

Introduction

METHODOLOGY

In order to document the opinions of gerontologists and older persons regarding the aging experience, we utilized several methods of data collection. These are listed below.

Secondary Analysis of Existing Literature

We began our research with an extensive literature review, which covered both academic and popular books; articles in scholarly journals (especially those concerned with gerontology, sociology, psychology, health, social work, and anthropology); and government reports and periodicals aimed at an older audience (e.g., *Fifty Plus* [the monthly magazine of the Canadian Association of Retired Persons] and *Modern Maturity* [the publication of the American Association For Retired Persons]). We also read the newsletters of various seniors organizations, newspapers devoted to older readers, and the publications of various gerontology associations and centres of aging.

We consulted research literature databases such as *Sociological Abstracts*, *Psychological Abstracts*, and the *Social Services Index*, and we conducted on-line searches of the World Wide Web, where numerous sites dealing with gerontology and aging are available.

Focus Groups

Throughout Nova Scotia during the fall of 2000 and the spring of 2001, we held a series of focus groups with seniors, including those from the Black and Mi'kmaw communities.

We posted our questionnaire (see Appendix 1) on such Web sites as the Canadian Association of Retired Persons (via the *Fifty Plus* chat room) and One Voice (a national Canadian seniors network that is independent of government and works to ensure that older Canadians are full and active participants in society). One Voice also produces a regular newsletter and holds conferences and workshops across the country on issues relevant to older Canadians. The questionnaire was also sent to groups of seniors in British Columbia and was published in a variety of local (Nova Scotia) newsletters with a large audience of elders. An example of this type of publication is the *Nova Scotia Senior Citizens' Secretariat Newsletter*, which is published four times a year and distributed free of charge to seniors groups across the province. Other publications in

which we sought people willing to complete questionnaires were *Aged to Perfection*, *Seniors Advocate*, and *One Voice*.

The majority of older persons with whom we spoke (i.e., those who were interviewed or who contacted us to respond to the questionnaire on-line) were female. It was not our intention to speak to more women than men; however, as there are more older women than older men and as they are more likely to participate in group activities than are men, it is not surprising that this turned out to be the case. The majority of older persons with whom we spoke lived independently in the community. Although we did speak with coordinators of nursing homes, we did not speak with residents.

In 1997 there were 159,040 persons aged sixty-five and over living in nursing homes across Canada. In Nova Scotia there were 5,513 people—approximately 8 percent of the population—aged sixty-five and over (Nova Scotia Senior Citizens Secretariat, personal communication, September 2, 2001). The majority of older persons living in nursing homes are aged eighty-four and over, and many live in such settings due to poor health, lack of mobility, lack of personal resources or family support, confusion, and other disabilities (interview with nursing home administrator in the Annapolis Valley region of Nova Scotia, September 3, 2001). We decided not to attempt to hold focus groups within such institutions for two reasons: (1) the ethical problems with gaining permission to speak with elders in such homes, where administrators would select who might be the most “appropriate” people to participate in the research; and (2) concern that the residents would not be able to relate to the topic or be able to communicate their responses to our questions. We both have experience with visiting nursing homes in Nova Scotia and elsewhere, and we concluded that data collected in such facilities would not necessarily reflect the opinions of enough of those who reside in them.

Overall we communicated with several hundred non-institutionalized older persons as well as with many who work with and for the older population.

We addressed eleven focus groups in all, and this is how they broke down in terms of location, number of people, gender, age range, race, and education.

1. Halifax (urban), seven women, sixty-one to eighty-seven, White, most university educated.
2. Seabright (semi-urban), South Shore, five women and two men, sixty-two to eighty-one, White, most university educated.

3. Wolfville (small university town), Annapolis Valley, five men and five women (couples), fifty-seven to seventy-eight, White, university educated/professional.
4. Wolfville (small university town), Annapolis Valley, five women and two men, seventy to ninety, White, university educated/professional.
5. Harbourville (fishing village), Kings County, ten women and two men, fifty-nine to eighty-nine, White, several university educated.
6. Halls Harbour (fishing village), Kings County, five women, sixty to eighty-four, White, high school.
7. Kentville (semi-rural small town), Kings County, bridge club consisting of four long-time women friends, seventy-five to eighty-five, White, high school (some higher).
8. East Preston (semi-urban), outside of Halifax/Dartmouth area, twelve women and two men, sixty to eighty, Black, high school.
9. Bridgewater (small town), Annapolis Valley, ten women members of a community club, ages sixty to eighty-four, Black, grades 3 to 11.
10. Eskasoni (rural), Mi'kmaq reserve in Cape Breton, eight women and one man, sixty-three to eighty-six, First Nations, high school.
11. Salt Spring Island (rural), small gulf island in British Columbia, life history writing group consisting of eleven women, sixty-five to eighty-four, high school (some university).

