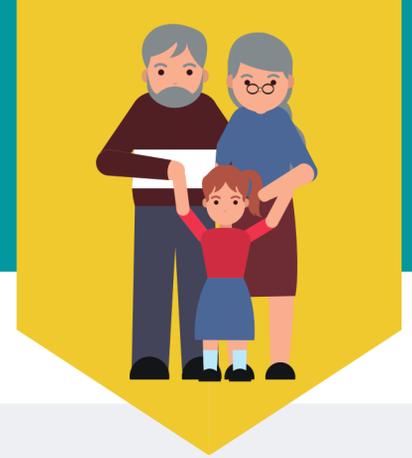


CONTRASTING CULTURES

Aging Individuals & Their Roles in Society



"Globally, there is great diversity in how grandparents are involved in their grandchildren's lives" (Dolbin-MacNab & Yancura, 2018, p.4)

MY POSITIONALITY

In regard to aging, it is important for me to locate myself as a white, settler Canadian woman. My perspectives center with a Western, Eurocentric lens and entrenched ideas of the nuclear family. Being female, childcare and household labour are roles commonly expected of me and consequently, important topics for me to explore. In my lived experience, grandmothers are loved and respected, but not necessarily valued the same as other members of society. Stereotypes pervade my thoughts when I think of older citizen's abilities. I have been taught to feel insecure and anxious of my own aging, with fear towards grey hair and all the abilities I will lose. Although I have been taught to respect my grandparents, I have not grown up valuing their knowledge and experiences as important learning opportunities for myself.

WESTERN PERSPECTIVE

In Western societies, individualism and nuclear family structures are deeply entrenched in the ways families function. It is less common for grandparents to reside in the same household as their children and grandchildren, yet they are still often relied on for childcare and other forms of support. In some instances, grandparents become the sole guardians of their grandchildren to meet their families needs (Dolbin-MacNab & Yancura, 2018). Ageism is prominent in Western cultures where youthfulness is valued and stigma and negative attitudes are inflicted on aging populations (Azulai, 2014). As Western culture values capitalism, it is not surprising that aging is devalued and taught to coincide with loss (Azulai, 2014). The media plays into ageism by framing older people as burdens rather than looking to their strengths and differing ways they can contribute to society (Azulai, 2014).

INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE

Indigenous communities are often structured based on kinship ties and collectivity, sharing responsibility outside of the nuclear family (Dolbin-McNab & Yancura, 2018). As Indigenous women age, they gain life experience, wisdom, and status, which leads them to highly regarded positions (Anderson, 2011). As these grandmothers lose their mobility, their roles merely shift to fulfill other needs within the community, keeping them actively engaged. Roles they hold include: teachers, leaders, mediators, nurturers, medicine people, keepers of law and traditions, and firekeepers (Anderson, 2011). Their firekeeping roles come from a place of trust and also act as a metaphor because, like fires, they keep their communities alive. This speaks to their integral roles and importance within their communities (Anderson, 2011).

"Old age was eminently a very productive stage of life"
(Anderson, 2011, p.127)

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

--- Many grandparents raising their grandchildren seek social supports including: financial, emotional, social, and material, and are often eligible for benefits (Dolbin-MacNab & Yancura, 2018). As a social worker it is important to understand this reality and to know what supports are available in order to provide information and direction.

--- When the supports for grandparents are not enough, social workers can play a big role in advocating for changes (Dolbin-MacNab & Yancura, 2018). It is important to critically analyze programs and policies to make sure they are inclusive and accessible.

--- Being educated on intergenerational trauma and effects of colonialism on older generations, is an important aspect of a decolonial practice.

--- In order to use an anti-oppressive lens in my practice, it is important to expand my view of the family to encompass various structures past the nuclear family, paying attention to grandparents involvements and intersections (Luxton, 2015).

--- Studies show that ageism is connected to different forms of abuse, which is important for social workers to understand and address (Azulai, 2014).



(Grant, H., personal communication, 1998)

IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

Intersectionality

As defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (2018), **intersectionality** is a term to help people understand how different inequalities build upon each other and create barriers for certain people, a concept not understood by everyone. With more **intersections** that fall outside of the dominant norm, people face greater discrimination and marginalization. When speaking to raising grandchildren, this work falls greatly on the grandmothers as this is often a cultural and socially expected role for women to play (Dolbin-MacNab & Yancura, 2018). This type of caring work often goes unrecognized. Further **intersections** of grandmothers positionalities can lead to greater oppression and vulnerabilities. They face disadvantages within the systems of society, which further affects their well-being (Dolbin-MacNab & Yancura, 2018). A social position that specifically affects older populations is ageism.

Ageism

Ageism is a discrimination against an individual based on their age and most often affects older people. This phenomenon has had less attention and research than other areas of discrimination (Azulai, 2014). Grandparents and their peers are faced with exclusion and stigmas about their **age** and their perceived lack of abilities. They are stereotyped as 'less than' other members in society without looking to other aspects of their positionality and abilities (Azulai, 2014). This affects their acceptance in society and engagement in communities as well as the support they receive from peers and greater systems.

Colonialism

Indigenous elders are seen as integral in passing teachings and values on to their grandchildren. This "ongoing generational exchange" (Anderson, 2011, p.127) was highly affected by **colonialism** and the effects continue into today. **Colonial** child welfare policies remove Indigenous children from their families, breaking down their relationships, identities, and cultural connections (Dolbin-MacNab & Yancura, 2018). Imposing the patriarchy onto Indigenous communities has had lasting effects as women and grandmothers had many of their rights removed and, in turn, their roles restricted (Anderson, 2011). The impact of **colonialism** pervades all areas of Indigenous communities so these are just a few examples.

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