972) proposed a sociology of age stratification; they posited that age should not be viewed as an individual characteristic, but rather as a dynamic component of modern society. Riley's age stratum develops its own cohort as it moves through time and history. Therefore, patterns of aging can differ not only from one society to the next, but also among successive cohorts in a society. According to Decker (1980: 145), "Stratification Theory teaches us to analyze the functioning of a society in terms of cohorts or age groups that make up a society at any point in time."

Modernization is the theoretical perspective traditionally employed to organize ideas and meanings in historical research to account for changes in the treatment afforded

older people. It begins with the notion that in pre-industrial societies the elderly have certain advantages, which they lose in the process of industrialization. In colonial North America, seniority rights gave elders first claim to important social positions, and the communal and hierarchical nature of pre-industrial society also gave the elderly a moral as well as a social advantage that was embodied in the ethic of veneration of the elderly. In addition, elders controlled the family, which in turn led to the control of the community (Atchley 1988).

The central thesis of modernization theory is that the processes by which societies evolve from rural and agrarian social and economic systems to urban and industrial, result in a change to the positions typically occupied by older people in the society, and the esteem afforded to the aged. The direction of change is usually assumed to be for the worse.

Simmons (1945) was one of the first to address the issue of modernization's effect on the elderly. Based on a cross-cultural study of 71 societies, he concluded that in relatively stable agricultural societies, the aged usually occupy positions of favour and power, owing mainly to the concept of seniority rights.

Cottrell (1960) viewed modernization as a growing result of fossil fuels and technology to increase human productivity. To him, the most significant aspect of the historical shift from agrarian to high-energy industrial forms of production was its effect on the organization of society. Agrarian societies revolved around a the village, comprising of a collection of families. The power of elderly men, and occasionally elderly women stemmed from their positions as heads of families, which in turn admitted them to the council of elders which governed the community. In addition, tradition was the most

influential manner by which people decided issues, affording elders value as keepers of knowledge and tradition. As technology increased and production became less dependent on land, decision-making power shifted from many landowners to relatively fewer factory owners and merchants, eroding the power of family patriarchs. In addition, as the volume of scientific and technical knowledge grew beyond the capacity of any one human to know it all, the value of elders as keepers of knowledge diminished (Cottrell 1960).

Fischer (1978: 108-112) advanced the notion that, in order for the new egalitarian type of society to emerge, the traditional hierarchical type had to be undercut. In the process, due to the fact that they were usually in control of traditional societies, the aged as a category came under attack by those who desired change within the system. Thus, it was not their capabilities nor lack of them that caused the aged to lose their advantaged positions, but rather the fact that they were symbols of an outdated social order.

All these are plausible explanations of why the elderly lost their hold on the privileged positions in industrialized society. The aged however, did not become merely equal to everyone else; they became less valued than other age categories. Cowgill (1972, 1974, 1986), in an attempt to rationalize this phenomenon developed a theory to explain why the elderly were devalued by the process of modernization. He felt that several factors associated with modernization combined to reduce the desirability of the aged participants in society. Modernization, according to Cowgill (1974: 127) is,

the transformation of a total society from a relatively rural way of life based on animate power, limited technology, relatively undifferentiated institutions, parochial and traditional outlook and values, toward a predominantly urban way of life based on inanimate sources of power, highly developed scientific technology, highly differentiated institutions matched by segmented individual roles, and a cosmopolitan outlook with emphasized efficiency and progress.

Cowgill and Holmes (1972), reviewing studies of fifteen contemporary societies from around the world, found that small numbers of older people, ancestor worship, low levels of social change, extended families, a value system emphasizing group importance, stable residency, and low literacy all support high status in old age. In modern societies, in which such conditions are generally reversed, they hypothesize, old people have low status. Cowgill and Holmes (1972) concluded that these trends support modernization theory.

Cowgill (1974: 127) has attempted to tighten and thus strengthen this theory with a more explicit definition of the general process of modernization. He emphasizes that the process is a unidirectional one, is international in scope and transforms a total society rather than effecting transformations in segments of a total society. Cowgill further notes that the development or introduction of modern health technology has important implications for the status and role of the aged. Although in the long run modern health technology leads to the aging of a society, in the short term the opposite trend, a "younging", should occur due to "a rapid increase of child population (Cowgill 1974: 129). This phenomenon could, he suggests, be a significant factor in determining patterns of intergenerational relations.

As with the historical record, cross-cultural information reveals many reasons why such changes as urbanization and technological development may disadvantage the old, relative to the young, in social terms in spite of improvements in health and longevity. Younger people may leave communities; they may acquire alternative economic opportunities that undermine seniority and the authority of the old; information may be stored more efficiently than in the human brain; experience may become irrelevant and supernatural sanctions less threatening. These consequences of social change are not inevitable however, and there are conditions under which the old may benefit even from

rapid social changes. Furthermore, old people may themselves be sources of change.

Other research further corroborates this theory. Palmore and Whittington (1971) studied the change in status of the elderly in the United States between 1940 and 1969. Employing a "similarity index" in order to compare the status of the aged (65 years and over) and the non-aged (14-64 years), they found not only a decrease in hours and weeks worked by the aged, but also a decrease in income and education level compared to younger people. Improvements were only found in the health status of the elderly. Therefore, they conclude that although there were improvements in health and health care, the elderly lost status relative to the young over the thirty years they studied.

Rose and Peterson proposed that the aged may be classified as a sub-culture (Rose & Peterson 1965). They noted that society's negative response to aging forced them to interact with each other regardless of a class distinction. According to them, the sub-culture creates a sense of group affiliation in the aging that prevails over all other group memberships. As stated by O'Reilly (1997: 21), "A subculture may be an ethnic, economic, or social group, which displays characteristics that distinguish its members from other groups within the culture."

In order to support his idea of an aged subculture, Rose noted the increased number of people over 65, welfare programs directed toward this age group, the growth of retirement communities, and compulsory retirement. The concept of an aged subculture however, has been determined to be more of a possible prediction of future events, rather than a concept which reflects present day trends.

A study by Harris (1975), on the myths and reality of aging in America, revealed the following findings: they refuted the concept of a homogenous aging population, in fact they

underscored differences within the aging population. The findings indicated that there is no such thing as a typical aged person. People generally don't stop being themselves and suddenly turn into the old person that fits society's myths and stereotypes. Instead, the psychosocial factors that affect people when they are young, persist throughout the life-cycle.

The theories noted above relate primarily to aging and life in Canada as a whole, but there have also been theories put forward to understand aging and the aged in a special segment of Canadian society; that is Canadian Aboriginal society, or societies.

Native Elders

The necessity for sensitivity to such differences as gender, ethnicity and socio-economic class among Canadian aged has been pointed out by Marshall (1980: 62). As noted by Holzberg (1981), ethnic categories are seldom homogeneous, and certainly within the broad category of "Native Canadian" there exists tremendous diversity based upon various combinations of cultural and historical dimensions. Examining the role of the Anicinabe aged in both historical and contemporary contexts, Vanderburgh (1987) demonstrates the difficulty in discovering patterns upon which one may base theory about Canada's Native population.

Canada's Native population is characterized by a very different demographic situation from that prevalent in the larger Canadian society. While the larger society shows a distinct trend towards the aging of the population (Denton and Spencer 1980), Canada's Aboriginal population demonstrates a reversal in the national trend, and is "younging" (Frideres 1983: 183). Cowgill's (1974) more recent insights concerning the modernization theory, as discussed above, seem to account for the demographic variance between Canada

as a whole and the Canadian Aboriginal minority. However, as stated by Vanderburgh (1987: 101), the model of modernization as transforming a total society needs to be qualified and reconceptualized. She further notes that Canadian demographic statistics suggest that while modernization may transform a whole society, the timing of the transformation will vary across the segments of a plural society.

Foner (1984) has reviewed both the modernization model and the arguments of those who have employed historical data to criticize it. She notes that cross-cultural data from modernizing non-industrial societies show a decline in the status of the elderly is far from inevitable, and suggests that the model, even as revised by Cowgill in 1974, is too simplistic (Foner 1984: 203). It fails to take into account the multidimensionality of the overall status of the elderly.

Amoss (1981a, 1981b) has used data from the Coast Salish Natives of British Columbia and Washington State to challenge the application of the modernization model in gerontology. The status of the elderly in any society is, she feels, directly related to the balance between the cost of supporting them and the social contributions they are perceived as making. She demonstrates that the high premodernization status of Coast Salish elders changed with modernization to approximate the low status of the aged in the larger North American society. With the "younging" of Coast Salish society that followed the introduction of modern health technology however, the traditional knowledge of the elders came to be perceived as a major contribution to the maintenance of Salish identity.

Vanderburgh (1987) further challenges the validity of the modernization model of aging in her study of the Anicinabe people of Georgian Bay. Missionary influence in the Georgian Bay area has been recorded as early as 1852 (Graham 1975), and the

establishment of schools for Aboriginal children was an important aspect of early missionary work. Thus, she suggests, erosion of the Aboriginal culture has continued steadily for over a century and a half. This erosion has been especially severe in the interconnected areas of religion and healing, as well as in the language. These are the very aspects of culture that relate most closely to what we know of the traditional role of elders in Canadian Aboriginal societies (Vanderburgh 1987: 102).

As noted above, there are a number of distinct theories relating to the aged and aging. Not one theory, in my opinion, is capable of encompassing all the influencing factors which attribute to the place and status of the aged within Canadian and Canadian Aboriginal societies. Rather, a combination of the above theories best describe the present situation of old people within Canadian societies.

The aged within many Western cultures, including Canada, face a dilemma. As stated by Clark and Anderson (1967: 18), the aged "are rendered helpless, either by personal default or by social definition, to meet cultural ideals and are consequently devalued." In the following chapter we will examine some of the social perceptions and roles of the elderly within the larger Canadian population resulting in their devaluation and low status.

CHAPTER THREE

Growing Old In The Dominant Canadian Culture

In the previous chapter I examined not only the relevant theories of aging and the aged, but also some recent studies in order to provide a frame of reference and to demonstrate some of the factors which influence the aged and the aging process within Canada. This chapter explores the situation of the aged within the larger Canadian population by examining stereotypes and myths associated with the aged. It also presents evidence of the promotion and persistence of negative perceptions of the elderly within the media and our language, and the devaluation and low status which result.

Stereotyping

Social scientists have long used the term 'stereotype' to refer to oversimplified, fixed, and usually fallacious conceptions which people hold of others (Lindesmith & Strauss 1968: 52). These pre-established classifications create biases and disguise facts. According to Lippmann (1922: 81), "For the most part, we do not first see and then define, we define first and then see". Once formed, the stereotype tends to persist even in the face of contradictory evidence and experience (Lindesmith & Strauss 1968: 53).

There is nothing to prepare you for the experience of growing old. Living is a process, an irreversible progression toward old age and eventual death. You see men of eighty still vital and straight as oaks; you see men of fifty reduced to gray shadows in the human landscape. The cellular clock differs for each one of us, and is profoundly affected by our own life experiences, our heredity, and perhaps most important, by the concepts of aging encountered in society and in oneself (Curtin: 1972: 113).

Old age may be perceived as a label, a symbol and a myth of cultural stereotypes that is part of the conditions of growing old in North American society. Labels may indirectly affect society's perception of the aging individual. Because older people are part of society, their behavior mirrors its attitudes and expectations. There are good reasons to state that since the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the aging population has been viewed quite negatively. Some symptoms of this are what many deem to be attributable to a youth oriented society. Aging is viewed as unattractive, asexual, unemployable, and helpless. Even older people themselves may have inaccurate views of aging. Common beliefs are that old people are forgetful, dependent, frugal, paranoid, lazy, and so on. Rosow (1974) concluded that aging people are commonly viewed in stereotypes. They are perceived as representatives of an age group, not as individuals, and negative characteristics are attributed to them. As stated by O'Reilly (1997: 14), it is interesting to note that these images of the aging are not limited to younger people alone, but are also shared by the aging themselves. Aging people devalue other aging persons. Furthermore, the stereotyped conceptions tend to be resistant to change, despite direct association.

Butler (1974: 22) explains that, "to develop a clear depiction of what old age can be, we must contrast the mythological with a realistic appraisal of old age." According to Butler, the following stereotypes are associated with aging:

An older person thinks and moves slowly. He does not think as he used to, nor as creatively. He is bound to himself and to his past and can no longer change and grow. He can neither learn well nor swiftly, and even if he could, he would not wish to. Tied to his personal traditions and growing conservatism, he dislikes innovations and is not disposed to new ideas. Not only can he not move forward, he often moves backwards. He enters a second childhood, caught often in increasing egocentricity and demanding more from his environment than he is willing to give to it. Sometimes he becomes more like himself, a caricature of a lifelong personality. He becomes

irritable and cantankerous, yet shallow and enfeebled. He lives in his past. He is behind the times. He is aimless and wandering of mind, reminiscing and garrulous. Indeed, he is a study in decline. He is a picture of mental and physical failure. He has lost and cannot replace friends, spouse, job, status, power, influence, income. He is often stricken by diseases which in turn restrict his movement, his enjoyment of food, the pleasures of well being. His sexual interest and activity decline. His body shrinks; so, too, does the flow of blood to his brain. His mind does not utilize oxygen and sugar at the same rate as formerly. Feeble, uninteresting, he awaits his death, a burden to society, to his family, and to himself.

Chudacoff (1989) believes, however, that there are some advantages to living in an age-conscious society, such as providing the individual with a sense of belonging and a sense of self from an age-based peer group. This enables policy makers to identify vulnerable groups, such as infants, teenagers, middle-agers, the aging, and the frail aging who need selected types of government assistance. It should be noted, however, that these groups might not need further assistance if the population thought of them, and was structured, differently.

The major disadvantage of such a society is the stereotype of ageism. According to Chudacoff (1989: 188), "age cannot be changed", and to discriminate against individuals merely because they possess a particular characteristic offends the traditional American concept of fairness.

