

Understandings about ancestors, Elders, ageing & elder-care across my matriline

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Introduction

The topic of ancestry, Elders, and ageing has inspired me to reflect on my matrilineal line. I have been thinking about how colonialism; changing notions about gender roles; and connection, disconnection, and reconnection with one's Indigenous culture/s may have impacted the beliefs, values, assumptions, and practices of my great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, and myself about ageing, Elders, and elder-care.

Maternal ancestry: Family / self location & my great-great-grandmother

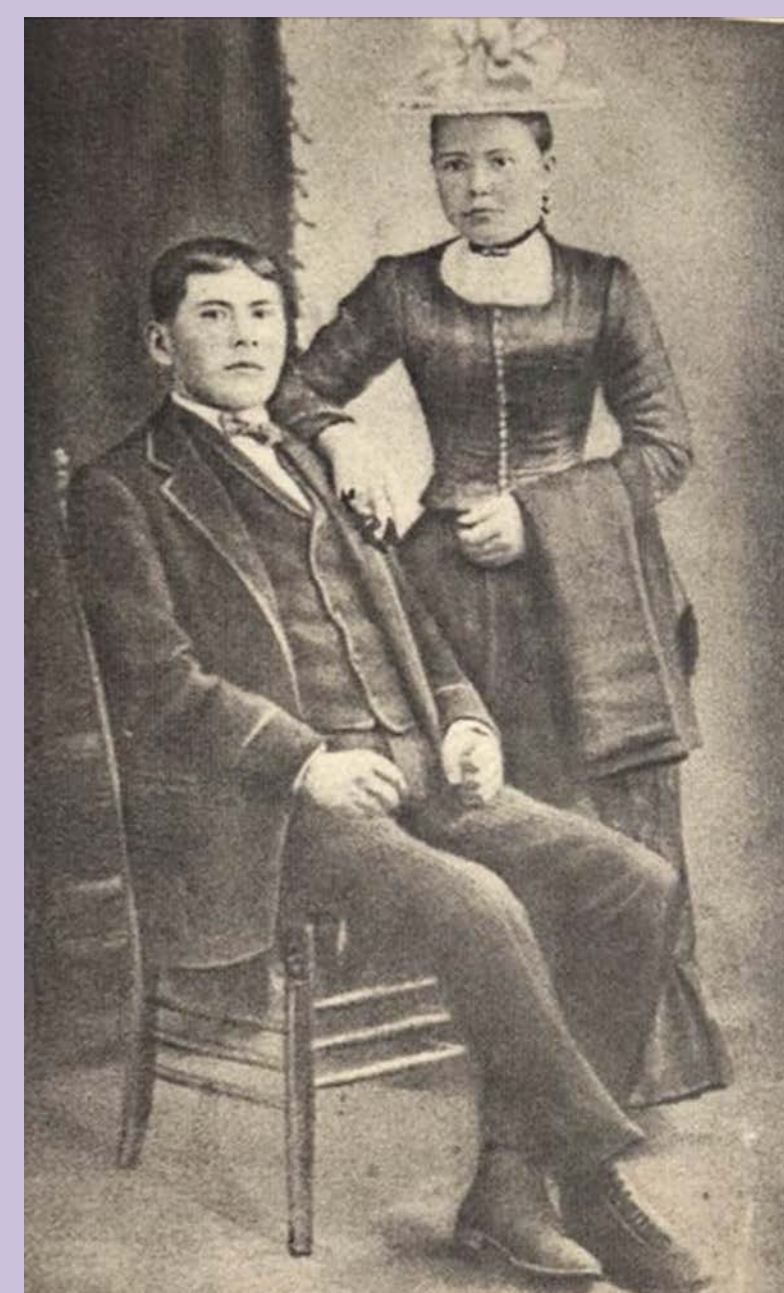
Great-great-great-great-grandfather Chief Sugnuston, with daughters / wives, father of Joe Wyse



(Cryer & Arnett, 2007)

On my mother's side, we are of Snuneymuxw, English, Cree, and Icelandic ancestry. My great-great-grandmother, Kate Bickle, was the daughter of Joe & Jennie Wyse (Sugnuston & Tsa'tass'aya), who were both Snuneymuxw respected Knowledge Keepers and Elders (Cryer & Arnett, 2007). Kate lost her Indian-status when she married an English man, my great-great-grandpa Bickle. Her loss of status meant she could no longer live in her community on the Nanaimo reserve.