Within the text, the above groups will be referred to according to whether they are rural, semi-urban, and so on.

Summary of Questions

In all cases we provided a list of twenty-four questions aimed at discovering how older persons felt about gerontology and the aging experience. Our questionnaire was broken down into five main areas, and, in the summer of 2000, we pre-tested it with a group of seniors living in rural Nova Scotia.

The main topics covered by the questionnaire include: (1) definitions of old age; (2) knowledge and awareness of, and reaction to, gerontology and gerontological theories; (3) definitions, awareness, and experiences of “successful” aging; (4) involvement in seniors groups, organizations, or clubs; (5) suggestions regarding social solutions to the problems of aging; and (6) opinions on the involvement of older persons in decision making.

Using the Focus Group Data

Where relevant and necessary, we include the voices of older persons throughout the main body of the text. We also include two case studies of the experiences of Black Nova Scotia seniors and of seniors of Mi'kmaw heritage. We do this because it seems to us that these somewhat "closed" communities provide supportive environments within which one can grow older in ways for which mainstream culture does not necessarily provide. We made the decision to do this after conducting focus groups within these communities in early January and May of 2001. In all cases we were told how seldom the Aboriginal and Black peoples of Nova Scotia were involved in research on, or discussions of, aging within their communities. And it was apparent to us just how much there was to learn from these elders. There is a paucity of material dealing with the experiences of Black and Aboriginal elders within Nova Scotia (as, indeed, is the case for all Canadian provinces and territories).

We felt that, by conducting several focus groups within these two communities, we could supplement the meagre knowledge base concerning these important groups and, thus, make their experiences of aging visible.

In order to ensure confidentiality, when quoting informants directly, we use fictitious names. In all cases where individuals were members of a focus group, a release form was distributed and signed.

Inner Reflections on Aging:

Locating Ourselves within the Work

When I (Jeanette) was a graduate student in the mid-1980s at the University of British Columbia, a group of us were sitting around discussing our doctoral dissertation topics. Mine was on gerontology and the social construction of agedness (Auger 1983). As we talked about our work it occurred to me that we all study our own struggle. Having thought that, and then discussing it with some friends, it became clear to me that we did not select thesis topics in a vacuum, that, indeed, we did have subjective experiences, interests, and commitments that directed us towards some issues and away from others. Since then I have continued to reflect upon my interest in older persons and gerontology.

When I wrote *Social Perspectives on Death and Dying* (Auger 2000a) I included in it a section entitled "The Text Within." I wanted to include my own experiences within the book so as to share with the reader some of those elements of my life that led to my interest in the subject matter. Similarly, in this book, Diane and I wanted to locate our own aging narratives within the text. We decided to do this for at least two reasons.

First and foremost, as feminists we believe that we owe it to our informants and readers to own our experiences of aging. It would be unacceptable to ask others to share their thoughts with us without being willing to share our thoughts with them. Second, we believe that self-reflection is essential to further understanding and analyzing the social construction of old age both within our own lives and within society in general.

As educators, volunteers, researchers, and writers, we are as much a part of the worlds in which we live as are those about whom we write. We are not immune to the social pressures and stereotypes that surround what it means to be aging women in our culture.

In an excellent article published in the *Journal of Women and Aging*, Ruth E. Ray (1999:175) discusses what she terms “the power of the personal.” She argues that, within feminist gerontology, the validation of personal knowledge and experience is crucial to a subjective research methodology. She suggests that conducting “self-reflection, self-critique and personal narratives” (179) pertaining to our own experiences enables us to become part of the more general cultural narratives of aging. She suggests further:

Wouldn't it be wise for me—and others like me who wish to engage in conscious, critical research on older people's lives—to look inward and examine our own aging selves first? Shouldn't we become aware of the decline narratives we have internalised for ourselves before we conduct any kind of research—narrative or otherwise—on the subject of aging? (182)

Being in agreement with the principles Ray puts forth, we decided to take the plunge and to reflect upon our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences relating to growing older and to examine the roots of these realities.