Although Platt (1980), agreeing with Chudacoff that industrialization stimulated many opportunities and afforded us many benefits, he suggests that it also created new patterns of constraints as we move through life. He further states, however, that we must take a renewed look at the biographical lines of human aging. "For the mature person is one of the most remarkable products that any society can bring forth" (1980: 3). The idea that people can go on improving with age is not a new idea, it is in fact, as explained by Platt

(1980: 5) an idea that existed as far back in history as Confucius. In the *Analects* the master says:

At 15 I thought only of study; at 30 I began to play my role; at 40 I was sure of myself; at 50 I was conscious of my position in the universe; at 60 I was no longer argumentative; and now at 70 I can follow my heart's desire without violating custom.

Age stereotypes are powerful images with damaging consequences. Commonly held, shared and maintained, they have the propensity to differentiate, segregate, and isolate individuals groups, and societies. The aged Aboriginal population in Canada, however, must not only contend with age stereotypes, but also with stereotypical notions concerned with their Native cultures.

The Imaginary Indian

Despite the diversity of histories and cultures which exist within and among Canadian Aboriginal groups, the most common image of Aboriginal people is that of one nation, in one particular period of time: the late nineteenth century Sioux warrior. This "Imaginary Indian" is most often pictured sitting on a horse, adorned with bow and arrow, and wearing buckskin and a full headdress of eagle feathers. He is endowed with all of the "Indian" qualities: nature-lover, warrior, mystical shaman. He is angry and defiant, yet ultimately he is resigned to his fate. His spouse is nowhere to be seen; if she is in the picture, she is quiet and subservient. The "imaginary Indian", adorning postcards and ever popular in airport gift shops, has reduced the multiplicity of experiences of Aboriginal peoples to one powerful and persuasive image (Francis 1992).

Early portrayals and depictions of Canadian Aboriginal people and Aboriginal culture within the print media and the film industry were based on images inherited from popular art, fiction and history; images which themselves were the product of

European/American imaginings of Aboriginal peoples (Francis 1992: 79-80). The Hollywood movie industry however, was so successful at creating and perpetuating Aboriginal stereotypes that some continue to affect current attitudes. These stereotypes reflected, in part, societal attitudes in the days of the Western dime novel and the Wild West Show, two popular forms of entertainment during the frontier days of North America that stereotyped Aboriginal people as savage and ignorant. As the movie industry developed decades later, it capitalized on these stereotypes to heighten the drama of films and to create suspense for its audience. Aboriginal people and cultures were regularly portrayed in a historically inaccurate manner (Berkhofer 1979: 100-103). For example, the religious ceremonies of Aboriginal peoples were often misinterpreted. The peace pipe has been freely employed by authors and producers to convey their own simplistic interpretation of a revered and sacred object and traditional dancers have been portrayed as pagan rituals. Furthermore, Aboriginal languages have been treated in a manner that portrayed Aboriginal people as silent, monosyllabic, and simple-minded.

Images however, have consequences; and ideas have results. The Imaginary Indian does not exist in a void. In their relations with Native people over the years, non-Native Canadians have put the image of the Aboriginal person into practice (Francis 1992).

Attitudes

We learn to be old.... We acquire the stereotype from literature, film and from the stage. Above all there comes a time when we are treated differently by the young. We learn myths and we are taught what it is to be old. So effective is the learning and the role performance that we actually feel more comfortable in fitting the niche created for us: The stereotype of the old is pernicious but very effective, because it permeates the self-image of the older person. (Jones 1976: 9).

It is generally accepted that attitudes are derived, at least partially, from the

prevalence of cultural stereotypes (McPherson 1983). In our culture, negative stereotypes about aging and growing old are inculcated through the socialization process. In turn, these stereotypes lead to the formation of attitudes and beliefs. In addition, attitudes are likely to form because of an institutionalized stratification process wherein there is differential ranking of status and opportunities by age (McPherson 1983).

As a result of these processes of attitude formation, negative societal and individual attitudes lower the status of older people in a society, decrease the frequency and quality of social interaction with them, and negatively affect their life chances, lifestyle, and quality of life. Negative attitudes may also decrease or inhibit the allocation of societal and personal resources to the elderly, or may lead to a self-labeling process where the elderly accept the negative stereotypes and attitudes. This results in negative self-evaluation and decreased self-esteem, which in turn can lead to disengagement and social isolation (McPherson 1983).

One might assume then, based upon age and cultural stereotypes and attitudes that elders within Aboriginal communities are not only perceived in a negative context based upon their age, but also, must contend with the cultural bias and stereotypes held within the larger Canadian population concerning their cultural ancestry. This, however, does not seem to be the case. Elders and the aged are different categories. Many Aboriginal Elders command a great deal of respect from the larger Canadian population; much more so, in fact, than the larger Canadian population would bestow upon their own aged. This may be best illustrated employing the example of the ever popular Grey Owl. The fact that he was not indeed a Canadian Aboriginal aside³, Grey Owl captivated the

³ Grey Owl was successful at creating and maintaining the illusion that he was a descendant of Aboriginal parentage. The majority of Canadians were convinced of his authenticity as an Aboriginal leader of

minds and hearts of Canadians as being a wise Aboriginal leader and advocate of environmental issues and concerns. As an Aboriginal person, Grey Owl was an authority in areas unknown to the general Canadian population, and was not only successful at portraying Canadian Aboriginals within a different context than the savages they were perceived to be, but also, was granted a great deal of status and respect. Furthermore, the case of Grey Owl is not an exception; there are numerous other examples of this trend within films and novels. The phenomenon of the general Canadian population conferring respect upon Aboriginal Elders, while demonstrating indifference to their own elderly may be best explained by Francis (1992: 221),

When two cultures meet, especially cultures as different as those of Western Europe and Indigenous North American, they inevitably interpret each other in terms of stereotypes. At its best, in a situation of equality, this might be seen as a phase in a longer process of familiarization. But if one side in the encounter enjoys advantages of wealth and power or technology, then it will usually try to impose its stereotypes on the other. This is what occurred in the case of the North American encounter between European and Aboriginal.

Over the years, however, the Aboriginal stereotype has transformed and evolved; resulting in different identities. From one extreme to the next, the imaginings of Canadians concerning the true nature of Aboriginal peoples has led many Canadians to discover in Aboriginal character and culture many fine qualities lacking in their own (Francis 1992). From noble savages to the mystic shamans and original environmentalists of today, Canadians continue to create idealized images of Aboriginals.

The Mythology of Aging

In his famous book *Why Survive? Being Old in America*, which was the recipient of

environmental issues. It was only after his death that his true identity as an Englishman was 'publicly' discovered.

the 1975 Pulitzer Prize, Butler wrote of the myths and stereotypes about the aged. As in all stereotypes, clichés and myths, there is an element of truth. Many current views of older people, however, represent confusion, misunderstandings and lack of knowledge concerning old age (Glendenning 1997).

According to Butler (.974), there are six major myths associated with aging, including aging itself, and the idea of chronological aging (measuring one's age by the number of years one has lived). Butler claims that physiological and personality indicators show a greater range in old age than in any other age group; and thus, the rates of metabolic and social aging are individual.

The second myth is unproductivity. Butler suggests that in the absence of diseases and social adversities, aging people tend to remain productive and involved in life. Furthermore, a substantial number of people become unusually creative for the first time when they are older.

The third myth is that of disengagement, or gradually being phased out of important roles in order for society to function. This myth gained great currency in the 1960s as a result of the book by Cummings and Henry, *Growing Old* (1961): the myth that after retirement older people prefer to disengage from activities within society, and that this is a natural part of the aging experience.

Fourth is the myth of inflexibility. Butler believes this has little to do with one's age, but rather with one's character. Barring brain destruction or illiteracy, people remain open to change throughout the course of their lifetime.

Fifth is the myth of senility. The notion that aging people become senile, evidenced by forgetfulness, episodes of confusion, and a reduced attention span, is widely accepted.

Butler explains that senility is a layman's term, sometimes used by physicians to categorize the behavior of the old. Some of what is referred to as senility is the result of brain damage. Furthermore, anxiety and depression are lumped into the category of senility, even though they are treatable and reversible. It is important to note that aging people, like the young, experience a full range of emotional and disease states, including: anxiety, grief, malnutrition, unrecognized physical illnesses, late-life alcoholism, cerebral arteriosclerosis, and finally the overuse of drug tranquilization. Many of these conditions may cause a pseudo-senility.

Sixth is the myth of serenity. In contrast to the previous myth, this one portrays aging as an adult sainthood. Aging is described as a time of relative peace and serenity when people enjoy the fruits of their life-long labors, and peace and quiet prevails. With retirement comes peace, relaxation and serenity. Visions of white-haired grandmothers in rocking chairs are pictured by the younger generations. In reality, aging persons experience more stresses than any other age group, with depression, anxiety, anger, chronic discomfort, grief, isolation and lowered self esteem. While the aging have a certain resiliency in some crisis situations, it should be noted that depressive reactions are quite common in late life due to the loss of friends and family. Furthermore, as stated by Butler (1974: 23), twenty-five percent of all suicides in the United States occur in persons over the age of sixty-five.

Butler urges society to take a more balanced view of aging. He contradicts the stereotypes by relating the following information: Aging people are as diverse as people of other periods in life, and their patterns of aging vary according to many variables. The majority of aging people live in the community and are ambulatory. Many physical and socio-economic forces interweave to contribute to the total picture of aging. Aging people

tend to be reflective rather than impulsive. They have learned this lesson through life-experiences. Many are employable, productive and creative, and many enjoy leaving their mark through the young, as well as through ideas and institution.

Aging in Language

One of the most subtle but pervasive influences of culture on our attitudes is our language: the words we use to identify or describe a person or group; the derivations, definitions, and connotations of these words; their synonyms and antonyms, and the context in which they are used (Palmore 1990: 78). Our language often supports ageism in all of these ways. Furthermore, there is considerable evidence that our language influences our perceptions and prejudices (Berelson & Steiner 1964; Palmore 1962).

Covey (1988) analyzed English terms for older people throughout history and found that these terms reflected the "decline in status of the elderly and the increased focus on the debilitating effects of aging" (1988: 297). He also found that terms for old women have a much longer history of negative connotations than those for old men because women not only faced a long history of ageism, but also sexism and religious persecution.

Palmore (1990) examined current definitions of *old* in the 1987 version of Webster's Dictionary and found that the etymology of *old* has positive connotations: it is akin to the Latin *alere* (to nourish), *alescere* (to grow), and *altus* (high, deep). Furthermore, of the 17 meanings, 13 are neutral (*ancient, of long standing, advanced in years*) or positive (*venerable, experienced*). However, 4 meanings have negative connotations: *showing the effects of time or use: worn; no longer vigorous, no longer in use: discarded, obsolete; and showing the characteristics of age (looked old at 20)*.

Furthermore, examining *Webster's Thesaurus* (Laird 1985), Palmore (1990) found

75 synonyms listed for the two meanings that apply to old people or things. Of these synonyms, Palmore discovered 57 (76%) which are usually perceived as negative, including:

(No longer vigorous) past one's prime, debilitated, infirm, inactive, deficient, enfeebled, decrepit, exhausted, tired, impaired, anemic, broken down, wasted, doddering, senile, on the shelf, ancient, gone to seed, with one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel.
 (Worn) time-worn, worn-out, thin, patched, ragged, faded, used, in holes, rubbed off, mended, broken-down, fallen to pieces, tumbled down, fallen in, given way, long used, out of use, rusted, crumbled, past usefulness, dilapidated, weather-beaten, ramshackle, battered, shattered, shabby, castoff, decayed, antiquated, decaying, stale, useless, tattered, in rags, torn, moth-eaten.

Only 3 synonyms were positive: *venerable*, *matured*, *seasoned*; and thus, Palmore concluded that the majority of synonyms for *old* as applied to people or things are negative, a few are positive, and the remainder were neutral or ambiguous (*aged*, *elderly*, *gray*, etc.). However, he further suggests that although the word *old* may not necessarily have negative definitions or connotations, many of them tend to support ageism.

Nuessel (1982) analyzed the language employed to depict elders and found it to be "overwhelmingly negative in scope." Furthermore, he found that many ageist terms are doubly offensive as they contain both ageist and sexist references such as; *biddy*, *crone*, *hag*, and *old maid*.

As noted by Palmore (1990), many adjectives do not specifically refer to elders, but are often associated with being old, such as *cantankerous*, *constipated*, *cranky*, *crotchety*, *eccentric*, *feeble-minded*, *frumpy*, *garrulous*, *grumpy*, *rambling*, *toothless*, and *wrinkled*. Even the adjective *retired* may have negative connotations due to its alternate meanings of *withdrawn* or *gone to bed*. As a result, some retired elders try to counteract this connotation by saying they are "actively retired", "partially retired", or "retired but busier than ever".

A more basic and subtle way in which our language encourages ageism is the equating of chronological age with various positive or negative characteristics. For example, the phrase *young at heart* means alert, active, vigorous, fresh, innovative, and fun-loving; all of which are positive characteristics. The implication, of course, is that the "old at heart" are dull, passive, slow, stale, old-fashioned, and wet blankets. Similarly, a "youthful figure" is one that is trim, beautiful, and attractive. By implication, an "old figure" would be fat, ugly, and unattractive. There are numerous examples of such equations. "Youthful skin" means skin that is unblemished, unwrinkled, soft, and smooth. "Aged skin" means blemished, wrinkled, rough, and dry. To "stay young" means to stay healthy, alert, vigorous, active, and beautiful; whereas, to "grow old" implies becoming unhealthy, senile, weak, passive, and ugly. There are many more such examples.

Palmore (1990: 80) suggests that it would seem that chronological age terms often become euphemisms or code for positive or negative characteristics that one would rather not name overtly. People often think it is more polite or tactful to use terms such as "old" or "aging" rather than decrepit or senile; however, he states, the problem which arises from using such terms as euphemisms for negative characteristics is that they tend to reinforce the stereotype that most old people have these negative characteristics.