Joe & Jennie Wyse



Great-grandmother

My great-grandmother, Glenna Gillis, was the matriarch of our family, where she kept us all connected. She used to tell me stories of what it was like when she was a child and how much she used to love going to visit her grandparents on the Nanaimo Indian reserve, where everyone was so kind, the nature was so beautiful, and the fresh food was delicious. Despite many hardships, she always kept an upbeat attitude and stayed busy with her hands and on her feet, right into her ripe older age. I never once heard her complain about getting older, with all the aches and pains that often come along with it.

My great-grandma cared for her mother for quite some time as she aged, until she was deaf and blind, as well as for her mother-in-law, until her death. She was cared for by my grandmother and another one of her daughters as she aged, until she got sick, need to go to the hospital, and passed away last year at age 92.

Grandmother

I had the privilege of discussing the topic of ageing with my grandmother last year. She said she didn't think a lot about ageing when she was younger but she did feel like her forties were the beginning of getting old, even though it really wasn't. She said the best parts about ageing is that she feels more content and peaceful. Further, she has learned to be more comfortable with who she is, which took a long time. The parts she didn't consider to be "much fun" is the changes to her physical body and health. She partially believed this was her own fault and said she would have taken better care of herself if she knew she was going to live this long. She had concerns about being physically disabled and being a burden. Because of this fear, she wanted to work on improving her eating habits and exercising. To prepare for old age, her advice was to take care of yourself physically, try to stay healthy, make sure you're financially secure, and stay close to family (Dashner, D., & Fawkes, R. A., personal communication, March 2, 2021). Outside of this recorded conversation, I am also aware that she is afraid of care homes and wants to be with family and in her own home as she ages.

Mother

I spoke with my mom recently about her beliefs about caring for ageing family and the process of ageing. She confirmed that our family has always cared for ageing family as long as we can, and those who have done the caring have been the women. Only a couple grandparents had to go into a home for the last few years of their lives. She discussed how she will do what she can to support her mom as she ages, but she will need outside help for certain things. When she talked about herself ageing, the best and worst parts were similar to what my grandma said. When I asked her about what she hopes for as she ages, she said she doesn't know, you never know how life is going to turn out, and she doesn't want to burden me with her care. She said at this point she can't imagine wanting to be here if her physical and cognitive ageing results in a significant loss of independence and causes suffering.

Five generations, I'm the baby



Analysis across generations

Thinking back to my Indigenous ancestors and to my relations still here on earth, I wonder how the perspectives of each generation from my maternal lineage on ancestry, Elders, and ageing may have transformed due to colonization and the enforced gender binary. As Hunt & Holmes (2015) point out, the colonial project's main goal was to "erase Indigenous peoples" (p. 159), and one way it accomplished this was by enforcing policies that would eliminate Indigenous people over time, at least as legal entities. One of the policies that facilitated this erasure was based on the colonial hierarchical gender binary, where under the *Indian Act* status-Indian women lost status when they married a non-status man, which meant they also could no longer live on reserve with their community. This policy impacted my great-great-grandma and her descendants, who were dislocated from their Snuneymuxw relations. While my maternal relatives up to my mother's generation have been able to regain status because of Bill C-31, C-3, and S-3 (Government of Canada, 2018), that does not undo the disconnection and lack of direct cultural knowledge passed on, including about ancestry, Elders, and ageing.

Even though I never got to question my great-grandma directly about her view on ageing, I can't help but think that she had a very different attitude on ageing than my grandma, mom, and I. She certainly was not afraid of ageing or death. This may be because she was more connected to her Snuneymuxw family and community, where cultural beliefs and values may have been passed on. But it might also just have been her nature.



Great-great-grandmother

Great-grandmother



In the interview with my mother, it was clear to me that the value and practice of caring for ageing loved ones as long as possible, if not until death, has been passed down. I am curious about the origins of this value and practice. Does it come from a time where our Indigenous Elders were held in high esteem, had important roles in the community, and were honoured for their wisdom and knowledge (Anderson, 2011)? Or is it due to other reasons, such as homecare making the most sense economically? I am also mindful that the stories my mother told me about family caregiving have followed along gendered lines, where it has been the women who care. I wonder why this is? Has our family been influenced by the sexist view that it is women who are supposed to be the caregivers, even when it is an economic burden to them (Doblin-MacNab & Yancura, 2018)? I realize at this point I have more questions than answers about why this value and practice exists and persists in our family. In the future, I would like to learn more about traditional Snuneymuxw views on Elders and ageing to tease out the origins of my maternal family's beliefs and practices.

In the interview with my grandmother and mother, I see their concerns about being a burden as they age (being cognitively and/or physically disabled) to be connected to our colonial, capitalist society's ageist and ableist perspective. From this lens, people who are not very self-sufficient or economically productive (i.e., older people) are not seen as valuable when compared to those who are (Azulai, 2014).