Jeanette

I am fifty-six years old. When I first began to teach the sociology of aging and gerontology I was in my early thirties. I was active in a variety of community-based organizations, which worked with and for older persons, and I felt that I could use my energy and skills to make life better for some of the elders I knew.

I have always had very good relationships with older persons, and my grandfather was a very important person in my life. I grew up in the East End of London, England, and there were many older people among

my relatives. Interestingly enough though, my own parents died when they were quite young: my birth mother at the age of twenty-eight, my father at the age of sixty-three, and my stepmother at the age of sixty-four. I suspect this is one of the reasons I was always interested in working with older persons: I never had the opportunity to provide assistance to my own parents.

I was born at the end of the Second World War, and the country had undergone vast losses, not just in terms of those who had died in the war, but also in terms of the economy and jobs. Within this context older people were looked upon as necessary resources. I grew up living next door to a pub, and every day a group of old women would sit in the “private bar” (the smallest of the many bars) drinking their barley wine (their drink of choice) and discussing the state of affairs in the nation. These old women were the cultural brokers of our neighbourhood: they knew who was married to whom, who had died in the war, who now had a job, how many children each neighbour had, and what they were doing with their lives. If anyone wanted to know what was happening on the local scene, then they went to these older women, who were always eager to trade gossip and stories.

Those who couldn't make it to the pub sat in their windows across the street from my house, and, when we would walk by, the predominantly older women would call out and inquire as to where we were going, what for, with whom, and so on. These bits of information would then be shared with the next passer-by, as long as they were neighbours. The daily market was another place where information was transmitted, and again older women were the ones most likely to be engaged in this work.

While younger men and women fought in the Second World War, their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers tended to the children and households. They also took care of the stalls and shops at the market and came up with interesting ways to make a few additional shillings or pence. When I was a child, my favourite stallholder was the old woman who sold grated horseradish. Every day except Sunday she would sit at the stall, always wearing black because her two sons had died in the war. She would grate horseradish onto pieces of newspaper and, if requested, would spill a few drops of beetroot juice on the radish to make it “red.” Sometime she also sold live eels, which would be slithering on large chunks of ice in steel containers. When the eels of your choice had been selected, she would skilfully chop off their heads and wrap the bodies in newspaper. She knew everything there was to know about the market and the community, and when the market eventually closed I often wondered whatever happened to her.

The “beetroot” woman and my grandfather (who had immigrated to England after the Russians had invaded his home in Lithuania) were also the last of the artisans: individuals who had specific skills demanded by the public. My grandfather had been a tailor. I grew up in the “rag” trade, and all the men I knew wore tailor-made trousers. When machine-made clothes and installment plans (what the English called “hire purchase”) came into being, men stopped having their trousers tailor-made and bought them “off the rack.” Beetroot started to be sold in jars; eels came in plastic tubs and could be kept in a new machine called a refrigerator. So, when I became a teenager, the resourcefulness and value of older people in the community began to change.

I observed first-hand what happened to some older people when their skills were no longer needed within their communities. My grandfather had always insisted that he knew he would be “old” if the time ever came when he was no longer needed or if he could not manage for himself. One day, while in his seventies, he fell in the bathroom and could not get up. He refused assistance or a visit to the doctor, and spent the next two weeks in bed, where he died as he had wished.

As a young, working-class child, older people were to me a productive, crucial, and much loved group. Sadly, as technology and advanced industrialization changed the economy of the United Kingdom, it also changed the value we placed upon the elderly.

When I first taught courses in gerontology I always insisted that age was a state of mind, that we were as young as we felt, that there was no such thing as old age per se—just a series of age-related changes that we all experience in more or less similar stages. As I grow older and feel the arthritis in my knee causing some mobility challenges and recognize that my ability to thread a needle or to do other up-close work is diminishing due to decreasing vision, I seldom make these kinds of statements. I am starting to become one of the people about whom I teach.