Image of the Aged in the Media

In Canadian society, people learn to be prejudiced against the old. As suggested by Novak (1996: 5), these negative views have come from many sources throughout history. In his *History of Old Age*, Minois (1989) quotes a Greek philosopher from the seventh century BC: "Happy are they who die at the age of 60, since once painful old age has arrived, which renders man ugly and useless, his heart is no longer free of evil cares"

(Minois 1987: 47). Within Shakespeare's seven ages of man, the final stage is 'second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything'. Shakespeare's sixteenth century evocation of the aging process describes the experience as one of inevitable dysfunction and disintegration. Unfortunately, the recurrent negative perception of old age persists within the twenty-first century.

Berman and Sobkowska-Ashcroft (1986,1987) reviewed the treatment of older people in great books from the Bible to those of the twentieth century, and found that comedies predominantly make fun of older people. Furthermore, in philosophy, literature, and theater, they found that "negative traits outnumber positive traits by about two to one" (Berman & Sobkowska-Ashcroft 1986: 141).

Towler (1983) analyzed five hundred of the most popular current books for children (kindergarten to grade 6) and fifty of the most popular television shows. He found that older people had not only minimal representation, but also, older characters displayed shallow role and character development. He concluded that the media gave children a biased and misleading view of old age.

Other mass media also foster prejudice against older people. Newspaper stories, for example, occasionally identify older people as a cause of rising health care costs in Canada. Harding and Neysmith (1984) assert that this practice overlooks the fundamental reasons for rising health care costs, such as cuts to government funding and increased expenditure in technological research and development, and creates a negative image of older people. Moreover, jokes create and demonstrate a negative perception of not only old age, but of older people as well (Davies 1977). Demos and Jache (1981) studied humorous birthday cards and discovered that greeting cards typically focused upon physical and mental decline

associated with aging. Furthermore, the aforementioned cards also focused upon age concealment, and most took a negative view of aging. Palmore (1971) studied attitudes directed at older people in humour. He examined 264 jokes within ten popular joke books and found that one-quarter of the jokes took a positive view of aging, one-fifth were of a neutral view, and more than half demonstrated a negative attitude to aging or the aged. He also found a double standard with reference to jokes concerning age: Jokes about women, more often than those about men, portrayed older people negatively.

Television is a very important mass medium in North American society; and the content of programs has the potential to heavily influence the socialization of its viewers. A multitude of studies have demonstrated several ways in which television supports ageism, or the negative stereotyping of old people. First, there are few elder characters portrayed in prime time programs, a meager 6 percent (Ansello 1978). Second, there is a sexist bias among the elders that are portrayed. Only 10 percent of the people on TV over 65 are female (Davis & Davis 1985), and those few older women are apt to be portrayed negatively (Gerbner, Grass, Signorielli & Morgan 1980). Older women tend to be comic or eccentric figures and are likely to be treated disrespectfully. In contrast, older men are given increased sexual attractiveness as they age, often based upon increased social power. Third, elders in night time television series were found to be predominantly "bad guys", prone to failure, and generally unhappy (Aronoff 1974). Another study found that older characters were rated as less attractive, sociable, warm, and intelligent compared to younger characters (Peterson 1973). Fourth, television's portrayal of elders in news and documentary programming tends to be negative. The elderly in the news usually have some serious problem or have suffered some disaster that is the basis for human interest or

commentary (Atchley 1988). Fifth, elders in commercials are less likely to be physically active and more likely to have health problems than younger people (Harris & Feinberg 1977). Elders are over-represented in commercials for health aids, and totally absent from commercials for clothing, appliances, cars, and cleaning products. This supports the stereotype that most elders are inactive and sick (Palmore 1990).

The terms and adjectives in our language(s) associated with age and the aging, and the portrayal of the aged within the media further contribute to our learned and preconceived notions of the elderly, and their location and status within Canadian society. We have become accustomed to the language used in contemporary studies on the aging population: words and phrases such as 'burden', 'danger', the 'demographic time bomb' and the 'rising tide'. Considering these terms and the dominant biomedical model that aging is a process of inevitable decline, it is not difficult to understand how 'ageism' has come about (Glendenning 1997: 7).

The Consequence of Ageism

Based upon our analysis of stereotypes, language terms, and the representation of the elderly within the media; the aged within Canada suffer from the imposition of negative images: images which do not accurately represent their everyday realities and aspirations (Featherstone & Wernick 1995). Age prejudice⁴, or ageism, is a dislike of aging and older people based on the belief that aging makes people unattractive, unintelligent, asexual, unemployable, and senile (Comfort 1976). Although extreme adherence to age prejudice is relatively low (approximately 25% in American studies), most Canadians probably subscribe to some erroneous beliefs about aging, and have at least a mild degree of

⁴ Prejudice is an unfavourable attitude toward a category of persons based on negative traits assumed to apply uniformly to all members of the category.

prejudice against aging and the aged (Atchley 1988). The existence and enforcement of a mandatory retirement age within the majority of Canadian businesses attests to this fact (Baker 1988).

The presence and reality of ageism, and its discriminatory consequences may be best demonstrated by means of an example: aged workers and the Canadian labour force. Ageism within the work force often prevents the unemployed worker over the age of forty from finding work; and the older the worker, the more difficulty in finding employment. However, although older workers may not adapt as readily to new technology, they are generally more stable, reliable, consistent, and loyal employees than younger workers (Hendricks & Hendricks 1977; Koyl 1977). Unfortunately, as noted by Barfield (1988: 8),

Old people, particularly in industrial societies today, are seen as a 'problem category', barred from the labour force by age but at the same time denounced as burdens on their juniors. Ideologies of progress exacerbate this bias by claiming that this year's model is superior to last year's, and that older versions of humanity might as well be trashed.

Furthermore, much of the difficulty of the over-45 age category finding employment is related to insurance and pension concerns. As older workers are more susceptible to illnesses and injuries and are more likely to require and acquire more medical expenses; the higher the percentage of older workers in a firm; the higher the company's insurance rates.

Work has been defined as the foundation of human culture, since there are no beliefs, values, or behaviour without a material setting, and no material setting without work. In industrial societies, humans are occupied and preoccupied with work; hence the term 'occupations'. During introductions and when initiating conversation with new acquaintances, it is often the first thing to which we inquire (Barfield 1998). What we do

in terms of an occupation tends to define our identities and worth. And yet, as a consequence of false stereotypes, attitudes and myths of aging and the aged, and the fact that people act upon their beliefs, ageism emerges.

Although there is no Canadian law specifying that a person must retire at a certain age (usually 65), collective agreements and the normal retirement age accepted for a particular job often result in an employee's forced retirement. Trade unions generally perceive this as a means of opening up job opportunities for younger people. In fact, retirement at age 65 is so customary that the Supreme Court of Canada has usually supported the employer in the event of a dispute (Macaulay 2001).

Mandatory retirement, in many instances, disproportionately affects women due to the fact that many of them require leaves of absence from their careers during childbearing years. When they return to the workforce, they have a much more limited amount of time in which to acquire and accumulate pension benefits for their retirement years. Furthermore, the loss of a partner through death or marital breakup increases this pressure.

Thus, regardless of ability, at 65 years of age, the 'elderly' must retire not only from their means of financial independence, but also from a position which granted them status within the community. Given that work is so important in modern life, it is not surprising that when elderly individuals are compelled to give up their work due to age and mandatory retirement, they often suffer from pangs of worthlessness.

Within Canadian Aboriginal societies, however, Native groups have a remarkably different perception of the aged and their abilities. Modernization has not occurred to the same degree among Aboriginal Canadian groups. Within Aboriginal societies, social change tends to be less rapid; hence accumulated knowledge by an individual is likely to be

more relevant and valued. Furthermore, the status of elders has been maintained not only because of a resurgence of political awareness of minority rights and government support for multiculturalism (Amoss 1981; Vanderburg, 1987), but also because they possess a stable knowledge base that is inseparable from an established sense of identity. In the following chapter we will examine the role and location of the aged within Canadian Aboriginal societies.

CHAPTER FOUR

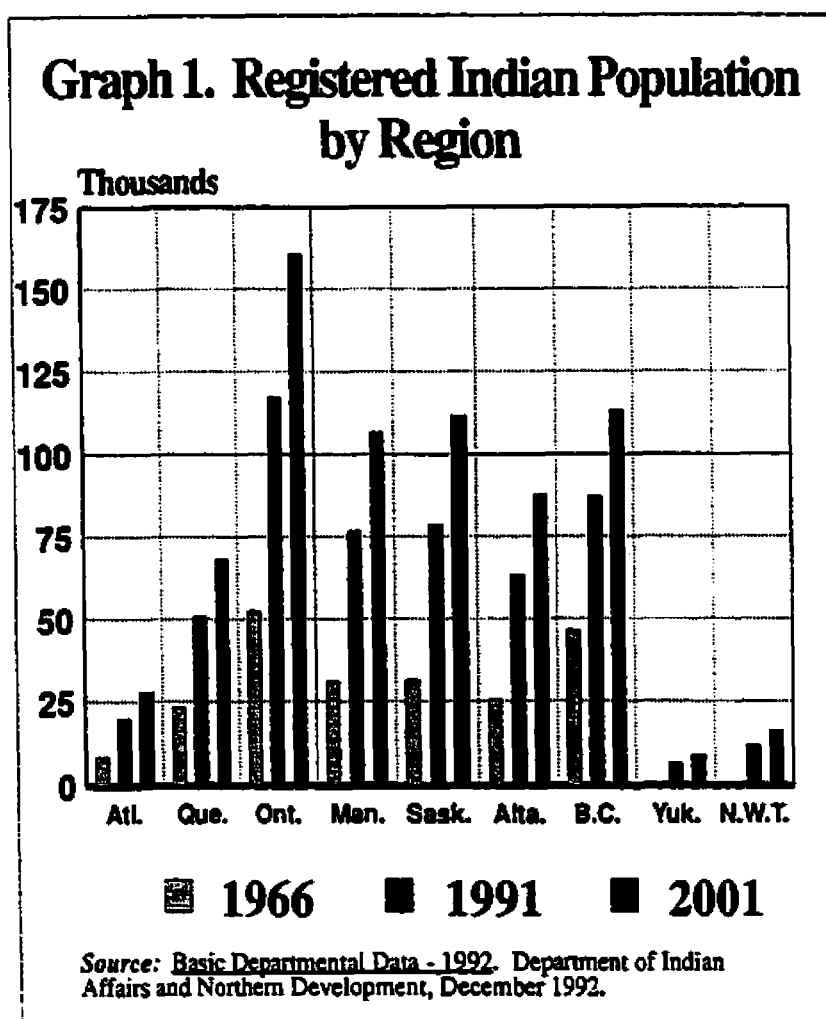
From Old To Elder: The Transitional Role of Canadian Aboriginal Elders

In recent years, Canadians have become increasingly aware of the difficulties faced by Aboriginal communities, as well as of the efforts these communities are making to heal themselves and to revitalize a sense of pride in their heritage, culture and traditions. Aboriginal Elders have a fundamental concern about the lack of knowledge of non-Aboriginal Canadians in regards to Native peoples, their culture and history. They believe this is directly responsible for the current misunderstandings between First Peoples and other Canadians (RCAP 2000). In this chapter I hope to address the present situation of Aboriginal Elders, their history and their message of the future. In fact, I believe Canadians may only benefit from a deeper understanding of Aboriginal culture and traditions, especially in regards of their treatment of the elderly. In order to provide this understanding, this chapter will employ and refer to the only recent data which has been gathered concerning Canadian Aboriginal peoples with reference to the aged and aging process. Most of these data are derived from a single case study of the Anicinabe people of Georgian Bay and the Inuit.

Because Aboriginal seniors have not been the subject of any appreciable research in Canada prior to 1994 (MacDonell 1994), there is a serious lack of knowledge about their situation, needs and concerns. It is often assumed that family and other members of the Aboriginal community provide for the needs of seniors, following traditional values and norms. Yet cultural, socio-economic and health-related problems seem to be destabilizing

Aboriginal communities and families in such a way that the well-being of senior members may be at risk. Policies and programs designed to benefit Canadian seniors as a whole do not appear to respond adequately to their needs and concerns (MacDonell 1994).

The estimated one million Canadians who claim Native ancestry make up approximately 3.5% of the total Canadian population. Of these, 521 000 are considered status Indians, of which 316 000 reside on a reserve. (See Graph 1 for location)



The remainder are non-status Indians, Métis and Inuit. The Native population is not a homogeneous group; thus, attempts to characterize their position in Canadian society are

plagued with both semantic and methodological debates.⁵ There are for example, major differences between Native peoples in the North and South and Aboriginal people living on reserves versus those living off reserve. These include differences in language, lifestyles, needs and the ability of the individual to deal with the physical, health and social aspects of aging. Nevertheless, there are similarities among different groups and the generalizations presented must be viewed in this context.⁶

The population and growth rate of status Indians is demonstrated in Graph 2. The data reflect the high growth rate mid-century, during the 1960s and '70s. Since 1981, there has been a steady decrease, although it remains much higher than that of the general population- presently, nearly twice that of the general population.⁷ Until the mid 1960s Canada had a typical pyramidal age structure in which more people are located in the younger age groups than in older age groups. More recently, as Beaujot (1991) notes, the age structure resembles that of an oriental jar; the bulk of the population is located in the middle part of the age group structure.⁸ The Native population is and will continue to be younger than the Canadian population for some time to come. The median age is 10 years younger (26 vs. 38) than that for the general population and the gap is expected to continue.

