



Debunking popular stereotypes of aging

Summary

Print media helps shape attitudes about aging and societal perceptions of older adults (aged 65 and older). Newspaper headlines like the *Grey Peril* and marketing campaigns from a lucrative anti-aging industry reflect increasing alarm about the aging of the population. We contrast popular beliefs about aging conveyed in print media with evidence from national surveys to deconstruct the stereotypes of ‘aging well’ in popular culture. We found the following:

- **Myth:** Aging is equated with ‘dependency’ and ‘burden’. **Reality:** Only 7% of older adults were frail enough to live in residential care settings; 93% of people aged 65 and older lived in private households in the community.
- **Myth:** Paid employment is a sign of vitality, hence older workers are viewed as still youthful. **Reality:** Older adults continue to contribute to society. Although only 7.9% of older adults reported that their main activity was paid work, 67.6% were involved in other, unpaid, productive activities like helping others, providing care and volunteering.
 - 66% of adults aged 65-74 helped someone outside their home with domestic work, home maintenance or outdoor work .
 - Over 65,000 grandparents were parenting grandchildren; many more provide regular or occasional child care to grandchildren.
 - Nearly 1.3 million older adults contributed over 310 million hours to Canadian volunteer agencies, valued at a conservative replacement cost of over \$2.8 billion dollars annually. Older adults who volunteer spend more time at it than those younger than aged 65.
- **Myth:** Aging well is the outcome of consuming the right goods and services and being physically active. **Reality:** Engagement in physically, socially and cognitively active leisure plays a strong role in aging well.
 - 88.7% of older adults engaged in physically, socially or cognitively active leisure, spending more time on active leisure than those younger than age 65 as well as more time on active (4.2 hrs/day) than passive activities like watching TV.
 - 27.9% participated in physically active leisure like walking, exercising and sports.
 - 63-76% participated in social leisure activities like visiting friends and engaging in civic events.
- Popular media should play a role in debunking stereotypes about aging well that they have helped to create by celebrating aging well and recognizing the contributions older adults make to society.
- Enhancing educational curricula and health promotion campaigns may be strategies to raise awareness of the diversity among older adults and their experiences of aging.

Print media helps shape attitudes about aging and societal perceptions of older adults. Newspaper and magazine articles reflect increasing alarm about the aging of the population with headlines like the *Silver Tsunami* or the *Grey Peril*. At the same time, advertisers capitalize on this panic to promote a lucrative anti-aging industry. Minimizing the effects of growing older is promoted as a way of ‘aging well’.

In sharp contrast to society’s preoccupation with the negative aspects of population aging, such as ‘dependency’ of seniors and the economic viability of provincial and national social programs, older adults (aged 65+) are in fact contributing to society in diverse, but often hidden, ways. Their contributions to society continue, even following retirement from the paid labour force.

Research Objectives

- To identify stereotypes about aging conveyed in popular print media (newspaper articles, magazine advertisements and self-help books).
- To contrast stereotypes with evidence from national surveys about the contributions of older adults to Canadian society.

Data Sources and Analysis

We integrated findings from several different sources of data which were analyzed with qualitative or quantitative methods.

- Discourse analysis of advertisements for anti-aging products in *O Magazine* and self-help book titles ¹
- Content analysis of articles published in *The Globe and Mail* (2004-2006) about older adults ²
- Quantitative analysis of three Statistics Canada surveys:
 - 2004 Canadian Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating ³
 - 2005 General Social Survey on Time Use ⁴
 - 2006 Population Census ⁵

[Note: ^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5} denote the data source in the subsequent text.]

Reality of the ‘Grey Peril’ - Most older adults are not frail

Popular print media reflects a worry about the greying of the population predicting that our society will be unable to support the growing number of older adults who may require health and social programs. Stereotypes of aging as equated with ‘dependency’ and ‘burden’

persist², despite criticism from gerontology researchers and activists.

Aging is portrayed as a pathway of decline towards disability and death. *The Globe and Mail* wrote of growing older: “*Winter is particularly hard on the elderly, and this year’s flu will probably take a greater toll on this vulnerable population. But for me and my friends, the past year has already had a surfeit of death. The loss of our parents has shocked us into realizing that we are now the next generation of elders, stepping inexorably toward our own old age and death.*”²

In contrast to this stereotype of old age as decline and dependency, national survey data show that only 7% of older adults are frail enough to live in residential care facilities such as nursing homes and long term care centres. Rather most (93%) live in private households in the community⁵.