Many of my friends are in a similar age range, and we often joke about our aging experiences. We laugh not so much because we think they are funny as because we all share some sense of surprise that we are actually having these kinds of discussions. We share our concerns about osteoporosis, menopause, cancer, having to live in an institution, having to go to bed earlier than we used to because we feel so tired, needing to reduce our beverage intake after 5:00 PM to reduce the chances of having to get up during the night to go to the bathroom, and other “typical” aspects of normal aging. We also share our joy at having good friends with whom we can discuss such topics.

I have two daughters who are both teenagers. When I first shared

their lives with their biological mother, I was concerned that my grey hair caused me to look more like their grandmother than their “other” mother, so I coloured it. Now that they live elsewhere and I live alone, I colour my hair because I don’t want to “look” old in case I meet someone new. Fortunately, while writing this book I did meet someone new—someone who appreciates and even celebrates grey hair and all that it signifies. Clearly I have internalized the values of my culture, which suggest that having grey hair equals oldness, which equals non-attractiveness, non-desirability, and asexuality. Intellectually I challenge this assumption, while in practice I buy into it. It is, indeed, a conundrum.

Recently my sixteen-year-old daughter was visiting and we decided that we would both colour our hair, she because she wanted a “different” look—something that represented her uniqueness, attractiveness, and sense of adventure—me because the grey was starting to come through. I thought how fascinating and telling it is that, in our culture, hair colour advertisements present at least two different messages to women and men on the basis of age. For younger women and men the message is about risk taking, about being glamorous, daring, adventurous, and mysterious; for older women and men the message is about looking younger. For older women, the voice-overs suggest that we “hide” the grey, “look the age we feel.” There is implicit in some of these media-manufactured messages the notion that “no one need know” the truth about our hair colour. There is to these common advertisements a sense of disembodiment: older women are not who they appear to be. Having grey hair and needing to disguise it implies the need to lie about who we “really” are; that is, “old women.” Being courageous, adventurous, and daring about one’s looks seems to be something reserved for young women; old women are simply expected to try to look young.

In advertisements geared towards men, such as a recent campaign for a product called For Men Only, the television commercial shows a forty-something man who glances at his image in a mirror and declares that he “didn’t realize [he] was going so grey.” After he has purchased and used the advertised product, the next scene shows him with darker hair and a woman on his arm who tells him that he “always stays so handsome.”

Even with grey hair disguised by cosmetics, men still get the women of their dreams. I have yet to see a television commercial, or printed advertisement, in which the older woman who uses hair colouring “gets” her man. Even more unlikely is the advertisement where a woman who uses hair colouring or other cosmetics gets the woman of

her dreams, or a man the man of his dreams. Indeed, if we were to look to the advertising market, or the popular print media in general, for images of lesbians and gay men we would find them totally absent.

In a new twist to the issue of grey hair, a recent L'Oreal advertisement featured in the December 2000 issue of *Fifty Plus*, the magazine of the Canadian Association of Retired Persons, shows three women. Two of the women appear to be in their late forties, while one appears to be in her mid-fifties. The caption reads: "Celebrate Your Gray!" After describing the benefits of the hair-colouring product, women are encouraged to "Be exactly who [they] are."

I have an aunt who is in her seventies, and she maintains that women who don't colour their hair when it becomes grey are "letting themselves go." Somehow, in her opinion, such women are failing woman-kind. Most of the women in my family coloured their hair; in fact, I cannot remember an older female relative who had grey hair.

I have internalized many of my culture's assumptions about older people, particularly about women. On a daily basis popular culture reminds me that youth is equated with beauty, men with power, and women with subservience to that power. I read advertisements that portray old women as feeble; as suffering from some form of dementia or depression; as needing to use cosmetics to hide wrinkles, age spots, grey hair; as wearing clothes that are dull and drab, usually grey or black. I watch television programs devoid of older women, unless I watch re-runs of *The Golden Girls*.

I am unlikely to see movies in which beautiful older women have starring roles. Although there are an increasing number of good popular novels that feature old women as the main characters, in general these people are not present. I am inundated with cultural messages about what it means to be old, and, in general, the scripts for aging women are neither inspiring nor challenging.