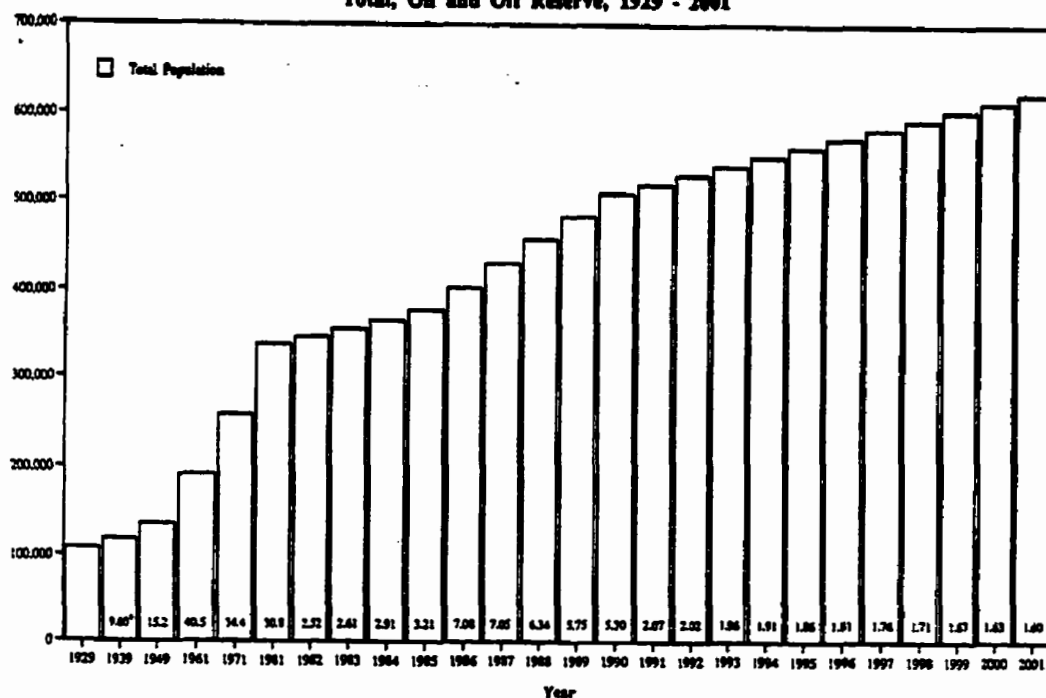
⁵Native is a generic term used to include Métis, Indian (status and non-status) and Inuit. Status Indian and Inuit are considered legal terms and are under the responsibility of the federal government while other Aboriginal categories are generally considered to be of provincial responsibility. The term Aboriginal, as it is used in the constitution includes Indian, Inuit, and Metis. Other terms such as 'Aboriginals' are employed to refer to specific groups who designate their political entity that way.

⁶The differences are most important in terms of policy implementation and the implications of policy. For example, the question of whether funding for health issues should be directed to better health (e.g., detoxification centers, anti-drug programs) or prolonged life (i.e., liver transplants, open heart surgeries) depends upon one's position in society. While non-Native Canadians want a focus on the former, Native people are concerned with the latter.

⁷The annual growth rate for status Indians peaked at 7.7% in the mid 1980s as a result of Bill C-31.

⁸The median age increased from 17 in the mid-1850s to 26 in the early 1970s, and today is approximately 32.

Graph 2. Population Growth of Status Indians:
Total, On and Off Reserve, 1929 - 2001



* Growth Rate

SOURCE: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, *Highlights of Aboriginal Conditions, 1981 - 2001, Part 1: Demographic Trends*, 1989, 21.

The aging Native population is increasing in size as mortality rates have decreased substantially over the past 50 years as a result of the increasing number of health facilities being made available to Native people, a reduction in communicable diseases and the provision of health services.⁹ Consequently, the aging Native population (65+) has increased steadily from 2.2% to 4.8% between 1951 and 1991.¹⁰ These figures are far from comparable to those for the general population of 7.8% and 10.6%. The population aged 65 and over is growing at a rate of three times that of the overall growth rate for both groups. The number over 80 years of age grew at four times the rate.

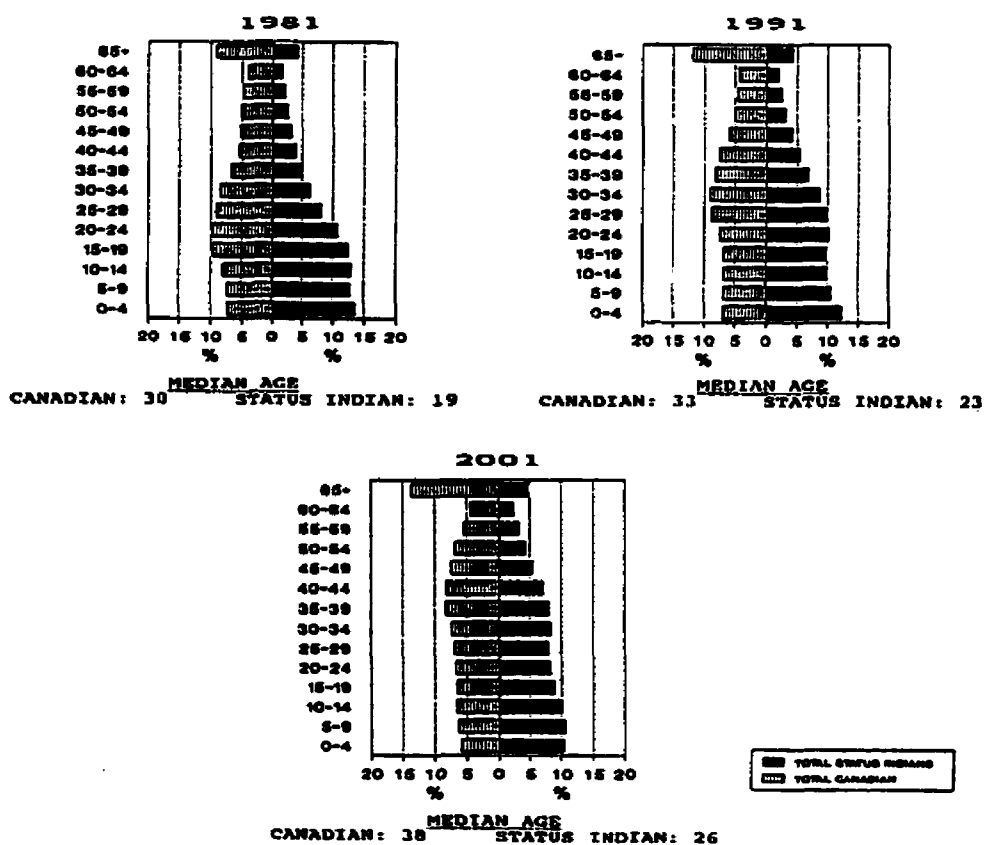
Current data have suggested that the total number of status Indians over the age of

⁹New forms of communicable diseases are now affecting Native people, for example AIDS. Furthermore, the incidence of diseases such as diabetes has increased in the Native population at alarming rates.

¹⁰Strain and Chappell (1989) employ the age of 50 as the definition of elderly for Native people due to a small number in this group.

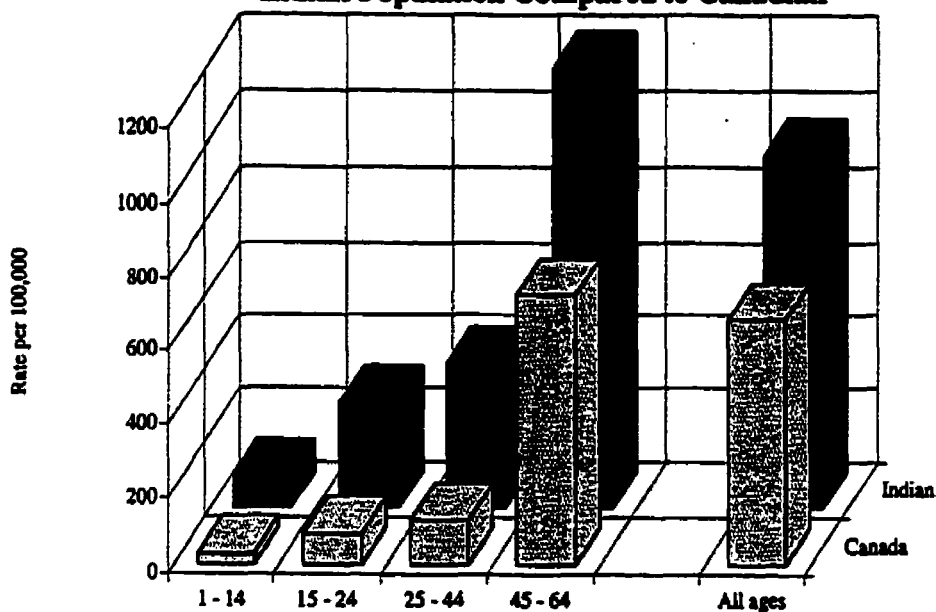
65 will increase by 1.4% annually between 1991 and 2001. As Stone and Frenken (1988: 35) state, there is a "veritable population explosion among seniors of more advanced age which will not end in the near future." Both groups are aging; however, the cohort differs. (See Graph 3).

**Graph 3. Age Structure of the Populations:
Canada and Total Status Indians**



Native people are aging from youth to working age, whereas the general Canadian population is aging into retirement. While these figures reveal substantial increases, it should be noted that Native people, on average, live a decade less than other Canadians. (See Graph 4).

**Graph 4. Death Rates Between Age 1 and Age 65
Indian Population Compared to Canadian**



Source: Ellen Bobet, *Inequalities in Health: A Comparison of Indian and Canadian Mortality Trends*, Health and Welfare Canada, Ottawa

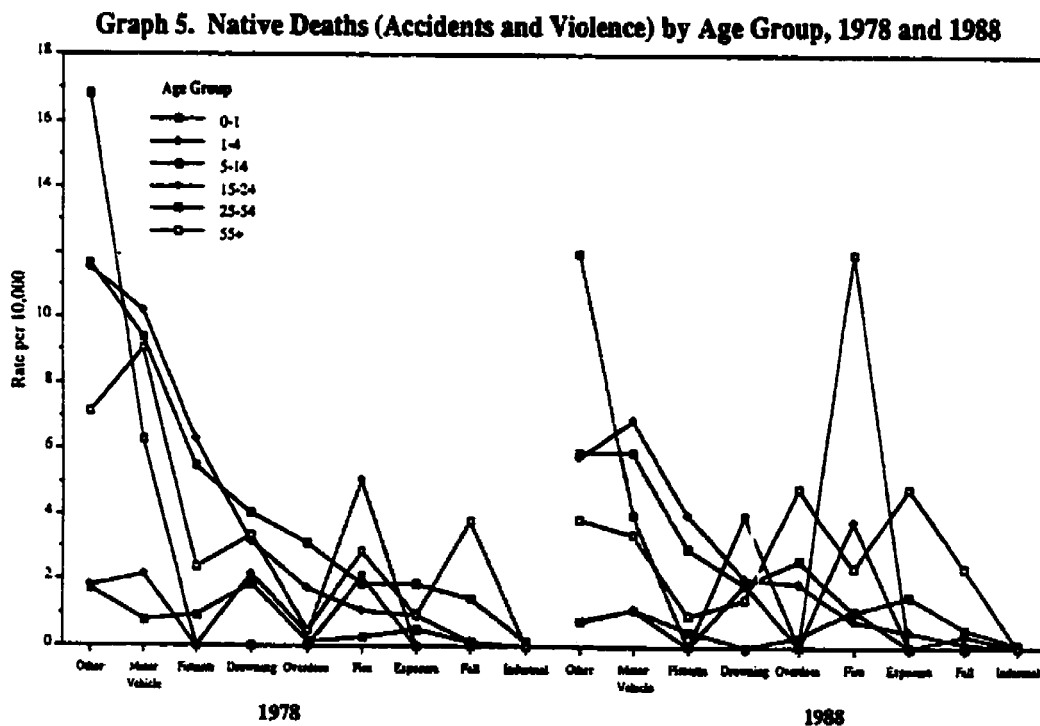
The majority of Native people can be characterized as being a part of the underclass of Canadian society, i.e., they represent the poor, uneducated¹¹ and unemployed.¹² The increased life expectancy of Natives will result in a larger population of elderly with their own special needs. At present, life expectancy at birth for Native females is 47 (compared to 75 for non-Native females) and 46 and 68 for Native and non-Native males, respectively. Furthermore, Native people suffer from many more health related problems¹³ and accidental deaths (see Graph 5) than the general population due to inadequate nutrition, substandard living conditions, low levels of education and poverty. In addition, while the

¹¹A recent study found that 75% of Native people over the age of 50 years living in the Southern part of Saskatchewan had no formal education, while 50% in the North had no formal education.

¹²Few older Native people have formally participated in the wage labour force. As a result, many older Native people are totally dependent on government assistance for their livelihood.

¹³The Saskatchewan Senior Citizens' Provincial Council (1987) found that the number of Native elderly who rated their health as either 'fair' or 'poor' was 20% higher than those of the general senior Canadian population.

average Canadian spends 13 years of his/her lifetime with disability (and normally at the end of life), Native people have disability for over twice that duration, throughout their life. This fact has remained constant for the past century and underscores the underclass position Native people have occupied for an extended time.



Bienvenue and Havens (1986) identified the amount of help provided to older Native people in Manitoba by family and friends (informal assistance) as well as through formal assistance channels. Their results showed that for certain dimensions of life (e.g., meals, shopping, repairs), older Native people used much more informal assistance than did non-Natives. Nevertheless, the overall need for formal assistance is much more pervasive for older Native persons than for the non-Native population.

Elders

In the Ojibwa world, there are Four Hills of Life: infancy, youth, adulthood, and old age. In order for an individual to live a full life, he or she must pass through experiences unique to each stage of life. This personal and spiritual evolution culminates in old age, generally a time of wisdom and reflection. Among the Gwich'in, people are considered old only when they have seen five generations. It is then an individual can be considered an Elder. The Old Ones have received gifts they can return to the community: the gifts of experience and knowledge (RCAP 2000).

Age itself does not make one an Elder, however. Most Aboriginal peoples have a special word or name for Elders that distinguishes them from what we would call senior citizens. In Inuit communities, for example, elderly people are called *inutuqak*, but those considered Elders are referred to as *angijukqauqqatigiit*, a 'union of leaders' (RCAP 2000).

Although easily mythologized, the term 'Elder' is usually defined first and foremost on the basis of age. In situations where true knowledge (based upon experience) is required, some elders inevitably are able of contributing more than others. Most, if not all, individuals over a certain age are granted the potential to make specific contributions- the opposite to the norms within the larger Canadian population.