My understanding of ancestry, Elders, & ageing

I think it important to respect and even revere our ancestor, Elders, grandparents, and parents, particularly those who have respected, loved, and cared for us. I believe in reciprocating care for my loved ones as they grow older, slow down, and get closer to returning to the spirit world. I wonder why it is that I believe this? In this section, I will try to locate the origins of my beliefs and values about ancestry, Elders, ageing, and caring for ageing family.

Even though I was much closer to my maternal family growing up, it was my Cree-Métis dad who took me out to a few Indigenous gatherings and ceremonies, including potlucks, sweat lodges, and a Sun Dance, throughout my childhood and youth, which had an impact on my concept of Elders and ancestors. Furthermore, there were opportunities in my high school for Indigenous youth, as well as my involvement with my Métis community in the last five years, which have also had an impact. In ceremony we often say "all my relations," which I see as showing respect for all of our human and nonhuman ancestors and kin. I've witnessed respect for Elders modelled by making sure they are fed first and receive help when the want it. Respect has been shown by making sure that Elders open and close our circles in a good way, with prayer, and are compensated for their time, knowledge, and wisdom. Respect for Elders has also been directly taught to me by many formal and informal Indigenous teachers.

One way that I have been taught about the special position Elders is through Medicine Wheel teachings, which I have learned from Elders and Knowledge Keepers, including Métis Elder Earl Henderson, as well as from the readings and content in courses, such as SOCW 356. Wenger-Nabigon (2010) speaks of the Cree Medicine Wheel teachings, where Elders and the elderly stage of life are positioned in the North door of the wheel. It is also the direction of caring, winter, and the bear. "Elders teach caring as a common sense activity that all humans are capable of, no matter what their age. Every action has consequences – the wisdom and guidance of the elderly are essential to the necessary caring function of the community" (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010, p. 155).



I have also learned about more Western normative ideas about ageing and the 'elderly' through my mom and grandma, as well as from the media and film, where growing old can be seen scary and the elderly are viewed as a burden to the younger generation. A course I took on human life-span development has taught me the idea that we are always growing and developing, even as we age and enter our elder years. My grandma has also shown me this. SOCW 356 has helped deconstruct some of these Western normative ideas about ageing, where I have explored issues such as ageism and ableism, as well as how they intersect with sexism, classism, and racism, which all exist within the context of the colonial, capitalist system.

Additionally, SOCW 356 has introduced me to the social constructivist understanding of ageing, where it is mostly a social construct, specific to each culture and society, as opposed to a biological process (Khungay, 2022). I'm still thinking about this last point, where I'm not totally sure I agree with it. I think there might be more of a balanced interplay between social meaning making and the bodily and cognitive changes of people over time, where on the one hand biological changes are very real (although not the same between people). On the other hand, the beliefs, values, assumptions, and practices about these changes are diverse, culturally-specific, and situated within a political, socio-economic, and historical context.

So what? Implications for practice

In practice, I think what I have learned about the significance of Elders and how they should be treated has been and will be a strength when I am working with older people. I have been taught to respect Elders, which includes listening to what they think and want for themselves. In my work, I want to honour older people's self-determination, even when their decisions might not be something I think is in their best interest. I must also be careful not to make assumptions about what they want based on my and my family's experiences (i.e., that people want to stay at home as they age). I must really listen to them. I recognize the principle of respecting older people's autonomy may become more ethically complicated when people are cognitively impaired and their decisions could cause harm to themselves. This is an ethical area I would like to critically examine in the near future because I'm not sure what to do in these situations. However, I suspect the ethical approach would be to support the individual with as much self-determination as possible.

Even though I may hold respect for older people, I think I still need to be mindful of my thinking and language in practice. I do not want to speak in a way that blames, pathologizes, or infantilizes older people accidentally. I know that even when I value something, like respecting Elders, that I can unconsciously hold and express harmful dominant ideas and discourses because I am so entrenched in them. For example, in the past I've bought into the dominant neoliberal 'active ageing' idea that it is the individual's responsibility to eat healthy and exercise over their lifetime. Meanwhile, I was not seeing as clearly the social factors, such as gender, ability, class, race, etc., that might be acting as barriers to following the active ageing 'program' (Khungay, 2022). Likewise, I was not recognizing that these aspirations are very rooted in ageism and ableism and do not need to be everyone's goal.

In my practice, I think I also need to keep the structural picture in mind, where I am working to serve community members within an ageist, ableist, sexist, classist, racist, etc. society. I need to be practicing from a critical, anti-oppressive, anti-racist, decolonial, and intersectional perspective, where I must be actively looking for, deconstructing, and challenging oppressive policies and practices that act as barriers and are violent towards marginalized people, including to our Elders.

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