In *Women and Aging: An Anthology by Women*, Sandra Healey (1986:62) articulates what aging means to her:

What does it really mean to grow old? For me, first of all, to be old is to be myself. No matter how patriarchy may classify and categorize me as invisible and powerless, I exist. I am an on-going person, a sexual being, a person who struggles, for whom there are important issues to explore, new things to learn, new challenges to meet, beginnings to make, risks to take, endings to ponder. Even though some of my options are diminished, there are new paths ahead.

Inspired by experiences such as the one just cited, I continue to walk my own path into old age. I am open to new experiences and challenges, and to teaching my students and others that growing older can be a rich journey.

Diane

I am sixty-two years old and have recently left a forty-year marriage. I have three adult sons: two married with children, one divorced. Since my fortieth birthday they have watched me as I sought to “know self.” When I was fifty I went to university and, taking part in women’s studies courses, very quickly identified myself as a “feminist.” I discovered I had always been a feminist but simply had not placed a label on my worldview. To this day I have great difficulty wearing any sort of label.

For many years my father’s parents were missionaries in India. My memory of them goes back to a time when they were on sabbatical and lived with us for six months. I remember my grandfather as a very strong, chauvinistic male, a great man with the ladies, while my grandmother I remember as staying quietly in the background. She was, however, a very angry woman, and I would sometimes experience the brunt of her anger about her lot in life. As I age myself, and as I reflect upon my own inner world, I can now see her situation with new eyes. She was the perfect example of a woman who was subordinate to husband and church. I remember my grandfather sitting in a rocking chair, reading the Bible and discussing issues of kindness, love, and the word of Jesus. I was to follow his example for a good part of my adult life.

My own mother is still living. She is eighty-six, and her life experience has consisted of “looking after other people.” She no longer has anyone to look after and is now experiencing a great loneliness, a lack of meaning in her life. She, too, was a traditional wife who left her own gifts and needs behind in her attempt to please everyone. I speak of this now as I remember that, from an early age, I wished to be different. I did not want to follow these examples and so struck out on an adventure to find a self.

In doing this research I find myself asking such questions as, What meaning is there in my life? What is important to me? How do I see the world around me? How do I wish to grow older? Being connected to people is very important to me. My work with palliative care has introduced me to many older persons who are facing death, and I am intrigued by the different experiences these people undergo as they face their physical deaths. Believing that I am a spiritual being within a

physical body, it has always been important for me to do what I came here to do. Initially, I belonged to the organized church, and, for many years, the people I met, the rituals I followed, were very meaningful and supportive to me as I travelled on my journey. However, as I asked more questions and searched my inner world more thoroughly, I could no longer accept the “man”-made dogma and doctrine presented to me. So the great Creator became both female and male for me, and I am experiencing a whole new way of being in the world as I journey forward.

I grew up with the image of a slim, female body as the norm. The women in my family placed great significance upon physical appearances. I have always struggled with a weight problem; however, as I grow older, what matters to me most is my health, not my physical appearance. Hallelujah!

As I get to know myself, I have more confidence in the life ahead of me. I no longer have to be beautiful in the worldly sense, as I feel beautiful inside. It is a great feeling. So very freeing. I see every living thing in this world as being connected to every other. When one hurts, we all hurt. So it goes with pain, happiness, and joy—any of the emotions we share as humans.

I am at a stage in my own life where I do not have to be totally responsible for anyone but myself. While I am my mother’s care manager, I answer only to myself. In my research I have come upon many people who are growing older and are experiencing some of the new learnings, new attitudes, and new perspectives that I am currently experiencing. I find it exciting to be sixty-two, and I look forward to the new lessons and adventures ahead.

Age is no longer relevant to me. I am who I am, and I am thoroughly convinced, after listening to many inspiring older persons and reflecting upon my own journey, that we are not old unless our minds tell us we are. My hope is that we simply all grow older and wiser. (Here it may be noted the Diane and Jeanette don’t necessarily agree about, or share the same experiences of, growing older. This reflects culture as well as life and educational experiences, thus displaying the diversity of the aging experience.)

FORMAT

Each of the chapters in this book includes both an academic component (i.e., the presentation of works by gerontologists and others writing in the fields of aging research and practice) and an experiential component (i.e., the presentation of the lived experiences of older persons). We shall

weave together the opinions of academic scholars and the data gathered from focus groups. In all cases we are interested in comparing the two versions of a reality of growing older within (primarily) North American culture.