Aboriginal Elders are generally respected individuals who have amassed a great deal of knowledge, wisdom and experience over the period of many years. They are individuals who have also set examples and have contributed something to the good of others. In the process, they usually sacrifice something of themselves, whether time, money or effort. Elders, Old Ones, Grandfathers and Grandmothers don't only preserve ancestral knowledge; they live it (RCAP 2000).

Elders are generally, although not exclusively, older members of the community. In many Aboriginal cultures, old age is perceived as conferring characteristics generally not present in earlier years, including insight, wisdom and authority. Traditionally, those who reached old age were the counselors, guides and resources for younger generations. Elders were qualified to advise based on their knowledge of life, tradition and experience (RCAP 2000).

Ideally Elders possess special gifts. They are considered exceptionally wise in the ways and teachings of their culture. They are recognized for their wisdom, their stability, and their ability to understand the appropriateness of actions in specific particular situations. Their community looks to and relies upon them for guidance and sound judgment. They are expected to be caring and to share the benefits of their experience with others in the community.

The community will define who they have as...community Elders. But in the true sense of Elders, they are people who are spiritual leaders, who have dedicated their lives and continue until they go to the Spirit World...They live the culture, they know the culture, and they have been trained in it. These are the true Elders. We have some Elders you might never, ever hear of. They stay in the bush, they stay in their communities, but they are Elders. They are spiritual Elders, and they live that way of life.

Elder Vern Harper, Toronto Ontario, 25 June 1992
(RCAP-Final Report, 2000)

For the Mohawk Nation, Elder is a sacred title. The Ojibwa word for Elder, *Kichenishnabe*, means 'Great People'. To Inuit communities in the Keewatin region of the Northwest Territories, Elders are "those who are able to see what they used to do and what they remember from what they learned from their parents and grandparents" (RCAP-Final Report, 2000).

Although generally respected, the category and institution of Elder as well as the accompanying defining character traits of Elders, have in the past been idealized. While Elder is a distinguished title and role, traditional Elders do not seek status; ideally status flows from the people. Moreover, communities are expected to elevate their Elders; whereas Elders are expected to keep their feet planted firmly and humbly on the ground. Even though they have experienced a great deal, elders are young in relation to their culture's ancient knowledge. Elders step to the fore, but often only when asked. It is the community's responsibility to seek out the Elders' gifts of knowledge and insight. Rooted in the morals of the Creator(s), Elders are perceived to be the conscience of the community. Elders are neither prescriptive nor intrusive in their teachings, however. They live their lives by example, according to the laws of the Creator(s). When asked in an appropriate manner, they offer their teachings: teachings which originate with the Creator(s) and have been passed from generation to generation. Ideally, Elders will recount the stories and legends that flow through their culture without imposing their personal interpretations of the lessons to be drawn from them (RCAP 2000).

They are good listeners, a quality born of humility and patience. For people with an oral tradition, listening is an important and essential skill. One does not presume to know; one listens and learns. Elders may be men or women. Both have many common responsibilities as the keepers of wisdom, but it is acknowledged that men and women have different and distinctive life experiences. In some situations, their roles and responsibilities are different, for example, the practice of midwifery (RCAP 2000).

In the Métis Nation, the title of 'Senator' is bestowed on individuals in recognition of their insight and knowledge. It carries many of the same connotations as the term Elder in

Aboriginal cultures. The term of 'Elder' has become increasingly popular within the last thirty years in order to refer to Aboriginal individuals in their elder years. Prior to the 1960s, elderly individuals were perceived much like the elderly within the larger Canadian population: as old people. In the late 1960s, triggered by a sudden wave of seekers, and the resurgence of Aboriginal culture and identity, Elders were forced to rethink and redefine themselves and their roles (Couture 1996). The term of Elder, then, came to connote aged Aboriginal persons not only as advanced in years, but also as wise and knowledgeable. As an adjective, 'elder' is a term which commands respect and deference; as a noun it is a recognized social and political category or institution based upon age. In some Aboriginal societies, Elders are called Grandmother and Grandfather, titles that acknowledge their role as teachers and wise ones. These familial designations also allude to the important role of Elders in raising children. Elders apply their spiritual understanding of relationships among the elements of creation to relationships within the family and the community.

Elders play a fundamental role within contemporary society. As many Aboriginal people rediscover themselves in their culture, Elders are perceived to be living connections to the original teachings of the Creator(s). Because of a breakdown in traditional Aboriginal culture however, Elders have had a diminished role in modern Aboriginal society:

It seems that time has taken its toll with the new ways. Our Elders' ways and teachings have now become unheard by young generations. Their once powerful guidance and sense of direction were completely ignored. We are now lost. There was, it seemed, no hope. We cannot go back into the past.
Robert Norwegian, Calgary Alberta, 27 May 1993
(RCAP-Final Report, 2000)

It is precisely because of this loss of direction that many Aboriginal people are looking to

Elders for guidance. It is said that Elders remind us of our responsibility to the future. Looking to the future and not the past, their teachings become the foundation on which to build healthy, self-determining communities.

The Anicinabe of Georgian Bay

Vanderburgh's (1987) study of the Anicinabe of Georgian Bay has provided some very useful and important data with reference to the aging process within Canadian Aboriginal cultures. Furthermore, her data and analysis challenge the validity of Cowgill's (1974) modernization model of aging and demonstrate that indeed, this model of aging may be in fact inapplicable to the aging process within Canadian Aboriginal cultures.

Traditional Elderhood

In pre-reserve times, and prior to the influence of missionaries and schools, elder status was understood partly in terms of the individual's progress through the life-cycle. Those who were grandparents, or who belonged to the grandparental generation, tended to be perceived (and to perceive themselves) as elders. However, the nature of the individual's contribution to the survival of the kin group was another important aspect of the meaning of elderhood (Vanderburgh 1987: 102).

The younger adult and parental members of the group were generally occupied with the provision of daily subsistence, and thus, had little time for child rearing. Those perceived as elders, then, played a major role in the socialization of new members of the group; this socialization being a major contribution to group survival. Thus, any individual who was no longer actively involved in the subsistence round tended to be viewed, whatever his or her age, as an elder. Frequently the socializing elder was a grandparent, but as noted by Vanderburgh (1987: 102), the Anicinabe child referred to anyone in the

grandparental generation, or who fulfilled an elder's role, as "grandparent".

"Grandparents" expected, and received, deference and respect from "grandchildren". Within these broad guidelines the relationship between elder and child was warm and almost fraternal. In contrast, the relationship between parent and child was patterned along authoritarian lines. "Grandparents", then, were repositories of knowledge, of essential cultural information, and were responsible for the transmission of information to the "grandchildren".

This aspect of the elder's role is not unique to any one group; it has been widely documented in North American Native groups, and indeed among traditional cultures around the world. Amoss and Harrell (1981) employed Levi-Strauss's nature/culture distinction to explain the existence of such a relationship. The young represent "nature", and must be transformed into cultural beings; this transformation is achieved by the elderly, who represent "culture". The aged represent not only the general aspect of "culture" as opposed to "nature", but they also embody a specific culture:

Whereas young children are unruly and unmannerly, without language, shame, instruction, or memory, the old are dignified, masters of their Native language and its oral traditions, sensitive to honor, well versed in customary law.... They are also more fully committed [than young people] to their own cultural system, its modes of expression, its technology, its dominant themes, and its aesthetic values (Amoss and Harrell 1981: 15).

Anicinabe elders, as within many other Native groups were (and still are) experts on both mythic and local history, on Native language usage, on healing and (to a lesser extent today due to the depth of missionizing) on ritual. In sum, they controlled the core values of their culture as these were embodied in myths/legends and in the forms of their language. Anicinabe core values have always been concerned with what are perceived as the most

basic aspects of survival: the control of social interaction and of the "supernatural", both essential for survival and success at the group and individual levels (Vanderburgh 1987: 103).

Social interaction involved not only human persons, but also the interaction of humans with "other-than-human" persons, i.e., animal and supernatural persons (Hallowell 1960). In addition, the incremental building up of individual power during the life course through proper social relations with the supernatural was the major road to success and renown. Survival to elder status underlined and validated the existence of this personal power, and elders could transmit some of their power to children through the naming ceremony, as well as through the passing on of specific skills in dealing with the supernatural (Vanderburgh 1987: 103).

Teaching was done largely through oral narratives, and the functional model of elderhood is embodied in the two forms of Anicinabe elder's narratives (Hallowell 1960). Anicinabe dialects distinguish between the myth or sacred tale and the anecdotal narrative. Myths deal with the exploits of cultural heroes and "other-than-human" persons, and in these tales elders passed on the core values that control social interaction. The anecdotal (or experiential) narratives are based on real events in the lives of real people, either the narrator or of someone he has known or heard. Into this form of narrative the elders incorporated information about survival techniques of proven worth in both known and new situations (Vanderburgh 1987: 104). New situations called for new ways of coping, and elders transmitted not only received cultural information but also new information. Amoss (1981a, 1981b) has noted that Coast Salish elders not only pass on received cultural information (tradition), but that they also innovate freely, creating new ceremonies based on

a combination of traditional and contemporary belief.

Erosion of Elders' Role

With the arrival of Christian missionaries and schools the role of elders as transmitters of vital survival information began to break down. Between the 1880s and the 1950s some Aboriginal teachings and practices were forbidden in Canada and familial education was discouraged (Elliot 1999). By the 1960s Aboriginal teachings and practices had virtually disappeared from the larger Canadian public realm. The transmission of cultural information was interrupted and changed within Aboriginal society by many factors; including the participation of missionaries and school teachers who attempted to control the cultural information perceived as vital to survival in the larger Canadian society (Vanderburgh 1987: 104). It should be noted, however, that many Aboriginal people were able to adapt and adopt a new perspective by combining Christianity with traditional teachings.

As the context of survival changed, so too did the nature of the information. Traditional knowledge was denigrated by the new non-Aboriginal purveyors of cultural information as they transmitted Christian values, literacy and mathematics and the skills of manual training and domestic science. Elders' roles were often not only usurped, but their prestige also often disappeared. Once vital, contributing members of Native society many were reduced to the status of liability. It became much less common for families to assign children the coveted status of helper to a beloved elder. The physical toll of aging brought about a loss of autonomy for the elders, and many were forced into various non-Native care institutions (Vanderburgh 1987). One must consider, then, that many elderly Aboriginal people in the present are a product of the residential schools that essentially destroyed

Native culture (Elliot 1999).

Older Aboriginal people are experiencing double jeopardy; they have been forgotten by their own people and ignored by the rest of Canadian society. Their lack of knowledge of the mainstream society and ability to participate (i.e., a lack of social skills such as formal education, and training in non-traditional work) have kept them from voicing their concerns. As a result of poor formal education (dislocating social experiences and unequal access to opportunity), and their compliance with a traditional system which has prevented them from taking on an allegiance to the industrialized system, few efforts have been made to incorporate this generation into the mainstream society (Frideres 1994).

Contemporary Elders

In searching for a model for the study of role adaptation under conditions of socio-cultural change, Landy (1974) has reviewed the data on the impact of Western medicine on traditional healers. He defines three categories of role adaptation to the process of modernization: adaptive, attenuated, and emergent roles (Landy 1974: 106). The "adaptive" role involves change in the direction of a new synthesis of tradition with modern science and technology. In other words, a traditional elder in the "adaptive" role would not only receive new information, but would also process that information and create new cultural forms, while retaining the indigenous community as his major reference and membership group. Amoss' description of the contemporary role of Coast Salish elders closely approximates Landy's "adaptive" role (Amoss 1981a, 1981b).

The category of "attenuated" role involves a conscious decision to maintain the traditional role within the indigenous community and the acceptance of diminishing prestige associated with an increasingly obsolete role. The modernizing community, in

- "attenuated" role adaptation, views the modern role as superior to the traditional role. An attenuated role may be illustrated through reference to the debate concerning the practice of traditional healing techniques as opposed to modern medical practices. Modern medical intervention, such as the use of antibiotics, is often deemed to be not only more effective than traditional and natural healing techniques, but is also encouraged. Thus, Elders who practice the traditional healing techniques may lose status in their communities in favour of physicians.

Landy's third category, the "emergent" role, involves the appearance of an entirely new role, not previously known in the indigenous society but having an analogue in the modern system. An elder who fills an "emergent" role retains his membership in the indigenous community, but the role reference group is the modern society, and he or she may find him or herself in competition with members of that system who fill the analogue roles. For example, Native elders who are involved in alcohol and drug-addiction counseling (an "emergent" role) are in competition with non-Native social workers. Amoss (1981) has suggested that for the aged the critical issue in social change is the specific context of change, i.e., whether that context provides them with "opportunities to reestablish themselves in useful roles" (Amoss 1981a: 228).

Those who attain the status of elder today should have had significant socializing experiences with past elders in their own childhood. This is related to the major contemporary function of modern elders, their role as validators of Aboriginal identity (Amoss 1981b: 59-62). However, the generation of elders who have received a cultural education from traditional elders is rapidly disappearing.

The current quest for Native self-government has been supported in the recent

report of the Special Committee on Indian Self-Government (Canada 1983), which recommends that each Aboriginal "nation" work out its own governmental policy based on traditional forms of government. Aboriginal "nations" are turning not only to recorded history for this information, but also to the narratives of elders (Vandenburg 1987).

Vandenburg (1987) concludes that elders are still telling stories, although the institutional setting in which they operate has changed. Their stories still reflect the dual function of the elders' role inherent in the two categories of narratives recognized linguistically, maintenance and change, tradition and transformation. They pass on the core values of the old culture in the myths they heard in their childhood, but in their anecdotal narratives they share with today's youth their own experiences in survival, in coping with modernization.