Most older adults are productive

The antithesis to the view of aging as one of frailty and decline is often captured in print media articles that portray older workers as still productive. Some older adults are perceived to age well by ignoring their age and continuing to participate in the

paid labour force². Well-known examples include 68-year old Michael Wilson, Canadian Ambassador to the USA; 82-year old Ingvar Kamrad, entrepreneur and founder of Ikea, and 86-year old Hazel McCallion, Mayor of Mississauga ON. Paid employment is considered a key sign of vigor and vitality, hence older workers are viewed as still being youthful.

Only 7.9% of older adults reported that their main activity was paid work⁴. But emphasizing paid employment overlooks the unpaid productive contributions of two-thirds (67.6%) of older adults who help others, provide care to family members and volunteer. These older adults continue to contribute to society despite no longer being in the paid labour market.

Some of the varied contributions that older adults make include:

Providing help to others. Two in three older adults aged 65-74 years (66%) helped someone living outside their home with domestic work, home maintenance or outdoor work³.

Providing child care. Over 65,000 grandparents were parenting grandchildren in 2006⁵. This does not include grandparents who provide periodic or regular child care to grandchildren while their parents are at work.

Volunteering. Nearly 1.3 million older adults in Canada contributed over 310 million hours to volunteer agencies in 2004³. In market value, the volunteer time of these older adults amounts to over \$2.8 billion dollars annually based on a conservative replacement cost calculated using provincial minimum wages. Data also show that older adults who volunteer spend more time at it than those younger than 65³.

Donating money to community organizations. In addition to helping others and volunteering, most (86.8%) older adults made at least one financial donation to a charitable organization³. As well, older adults (65+) donate more overall than younger adults³.

Engagement rather than consumption contributes to aging well

Advertisers recognize the purchasing power of older adults, particularly those who have retired with comfortable pensions. Advertisements, self-help books and articles alike urge older adults to buy and consume products and services to avoid aging^{1,2}, such as *The Doctors' Book of Food Remedies: The Newest Discoveries in the Power of Food to Cure and Prevent Health Problems—from Aging and Diabetes to Ulcers and Yeast Infections*. Similarly, an article in *The Globe and Mail* reported that “getting older means eating smarter.”

Advertisements often promise to erase the signs of aging, focusing particularly on the most visible parts of the aging body—the faces and hands of older women—smoothing wrinkles and dying hair¹. Oil of Olay Total Effects Intensive Restoration Treatment uses the



caption “*Lie about your age. Hide the evidence*” as though facial lines are signs of ill health.

The underlying assumption is that youthfulness is an overall desirable goal and that ‘aging well’ is the outcome of consuming goods that keep one youthful (looking)¹. As well, popular print media emphasize that aging well involves being physically active in sports², such as golf and curling. According to a Globe and Mail article, “*All I have to do to live right is join a gym and do serious aerobics at least four times a week.*”

Yet research findings suggest that engagement of all sorts—physical, social and cognitive—plays a stronger role in enhancing well-being among older adults. According to the 2005 GSS⁴, most (88.7%) older

adults engage in physically, socially or cognitively active leisure, which has been shown to have a positive effect on well-being (physical, cognitive and mental health, life satisfaction and life expectancy).

Active leisure. Time spent on active leisure increases following retirement and older adults spend more time on active leisure than those under age 65. Even older adults aged 75 years and older spent more time on active leisure (4.2 hrs/day) than on passive activities like watching TV⁴.

Physical engagement. More than 1 in 4 older adults (27.9%) participated in physically active leisure, including walking, exercising and sports⁴.

Social engagement. About two-thirds (63-76%) of older adults participated in social leisure activities, such as meeting with friends and engaging in civic and cultural events in the community⁴.

Implications

Media portrayals bring into the public consciousness perceptions of aging which in turn influence the ways we think about older adults and the process of aging. Popular media should play a role in debunking stereotypes about aging well that they have helped to create.

As a step in this direction, providers of media could start recognizing the benefits of growing older and conveying such key messages to the public. Days like the United Nations International Day of the Older Person or provincial or municipal Seniors Weeks are opportunities to celebrate aging well and the contributions older adults make to society.

It is also important that journalists, educators and the public recognize the diversity of older adults; experiences of aging are not universal. Enhancing social gerontology components in educational curricula and health promotion campaigns may be strategies to raise awareness. Another strategy might involve developing educational programs that pair older adult mentors with youth. Such intergenerational exchanges could provide older adults with meaningful volunteer opportunities, youth with first-hand experience relating to older adults and a bridge to reducing ageist stereotypes.



Photo: Health Canada/Sarah Carré

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