The context in which senior Native people were raised was substantially different from the surrounding mainstream structure. Today they find that the environment in which they operate is different from the social environment they occupied a half century ago. For example, most older Native people did not leave the reserve/community for prolonged periods of time before they were twenty years of age. In addition, many of the older individuals were born and raised prior to, and during the advent of major changes in our social structure, e.g., urbanization and codes of human rights. Further, many Aboriginal seniors were, or have had contact with those who were raised in a traditional lifestyle (at least in their early lives) and achieved compliance with a culture that would be under siege for the rest of their lives as Canada entered the industrialized economy and fully endorsed the tenets of capitalism. The skills developed by this generation such as tanning hides, tracking animals and other modes of traditional behaviour were of marginal import to the

Canadian economy by mid-century. Traditionally elders were thought to be closer to the spirit world and thus needed to be respected (Kasakoff 1992). De Laguna (1972) notes that older Native people were given a special status, regardless of their formal status in the community. In some cultures, such as those on the Northwest Coast, because it was believed that elders would return to the living world through a form of reincarnation, older people were treated well. Today many Aboriginal Elders are not universally afforded such status (Frideres 1994).

Elders Within the Transitional Phase

Elderly Native people have experienced double alienation, as they have remained outside the mainstream Canadian institutional structure¹⁴ as well as outside the changing Native community. Unable to speak one of the two official languages,¹⁵ these elders have become increasingly distanced not only from the dominant society; but also, they are often increasingly distanced from their own communities as a result of extensive social and political change. Most Aboriginal people, however, have participated in the larger economy for generations, and although the outward show of custom may have changed, the old ideas have been maintained (Laforet & York 1998: 195).

They also found their influence within the Native community diminished as their economic, spiritual and other forms of contributions became less and less important to the functioning of the community. In many cases their role has been reduced to a symbolic function (Block 1979). Further marginalized, many older Native people have sought refuge

¹⁴As the elderly did not constitute an organized vocal group, and because no one knew how to deal with elderly Native people, little was done to help them integrate into Canadian society. In addition, since urban Native people had not formed networks with mainstream institutions such as religious organizations or voluntary associations, they were equally excluded from participating in or soliciting help from mainstream institutions, further intensifying isolation.

¹⁵While younger Native people were generally unilingual (English), most of the older Native people spoke a combination of English and an Aboriginal language but preferred to speak in Aboriginal tongue exclusively.

within their remaining traditional roles, such as within the family unit, e.g., nurturing grandchildren who are without the support of the children's parents.¹⁶ Their ability to salvage self-esteem or self-worth remains in their willingness to take care of the younger generation entrusted to them.¹⁷ While this suggests a symbiotic relationship between the generations, most older Native people are dependent upon outsiders for economic and social support, e.g., social welfare agencies, religious institutions (Strain and Chappell 1989).

Several explanations have been offered to as why the older Native population has found itself outside and peripheral to society. First, as noted previously, individuals are socialized to accept the ideologies inherent to their culture. Once accepted, alteration to these ideologies does not come easily or quickly. As suggested by Michels (1962), an individual's ability to envision new institutional linkages or accept different compliance ideologies is partly a function of the level of technology of the society. For example, individuals who reside in non-industrialized economies are less likely to be exposed to different social and political perspectives and thus, possess a stable and enduring world view. Henry (1963) further suggests that in traditional societies, the majority of individuals have a fixed 'bundle' of desires which, when exceeded, will be redistributed to others. In the present case, most older Native people were raised in a traditional culture in which the pervasive forces of the market economy were different in degree and effect.

Returning to Their Roots

The Aboriginal community, however, is undergoing a traditional, cultural, and

¹⁶Historically elderly couples would live in their own homes, rather than in those of their children, but they would not live alone. A grandchild would live with them, not only helping the elder but also redistributing children, lightening the load for parents.

¹⁷Approximately 50% of the elderly Native population lives in extended, multi-generational families, contributing economically to the family.

spiritual renewal (Ponting 1997). Elders, as keepers of traditional knowledge, are reclaiming not only the status which was once afforded to them, but also an emergent status with traditional cultural underpinnings. As Harold Cardinal (1977: 29) says: "To find the models we need, the first place to look is within ourselves. We have to go back to our elders...". Elders are defined as the "soul" of the Aboriginal experience. Elders are helping to validate and affirm Aboriginal societies in all its aspects. Their wisdom is perceived as coming from deep within their being, reaching into the past in order to link contemporary Aboriginal peoples with their ancestors and traditions. While the wisdom of elders is now enjoying worldwide recognition, it is the practical and sensitive manner in which they approach the intricacies of the natural world which garners them the admiration of their Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal followers (Ponting 1997).

In order to take into account the vast diversity and differences which exist among and within Native groups in Canada, it is necessary to investigate the aged and aging process within a distinctly different group of Aboriginal peoples: the Inuit. With comparatively relatively recent and minimal contact with the larger Canadian culture, the Inuit are presently experiencing the process by which acculturation and modernization has, and still is, drastically altering their lifestyle.

Although the Native peoples of Northern Canada are increasingly experiencing modernization, many still belong to nomadic tribes that live just outside, but in contact with, the modern world. Because of this contact, and acculturation, many Native groups in the North are falling away from their traditions and are adopting the norms and values of the larger Canadian population; including many of the attitudes and behaviours associated with modernization, such as disrespect for their Elders.

The Canadian Inuit

The Inuit are a distinct Aboriginal people in Canada. Inhabiting a predominantly frozen territory, the Inuit and their ancient occupation of the Arctic have become symbols of Canadian northern aspirations, enticing awe and admiration for their ingenious adaptation to a harsh environment (McMillan 1995). Due largely to their inaccessibility and inhospitable climate, Inuit communities within Nunavut and the Northwest Territories of Canada have had substantially less contact with the dominant Canadian culture, and thus have had a significantly different experience with reference to the status of the elderly and the effects of modernization. Unlike the Anicinabe of Georgian Bay, many Inuit communities and cultures have only recently been drastically altered and transformed through the introduction of modernization.

The Canadian Inuit extend from northern Alaska to Greenland, including all of arctic Canada. In Canada, the word "Inuit" (meaning "people"; the singular is "Inuk") has now almost totally replaced "Eskimo" (generally, although probably erroneously, believed to be derived from the Algonkian term meaning "eaters of raw meat") (McMillan 1995). Throughout their vast distribution, the Inuit speak a single language (Inuktitut), although there are a number of dialects.

Although contact with non-Aboriginal people has brought many modernizing influences, early accounts of the traditional system provide information about the role and status of the elderly within Inuit culture.

Among the Inuit, the aged were accorded great respect. They were treated with considerable deference and their words were regarded as final. Murdock (1887-1888) reports that among the Inuit of Point Barrow, "respect for the opinion of the elders is so

great that the people may be said to be practically under what is called 'simple elder rule'" (427). Hughes (1960) records that among the St. Lawrence Island people informants maintained: "Oldest is boss for everything. Eskimos always ask first our oldest one, when we do something" (265). VanStone (1962) observes that

the transition to old age is not clear-cut. Parents whose children are grown, married, and who have moved away from home are not necessarily old by Point Hope standards. Eskimo men seem to age early in terms of appearance, but remain active until relatively advanced years (93).

Guemple (1974) found that among the Qiqiktamiut in Hudson Bay that physical appearance was less important in determining old age than physical capability was. He states:

When a man cannot hunt in mid-winter, when the work is most rigorous, and when the need for food is most pressing, then he will be called "old" by his fellows. Old age comes to a man suddenly; the transition can take place in a single year...Because women's work is less demanding...the decreasing physical capability of a woman does not appear so obviously or dramatically (205).

In these societies, however, the aged are not stigmatized, even though there are social labels for older men and women. This labeling process occurs when the elderly give up the more strenuous chores (Guemple 1969). The definition of old age is related to biological aging, and is initiated by withdrawal of the elderly from active participation in economic or domestic work because of declining strength or health. This labeling, however, can be delayed by a 'renewal' process in which the older man works to complete his hunting in the spring and summer, or takes a younger woman as a wife. For the older woman, this renewal process involves adopting a child she hopes will take care of her in old age (Guemple 1969).

Physical capability however, is only part of the criteria for defining "old age". One

is 'old' in this society when one has grandchildren who have reached the time "when they begin to learn basic work skills in earnest, in other words by age 8 years" (Guemple 1974: 204).

Within the Inuit family, the grandparent-grandchild relationship is one of extreme affection and support, with emphasis upon mutual helpfulness and kindness. The Inuit believe that knowledge increases with age and teaching children is perceived as an appropriate and valuable function of the aged. Instructing children in games, rituals, taboos, and other ancient lore is carried out by grandparents; who are considered repositories of songs, stories, and tribal history as well as monitors of proper behaviour (Holmes & Holmes 1995). The elderly are considered great storytellers, and stories are told both for education and entertainment. Rasmussen (1908) reports of the Polar Inuit that almost every question and every problem is explained by a tale. His informants reported: "Our tales are men's experiences...the experience of the older generations contains truth" (97). Old people also function as 'village newspapers', making it their business to know and tell all of the recent happenings.

Family members always consult their elderly members concerning choice of marriage partners, division of material wealth, and settlement of family disputes. Elders are directly involved in the naming of the children due to their involvement with name-souls. After death the soul associated with the name of the deceased is believed to hover around waiting to be reincarnated in a newborn child. Old people are believed to have special knowledge of the spiritual world, and they inform the child's father if a particular name-soul is agreeable to be given to the new infant.

The elderly play an important role in educating children and adults in economic

skills. Old men are often consulted by their sons as to the proper time to go hunting, how to care for a boat or other equipment, and how to apportion goods or game. Burch (1975) relates that

If some of these [elders] were wiser and more skillful than others, an ambitious young man might undertake to recruit these people to his own local group, or he might go to live with them. In return for food, shelter and protection, they could provide instruction and advice of a kind few of his same-generation kin could offer (219).

Elderly Inuit are believed to have considerable magical or spiritual power. Among the special supernatural capacities supposed to be possessed by the elderly are: the ability to foretell the future; the ability to change one's future through will; the ability to interpret dreams and receive magical formulas within dreams; the ability to 'talk up' winds in order to drive ice offshore; and, the ability to ward off evil spirits. The supernatural power of all old people is believed to be considerable, and it was held that neglect or offenses against an old person could cripple or sicken one's children.

Old age is not glorified in the folklore of most Inuit groups, but many of the gods, heroes, and demons within tales are elderly. For example, the Polar Inuit believe the goddess *Nerivik* is an old woman who lives beneath the water and will not let seal hunters succeed until the village shamans visit her to groom her matted hair. Another myth tells of an old man who was transfigured into a luminous body and shot up into the sky, where he now exists as a bright star. Furthermore, more often than not, shamans, who exert substantial influence over the community, are elderly.

Given the harshness of the arctic environment, the lot of the aged may be assumed to be relatively difficult. Although in some respects this is true, the majority of Inuit societies appear to be structured in order to provide substantial support to their elderly. As

is often the case among hunting peoples, the Inuit practice food sharing that ensures that widows, orphans, and the elderly are provided for.

The elderly are assured of constant care by two interacting social institutions: the extended family and the community (Guemple 1980), both of which are based upon communal sharing. As long as an individual can contribute in some way, he or she is considered part of the community and receives assistance. However, if his or her children leave the community, as happens more frequently, and if the elderly person can no longer make a contribution, he or she may be viewed as exploiting others. In the past, the elderly perceived as parasites were abandoned or killed (McPherson 1990). This occurred not through indifference but through necessity. This early death was more likely to occur if modern assistance, such as federal pensions and health care, were not yet available. Interestingly, because of cultural folklore, the elderly accept this imposed death. The Inuit believe that their names and social identity remain in an underworld at death and later enter the body of a newborn child. Because of this belief, they would die willingly, knowing that their identity would live on in the community. With the increasing conversion to Christianity, however, this belief is becoming less prevalent.

A great deal has been said concerning the custom of gerontocide among Inuit peoples; however, it should be noted that not all groups have practiced this custom, and others have so only under the harshest of conditions. Burch (1975) notes that

Aged parents were abandoned only under conditions of the most extreme hardships, and it was rare even then.... Abandonment occurred in situations in which old people had to be sacrificed or everyone would have starved to death. In the exceptional case, the individuals did abandon their parents; they came to be regarded as deviants as a consequence, and were subsequently treated as outcasts.... Old people were not left behind at all; it was so that the younger, more active members of the family could travel more quickly to where food could be procured, and *then return* (419).

Contemporary Inuit

Although some things have improved for the Inuit elderly with the arrival of the Europeans and their modern commodities, many things have deteriorated. On Holman Island in Arctic Canada, Condon (1987) notes that

Adults in the community who were born in snow houses and who spent most of the first part of their lives out on the land now watch colour televisions in the comfort of heated homes equipped with running water and electricity. The elderly, who have vivid memories of starvation and frostbite, now receive government pensions to ensure their welfare and comfort (5).

On the other hand, Graburn (1969) reported thirty years ago for the Hudson Bay area that the elderly men and women were losing their influence and decision-making function in community affairs. Councils of elderly that once directed civic activities were then being replaced by elected community organizations in which young men have a great deal of authority. The old patterns of community sharing were giving way to a commercial attitude toward hunting.

At Point Hope, the traditional functional definition of when old age begins (when men are too old to hunt) has been superseded by a chronological one (65- when old age assistance cheques begin). Old age assistance and pensions have, of course, provided a new source of value and recognition for the aged. Burch (1975) writes:

After the advent of old age pensions, elderly Eskimos were able to make another major contribution to the welfare of the family. In the 1960s, for example, many a son obtained cash for ammunition and other items from the aged parents, supplying them with food in return (139).

This new source of status, however, is a poor substitute for the respect and admiration they once enjoyed. Education, once largely in the hands of the elderly, has since World War II been transferred more and more to the government-supported school. This has brought, among other things, significant changes in grandparent-grandchild

relationships. Traditionally, grandchildren not only learned much of the culture from grandparents but also helped the aging relatives in many ways.

In the Northwest Territories, the Inuit of Holman Island still find security and support for the elderly in the traditional practice of adoption. According to Condon (1987: 96-97): "A large number of adoptions in the community are grandparental adoptions.... One such form...involves sending an older child, usually a young girl between nine and sixteen years of age, to live with and care for an elderly grandparent".

In many villages today, however, a language barrier has developed between the old and the grandchildren (who are taught and urged to speak English in school). The result is very little intergenerational communication or learning. However, much of the knowledge the old people have imparted is now perceived as being irrelevant.

The elderly have also lost other traditional functions. Store bought goods have eliminated the need for old people to make many necessities, such as clothing; and maintaining new mechanical and electrical gadgets requires skills they have never acquired. The elderly once performed magical services and taught young people magic songs, formulas, and techniques; however, the coming of Christianity has done much to destroy belief in or use of such phenomena. In the larger communities, curing activities and midwife duties have been taken over by trained medical personnel.

The Inuit, however, are in a relatively early stage of modernization, and thus, are experiencing the effects and consequences of social change that many other Aboriginal groups have experienced within the past. Nevertheless, although Aboriginal elders have experienced quite a dramatic modification in terms of their role and status within their communities, the resurgence of political awareness of minority rights and government

support for multiculturalism is encouraging the return and restoration of their traditional roles; and thus, deference and respect for the elderly.

Canadian Aboriginal groups then, have a remarkably different perception of the aged and the aging process than that of the larger Canadian population. Although modernization has not had the same effects, several serious social consequences have emerged as Aboriginal Elders lose their status within their communities; the most alarming of these consequences is the increasing presence of Elder abuse.

In the next chapter, the fundamental difference between the larger Canadian and Canadian Aboriginal societies, with reference to their perceptions and treatment of the aged will be examined. Further, several possible explanations of this phenomenon will be discussed. By means of contrasting Canadian Aboriginal groups with the larger Canadian population, I hope to demonstrate that the elderly are a valuable social resource, and are fully capable of making a dramatic positive contribution to the healthy functioning of the family and society at large.

CHAPTER FIVE

Changing Dispositions: Modernization And Acculturation

In the previous chapters there has not only been an examination of the theoretical components and findings of the recent literature and research which exists upon the situation of the aged within Canadian and Aboriginal Canadian societies, but there has also been a better understanding of the aged, in terms of social perceptions, assigned roles and statuses. As we have seen in previous chapters, there is a fundamental difference between Canadian and Aboriginal Canadian perceptions and treatment of the aged. In this chapter I will attempt to mediate the difference between these diverse groups; and offer some possible explanations of this phenomenon.

This chapter will examine the change associated with influences of modernization and the ways in which Canadian societies, and more specifically the aged, are affected by such change. Also I will advocate for a better understanding between these two groups so that we may ensure an equitable and independent future for our aged.

Mediating the Difference

Whereas the aged within the larger Canadian population experience a decline in status and role; the Aboriginal aged tend to experience quite the opposite: an increase in role and status within the family and among the community. The different manners in which these two groups perceive their elderly is directly related to their cultural concepts of individual worth and assigned value within the larger social structure; and may be partially explained and understood not only through Modernization Theory, but also by means of an

examination of the diverse social and political factors affecting these two different groups.

Although many anthropologists today base or frame their argument(s) within a colonialist, neo-colonialist, or global capitalist perspective, I believe modernization theory is a more sophisticated explanatory theory with reference to the treatment of the aged within both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies. Whereas the central thesis of colonialism focuses upon power dynamics between the larger Canadian population and Aboriginal societies (of which a great deal may be applicable), modernization theory accounts for the power dynamics between the generations in terms of the introduction and implementation of technology and the declining status of the elderly. Furthermore, modernization theory is much more capable of accounting for the substantial differences which exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups concerning the manner in which they treat their elderly.

Cultural Change

Change which can influence the status and treatment of the aged may originate from within or outside the society. Internally generated change may be a result of “technical inventions, individual struggles for land and power, reformulations of ideas by specially gifted inquiring minds,...pressure of population on the means of subsistence, and perhaps climatic changes” (Firth 1958: 148). All of these factors can conceivably affect the care and status of the aged. Change resulting from influences outside the society involves the borrowing of ideas. The borrowing of ideas, or acculturation, is a consequence of ongoing contact between representatives of different cultures or societies, and is *perceived* to be a mutual relationship regardless of the degree or amount of technical sophistication within either society (Holmes & Holmes 1995). Furthermore, it must be noted that acculturation

must not be mistaken for the colonial experience of assimilation¹⁸. As noted by Ponting (1997: 257),

...acculturation is inevitable, to some degree. It is also desirable, to a certain extent, for without acculturation there could be no enduring adaptation to the drastically changed social environment which Aboriginals now face. Just as Aboriginals in the seventeenth century and later adopted some aspects of the material and non-material culture from the Europeans, so must adoption occur in contemporary times. The culture of the larger society has much to offer by way of improvements in health and safety, efficiency, comfort and convenience, communications, acquisition of knowledge, etc. Those features of the larger society's culture can be exploited by Aboriginals without necessarily sacrificing the fundamental values of Aboriginals' traditional cultures...there are many material and non-material traits which individuals can add to their cultural repertoire without having to relinquish traits from the culture into which they were first socialized.

Newly acquired values and institutional procedures, however, undermine age-old support systems for the elderly. This type of change, as will be discussed within this section, is the case within many Canadian Aboriginal groups.

The onset of industrialization led to lifestyles characterized by increasing individualism, by rapid social change, by affluence, by increased geographical and social mobility, by automation, by higher literacy rates for each succeeding generation, and by an increasing number of women in the labour force. These characteristics of an industrialized society have resulted in the devaluation of the aged and the aging process. There remain few customs or ceremonies associated with aging, other than birthday celebrations at ages 16, 21, 40 and 65. In fact, although children are socialized to respect the elderly, there is little evidence that this respect is put into practice (McPherson 1983).

Demographic trends resulting in a higher proportion of older people in the

¹⁸ Assimilation was the deliberate effort by the Crown to replace Indigenous cultures with European. Aboriginal individuals were to be prepared for absorption into the broader Canadian society. It was expected that eventually Aboriginal individuals would shed their Native languages, customs and religious beliefs, and would become self-sufficient members of the modern Canadian society and labour-force. The goal of assimilation, with reference to Aboriginal peoples, has been referred to as cultural genocide.

population, coupled with a lower demand for workers due an increased use of technology, heightened the competition between the young and old for jobs. Older men have generally held the highest political and religious positions, but with industrialization and urbanization, traditional skills and experience have become less important than higher education, flexibility, and technical expertise (McPherson 1983). In addition, an increase in new professions reduced the value of experience and practiced skills; both of which compensated for the elderly's relative lack of physical dexterity.

Since status is intimately linked to work (and for many women, to the husband's occupation) in North America, retirement is a significant factor in the loss of status after approximately age 65. Retirement lowered the value of the aged, as it was not only based upon the assumption that the elderly were no longer capable, but also, because it dropped them into a less desirable income category (McPherson 1983).

Rapid social change and child centered education outside the family made obsolete much of the knowledge that had formerly been a foundation of esteem for the elderly. Furthermore, young people often move away from home, acquire more formal education than their parents, and follow employment opportunities. Consequently many young people now have less in common with older people and may feel that they have less to learn from them (Baker 1988).

Although there seems to be continued interaction and interdependence between parents and adult children, much of this interaction occurs indirectly via telephone and mail rather than face-to-face, as people are more likely to live in different communities or regions. Moreover, due to mobility and the great variety of lifestyles in North America, the elderly seldom live with their adult children, but live instead in various housing

arrangements- their own homes, retirement villages, age-segregated apartments, or homes for the aged.

The modernization theory states that with industrialization, achievement often becomes more important than tradition or even seniority. Educated young people expect to enter the labour force somewhere in the middle of the hierarchy rather than at the bottom. They expect to be promoted by merit rather than age or seniority and hope to share responsibility with older people, gain prestige, and earn higher incomes than those with less education. Older people with outdated skills are edged out of important jobs or the labour market itself (Baker 1988). Respecting one's elders becomes a matter of decision rather than tradition, and if the older person is admirable or very skillful, he or she commands respect. In other words, as some researchers have claimed, technological change and higher education have lowered the status of the elderly (Maxwell and Silverman 1970; Cowgill and Holmes 1972).

This decrease in status, however, has not been restricted to the elderly within the larger Canadian population, but has occurred within Canadian Aboriginal societies which have had to contend with not only technological change, but also acculturation. The manner in which these two diverse groups perceive their elderly, however, is remarkably different. This difference may be attributed to modernization: a process which has provoked Canadian Aboriginal communities to re-examine and recognize the value of their elders. Whereas the elderly within the larger Canadian population is increasingly perceived within negative stereotypes, Aboriginal elders are regaining and retaining much of their lost status within their communities.

Native Issues

Like all Natives, Elders too, have been influenced by the forces of “contact” (Couture 1996). Aboriginal elders, at least in the past, received respect and held power for as long as they contributed to the society. The manner in which they contributed to their communities included valued roles and functions, and varied depending upon individual strengths and knowledge. Not only were they regarded and respected as the ‘keepers’ of traditional knowledge, language, practical experience and folklore, but they were also perceived as invaluable mediators, counselors and educators. The onset of cultural change, specifically the attempted assimilation of Aboriginals by the Crown; and later, the acculturation of modernizing ideas and values, however, has had a relatively turbulent effect upon Canadian Aboriginal groups, especially in reference to the treatment, role and status of their elderly.

The traditional roles and practices of elders were questioned as Aboriginal groups had to contend with missionaries and western education undermining their traditional knowledge and beliefs; Crown land acquisitions which limited traditional economic pursuits such as foraging for some Aboriginal peoples; and the involvement in the capitalist economy which required western based skills and knowledge. In addition, many Aboriginal groups have adopted western-based stereotypes, myths and notions of the elderly prominent within the larger Canadian population; resulting in their elderly being perceived as a burden.

Although many Canadian Aboriginal groups have been influenced by, and adopted the values and ideals of the larger Canadian population, an interesting phenomenon has occurred: Elders once respected, then devalued, are regaining their status by means of

playing a fundamental role within the resurgence of Native culture and identity. As interest increased within the areas of Native identity, culture, and self-determination, Elders were perceived as an invaluable resource in terms of educating others of past traditions and cultural practices.

This cultural renaissance took on momentum with land claims, self-determination and the legal-political emphasis placed upon traditions. Forced to re-evaluate and re-define their roles, Elders were elevated to fulfill a prominent role within their communities, as they became responsible for the transmission of traditional cultural knowledge. Furthermore, this traditional knowledge has many political applications (i.e., land claims, traditional practices etc.) and provided Aboriginals with a basis for activism inseparable from 'continuity of traditions' that differentiate and legitimate.

Elders are conceptualized as a link to the past: a past which is soon to be forgotten and untold if not for the traditional teachings of the elders. Traditional Aboriginal languages have typically not been taught within the classroom; rather they have been replaced with the official Canadian languages of English and French. As many stories, legends and myths may not be translated or relevant when recounted in another language; increasingly, Aboriginal communities are encouraging the younger generations to learn their traditional language. Thus, Aboriginal elders have an exceptionally vital role, and are perceived as not only important, but necessary, in the process of retaining and continuing the cultural identity of the group.

Although acculturation and assimilation to the larger Canadian population threaten to abolish many Aboriginal cultures, Elders have retained the traditional knowledge required to delay or prevent this occurrence. If elders are devalued and cultural information

is lost, it becomes reasonable to assume that Aboriginal identity could feasibly be replaced with the values and identity of the larger Canadian population. The probability of this occurrence has been insinuated by McPherson (1983) who notes that with the migration of Aboriginal children to the cities, the elderly have lost, and are losing their culture-based respect and power.

Aboriginal people who migrate to urban settings learn that marketable skills are necessary for their survival; and those who are educated in the public school system and adopt the values of mainstream society generally show less respect for the aged. These young, educated Aboriginals are increasingly occupying leadership roles, which in the past were held only by the elders. This shift in power and prestige results in intergenerational conflict (Williams 1980). Furthermore, it should be noted that Aboriginal people living in urban centers are less likely to demonstrate respect and deference to Elders than those living on reserves or in rural settings due to the minimal emphasis placed upon Aboriginal traditions within these industrialized populations.

Many of the social processes within the larger Canadian population responsible and associated with devaluing the aged, mandatory retirement and stereotyping for example, are inevitably adopted not only by members, but also by participants within the society. These stereotypes and attitudes result in practices and behaviours; which in turn will not only precipitate a negative conception of the aged, but also will influence the creation and maintenance of a culturally constructed low status and dependence of the elderly.

Social and Political Atmosphere

The practical implications of the cultural construction of the dependency and low status of the elderly have both negative and positive consequences. Not only does the

dependency of the elderly result in increased financial obligations of the society at question; but also, their shared dependency will result in the formation and organization of a minority group consciousness. United, the elderly represent approximately one fifth of the Canadian population: organized, they represent an influential political and economic group. Further, as discussed earlier, one's importance and worth in a modernized society is measured and calculated in terms of financial or economic participation and contributions; and thus, as the prevalence of the aged population within Canadian increases, so too should the status and value of the elderly. It would appear, however, that Canadian Aboriginal elders, possibly due to their prior experience with minority group politics, have been more successful at re-establishing their status and value within their societies by means of demonstrating their importance in the maintenance of their distinct communities and cultural identity, rather than exclusive economic participation.

Based exclusively upon economic participation, the elderly within the larger Canadian society face a much greater challenge, as they may be perceived as an economic drain or burden rather than as productive members of society. In addition, the difference between these two groups may be further attributed to the fact that Canadian Aboriginal people, as we have seen in the previous chapter, are relatively disadvantaged in comparison to the larger Canadian population. In other words, because Canadian Aboriginal groups are relatively and generally economically disadvantaged within the larger Canadian context¹⁹, the status of their elderly in comparison to the status and economic worth of the elderly within the larger Canadian population, is difficult to ascertain.

¹⁹ McPherson's (1983) research concluded that Native elderly experience poverty, malnutrition, loss of respect, and poor general health. Despite the intervention of federal health and financial assistance programs, the aged still suffer higher unemployment, more substandard living conditions, and greater poverty than any other minority group in North America.

Aboriginal Elders, however, may be perceived to have greater status within their communities not only because their status is being measured with reference to a population of disadvantaged people²⁰, but also because of the different value accorded to knowledge within Aboriginal societies. Thus, the relationship between respect and economic status is different in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies.

As stated by Amoss & Harrell (1981: 14-15), the contributions made by old people and the control they exercise over valuable resources are perhaps best illustrated in the case of knowledge. It is through this control of ritual and religious knowledge, or the knowledge that contributes to the whole enterprise of "generating and sustaining meaningful forms" (Ortner 1974: 72), that the old are capable of gaining a special measure of respect. As societies modernize, however, there is a general trend in which the relevance of traditional knowledge declines with rapid social change. Thus, members of the modernizing society begin to value the new technological and scientific knowledge over learning traditional skills (Amoss & Harrell 1981: 18).

Knowledge perceived as valuable in modernized societies, such as the larger Canadian population, is continually changing in tandem with the uninterrupted introduction of technological advances. As has been discussed in previous chapters, the elderly within modernized societies are perceived to be of less value and economic worth because their knowledge is primarily based upon obsolete experience and tradition within a changing society. Moreover, a greater proportion of the larger Canadian population is comprised of elderly individuals. Thus, the elderly are perceived in terms of an economic burden because of their lack of valuable knowledge and their increasing proportion within the population.

In Aboriginal societies, however, Elders are afforded greater status and enhanced

²⁰ Thus, it is difficult to distinguish the degree of disadvantage when everyone is disadvantaged.

prestige not only due to the disparity in the importance of traditional knowledge, but also to the relatively small proportion of Elders. Differing from the larger Canadian population, social value and prestige within Aboriginal societies is not intimately linked with economic worth, but rather with the possession of a stable value and knowledge base grounded in tradition and history. Therefore, Aboriginal Elders are afforded high social prestige and status for three reasons: first, there are relatively few Elders in proportion to the population; second, these Elders are perceived as making a substantial social contribution as they transmit valuable traditional knowledge; and third, because they fulfill traditional roles in the maintenance and survival of the family and community. Furthermore, the term of 'Elder', which commands respect, ensures that one category of people within such a population are held within high regard.

The institution of Elder has an advantageous impact within and outside Aboriginal societies. Such a label may be perceived as a social and political device; and yet, it has little economic impact or value. The high status of Aboriginal Elders, as was demonstrated earlier employing the example of Grey Owl, may be transferable from one society to the next. In other words, Aboriginal Elders maintain their high status within their own societies, as well as within the larger Canadian population. This ensures that one category or group of Aboriginal peoples is held in high esteem, regardless of the social and economic position of their own people.

Many of the norms and values regarding the demonstration of deference to the aged are often ignored or contradicted within the larger Canadian population. This, in fact, may also be true within Aboriginal societies based upon the increasing presence of Elder abuse. The respect and regard afforded to the category of Elder may be distinct from how the

elderly are treated in reality. Elders may be perceived as symbolically important due to their ideological role of preserving traditional knowledge; their actual presence may be, in fact, an economic, social, and political burden.

Thus, although the elderly within both populations are relatively disadvantaged, the status of the elderly within modern, urban and industrialized societies, may in fact be much lower. Such a perception becomes apparent and discernable when one compares the status, situation and position of a middle aged individual within the larger Canadian population, to the status and position which they will eventually occupy as an elderly individual. Within Aboriginal societies, however, all individuals are afforded the opportunity of becoming an 'Elder'. The term of 'Elder', as previously discussed, is a role that is not only afforded greater deference, but also serves to distinguish individuals who possess the capacity to contribute and participate within the community.

The Presence of Abuse

Abuse and neglect of the elderly is an increasingly important social problem within Canada. Podnieks (1990) and Pillemer and Finkelhor (1988) conservatively estimate 3 to 6 percent of persons aged 65 and over have experienced some type of abuse. These studies also demonstrate that there may be regional differences with reference to the prevalence of elderly abuse.

Elder abuse can take the form of financial exploitation and repression (Dumont-Smith & Labelle 1992), but it can also involve coerced activities like baby-sitting, rape, physical, emotional, and verbal abuse (Zellerer 1993: 10). Angela Jones laments on the manipulation of elders when she states:

There is a lot of Elder abuse. ...A lot of times some of your relatives will manipulate you. You sign your farm over to them, and they promise to do

this and that for you but, after the transfer is done, you don't even see them any more. A non-Indian looks forward to retiring from their farm and selling it and taking that long-awaited trip they always wanted to take, but for a lot of us Natives that doesn't happen.

RCAP Public Hearings, Prince George, B.C. July 17, 1993

As Canadian Aboriginal groups adopt the cultural norms and values of the larger Canadian culture, the presence of elder abuse becomes more prevalent. Some elderly Aboriginal people suffer the indignity of neglect and abuse at the hands of those closest to them. This is an extremely sad development in the very communities that claim to hold the elderly in such high regard.

According to Giordano and Giordano (1984: 235), "patterns of elder abuse and neglect may be reinforced by negative stereotypes toward elderly people and their roles in society." Misconceptions or negative attitudes towards the elderly may contribute significantly to the creation of situations conducive to abuse. These negative attitudes dehumanize elderly persons and thus facilitate their victimization, while the abuser feels little guilt or remorse (McDonald et al. 1991). Moreover, Block and Sinnott (1979) suggest that the elderly themselves may perceive abusive treatment as deserved, unavoidable, or inconsequential, since they too may internalize society's negative attitudes and stereotypes. As concluded by Kosberg (1988: 49),

Elder abuse will continue as long as ageism and violence exist....Elder abuse results from the dynamic interaction between personal, family, social and cultural values, priorities and goals. Therefore, attention must be given to those factors which, although not causing abuse, contribute to its likelihood: poverty and unemployment, lack of community resources intra-family cycles of abuse, and personal hedonism.

Status within the family is a fundamental factor in reference to the occurrence of elder abuse. Cultural adaptation and changing lifestyles may diminish the influence that some seniors have within the family. Conflicts may arise between adult children, and

even grandchildren, who adopt the cultures and morals of a different society (Boyack 1997: 73). Thus, the senior's influence as head of the family may be undermined as the traditional roles of family members change.

Elders have typically held high status within the community as they have acquired a vast repertoire of skills and adaptations over the years. In the face of advancing technology, however, some of these skills have become obsolete. The resulting factor is a decrease in the Elder's esteem and feelings of inadequacy and unhappiness. These feelings are further heightened for seniors whose first language is not English, and who become financially dependent upon their families. Elders may perceive themselves as powerless in the community, because they have to depend upon others for even the simplest of things. By losing their independence, they may also feel that they have lost the right to be respected or to exert any authority within their families and communities (Boyack 1997: 74). As argued by Fanon (1970), the needs of older Aboriginal people are both psychological and physical. Due to the notion that they are irrelevant to others within mainstream society, they are perceived as having little to offer the urban, industrialized economy, an attitude that is debilitating. Their inability to actively contribute to any of the institutional structures of the mainstream society has reinforced the belief of 'worthlessness' and has, over the years, been internalized, producing an 'inferior' mindset.

Therefore, based upon some of the previous notions, one may assume that as Canadian Aboriginal societies adopt and acculturate to some of the values and norms of the larger Canadian population, Elders will experience a loss in status, and the threat of Elder abuse will increase.

Conclusion

Reflecting upon the analysis of the negative stereotypes, perceptions, and attitudes towards the elderly, and the ensuing development of ageism and elder abuse, as was discussed in previous chapters; it becomes apparent that the treatment of the elderly within Canada is becoming an increasing social problem. As current economic attitudes and values support the mistreatment of Canada's aged population and the costs incurred for supporting a culturally constructed dependent population increase, the situation of the elderly becomes increasingly tragic.

Whereas the treatment and status of the elderly within the larger Canadian population was hypothesized at the beginning of this paper to be fundamentally worse than within Canadian Aboriginal societies, this may not be the case at all. Considering the deficiency of data concerned with Aboriginal Elders, and the relative disadvantage faced by Aboriginal peoples within the larger Canadian context, such a conclusion is not ascertainable. What may be concluded, however, is that the traditional roles and status of Aboriginal Elders ensure an increased degree of inclusion and importance within their communities. Furthermore, the institution of Elder, and the positive connotations of such a term, and the absence of derogatory ageist terms within Aboriginal societies, however, suggests that the aged within their societies are afforded greater esteem.

Based upon the two diverse examples presented within this paper, the Anicinabe and the Inuit, the diversity that exists among Aboriginal societies is apparent. The similarities, with reference to the treatment of the aged, however, in contrast to the larger Canadian population, allow for the assertion of generalizations. Elders seem to not only maintain, but benefit from an increase in role and status within their societies. And yet,

based upon the social, economic, and political differences that exist between these two diverse groups, it becomes obvious that it is inherently unsuitable to make an equitable comparison.

A comparison between Canadian Aboriginal societies and the larger Canadian society, however, provides one with the opportunity of learning from the differences which exists in reference to the treatment and status of their elderly. In contrast to the aged within the larger Canadian population, the elderly within Aboriginal societies are not only presented with equal potential to achieve, but are afforded, high status and esteem.

One may conclude then, that the elderly within both the larger Canadian population, and the elderly within Canadian Aboriginal societies, are relatively disadvantaged. The manner in which they are devalued, however, is different. Whereas the elderly within the larger Canadian population are devalued because they are deemed to represent a dependent category which is perceived as a financial and social burden and of little economic value; the elderly within Canadian Aboriginal societies are devalued as they are members of a disadvantaged population.

Although Aboriginal Elders have been through several transitions in which they have adapted to different social perspectives, values, and attitudes inherent within the larger Canadian population, and have lost and regained status among their communities; I concur with Gravelly (1987) who says that a true Elder is not simply classifiable as a "...passive informant on the traditional past...", but who is, and is perceived, as "...a creative theologian, open to the possibilities of his [her] situation, to new ideas and symbols, and to a dialogue between the traditions" (1987: 11). In other words,

Aboriginal Elders not only have the necessary skills, but are the key actors in terms of successfully borrowing and incorporating material and non-material culture from the larger Canadian population in order to preserve the continuation of their culture. The Final Report of the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples' (RCAP 2000) mandate made explicit reference to the role of Elders in which the Commission recommended that Aboriginal and other governments "acknowledge the essential role of Elders and the traditional knowledge that they have to contribute in rebuilding Aboriginal nations...self-determination...and well-being" (237).

The larger Canadian population has a lot to learn from the experiences of Aboriginal peoples with reference to the treatment of the aged: including an increase in the involvement and incorporation of elders within fulfilling and contributing roles within the community. Such a transfer of knowledge may be accomplished by integrating specific and relevant knowledge into pre-established and existing social networks. As the multicultural nature of Canada, and the center margin theory (Innis 1995) suggest, incorporating novel influences and factors deemed as normative within many of the marginal cultures which compose and characterize Canada, become with time, accepted norms. Therefore, one may assume that certain Aboriginal behaviours and norms, such as the deference afforded to the elderly, could with time become a demonstrated cultural norm within the larger Canadian population.

Moreover, the Canadian Aboriginal population may learn from the experiences of the larger Canadian population, in which the process of modernization has devalued the elderly as traditional and historical knowledge has become obsolete. Preserving Canadian Aboriginal identity and culture depends upon the stable knowledge and value base inherent

in Elders' teachings and practices. This should not be soon forgotten.

As public interest and attention increases within the area of aging and social implications, there have been a number of movements initiated in North America since the 1960s (the most noted being the Canadian (CARP) and American Associations of Retired Persons (AARP), Help the Aged, Age Concern, the Gray Panthers), which have sought to combat age discrimination in labour markets, reverse the mandatory retirement age, as well as contest ageist language and negative stereotypes of the aged in general.

The Canadian Association of Retired Persons made several suggestions at the Ontario Human Rights Commission's community consultations on age discrimination held in November of 2000 including, but not limited to: mounting a major public awareness campaign in the media and in the public, professional and journalism schools to counteract the myths and stereotypes associated with older persons; publishing booklets on ageism and how to combat it; partner with seniors groups to identify ways to encourage community-based services and supports for managing problems faced by seniors- especially ethnic seniors; pressure the government to extend the protection of the Ontario Human Rights Code to include workers over the age of 65, as well as to declare mandatory retirement illegal in Ontario; and develop, with the appropriate provincial agencies, provincial legal penalties and rehabilitation programs for elder abusers and awareness programs for abused people, as well as a Bill of Rights for seniors in hospitals, long term care and retirement facilities, as well as at home.

As awareness increases and a better understanding develops concerning the plight of the elderly in Canada, we may soon strive to meet the individual needs of the ethnically diverse groups which characterize this multicultural nation.

Future Research

Given the marginal living conditions of most Native s, it is easy to imagine that the plight of the elderly Native person is generally worse than that of the elderly person in mainstream society (Levy 1967; Doherty 1971; Goldstine and Gutmann 1972; Jeffries 1972; Murdock and Schwartz 1978; Rogers and Gallion 1978). However, even though over fifty percent of the Aboriginal population over 60 years of age live on reserves, relatively little information is available on the aged and the aging process within their societies.²¹ It is assumed, however, that the Aboriginal aged on reserves face conditions that are substantially different from the older population in general, as they tend to lead a lifestyle which has changed much more slowly than the larger society as a whole (Atchley 1988: 284). This assumption, however, considers neither the location of the reserve, nor the family concerned. Also, there can be substantial cultural change and distance from a pre-contact culture without placing a community into the mainstream economy or culture.

A number of complexities have been demonstrated to exist within an examination of Aboriginal groups, including the differences that exist among Status, non-Status, Métis, and Inuit peoples; urban and rural populations; and idealizations and realities with reference to the treatment of the aged. The experiences among these diverse Aboriginal groups are bound to be dissimilar considering the demographic differences influencing their lifestyles. Future research is necessary in order to consolidate these differences.

Future research in this area, in the form of a comprehensive study examining the aging process, is necessary in order to provide a more accurate and detailed account and understanding of the conditions and consequences faced by many Aboriginal Elders. Such

²¹ According to McPherson (1983), little information is available due to the inaccessibility of many reserves, language problems, a general mistrust of outsiders, and a determination to keep Native culture, lifestyle, social structure, and problems private.

research is essential in order to design and implement public policy that will enable not only Aboriginal elders, but also Canadian elders within the larger population, to lead healthier independent lives.

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