

Ageing, Old Ones, Ancestry & Elders:

A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Grandmothers – By Jeff Scotney



According to Uhlenberg and Cheuk (2010), “grandparenthood is a socially recognized category in every human society, but that the meaning and significance of grandparenthood is socially constructed” (as cited in Dolbin-MacNab & Yancura, 2018). As I contrast Indigenous grandmothers with my own grandmothers, it is apparent that these roles have diverse, culturally-specific meanings.

I am a white settler of Norwegian, Irish, Swedish, and English ancestry. My maternal grandparents were granted stolen Dane-zaa land to clear and settle (homestead pictured above). They both worked on the farm until my grandfather’s death. My maternal “Grannie”, Geraldine Burke, was of Irish descent. She was one of the only trained nurses in the area, and though not paid for her work, was instrumental in caring for the sick and injured, as well as aiding in childbirth. In this way, she was engaged in community healing; however, her role was solely in attending to the physical component of health. According to my mother, my Grannie was emotionally distant, and matters pertaining to religion and spirituality were generally solicited through male church leaders. After my parents divorced, Grannie did come to live with us in the winters, before her death (pictured right). This was mainly to help when my mother went back to school; however, my brother and I were too old for her to have significant influence on our socialization (Dolbin-MacNab & Yancura, 2018). Importantly, she allowed my mother to engage in school, which eventually led to her ability to join the labour force (Dolbin-MacNab & Yancura, 2018).



My paternal grandmother (pictured to the left), Fern Soder, is of Norwegian descent. Growing up, we lived closer to my father’s family (patrilocal), and some of my fondest memories were of the rituals and ceremonies centered around Christian holidays. We would regularly go to visit my father’s parents for Christmas and Easter with my aunts, uncles, and cousins. The memories of decorating trees, singing carols, wrapping presents, and searching for candies with my extended family, stands out as being integral to my development. My grandmother was connected to her culture, and through her connection and teachings, I became interested in my Norwegian heritage. Through her, the foundation for my cultural identity was formed. I remember the scalding hot water she used when we washed dishes together. She would often say, “cleanliness is next to godliness”, as she supervised me to ensure chores were done properly. While it did not grant her special status, my grandmother was very religious, and taught me to value my spirituality. I miss her terribly.

Although, this brief comparison has allowed me to see some cross cultural similarities in grandmother’s roles, aging populations are not as respected in the west, where ageism and stereotyping of elders is commonplace (Azulai, 2014). This does not appear to be true among traditional Indigenous cultures, where communal life provided respected and honoured roles for elders (Azulai, 2014). Despite these differences, my goals to treat everyone I work with dignity and compassion, remain. The power I have is only useful in that I can use it to stand up to ageism, racism, and other forms of oppressions.



NORTH DOOR

Representing air and the processes of change, movement, and caring (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010). In the Anishinaabek culture, “old age itself marked a kind of religious attainment” and Old Ones were revered for having invaluable experience in stewarding human, non-human and spirit relations (Anderson 2011, p. 126). After mastering these relations, elder women had a responsibility to “keep the life force and spirit moving” (Anderson, 2011, p. 126). Elder women could become chiefs just like men and were responsible in caring for “the circles of healing, the circles of peace, and human justice” to foster community harmony (Anderson, 2011, p. 128).



WEST DOOR

Representing entrance into the spirit world, “respect, reason, and water” (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010, p. 146). Both men and women elders played important roles “to bring about closure to different things, to mourning, to breakdown in the community” (Anderson, 2011, p. 128). Women elders helped alleviate community suffering when deaths or conflicts occurred. In some Indigenous cultures, when women became grandmothers, they gained great respect and special powers that were previously accessed only by men (Anderson, 2011). “Once you had reached menopause, you were considered both genders...You could use a man’s pipe; you could sit down inside of a circle...You could move back and forth between” (Anderson, 2011, p. 130).



EAST DOOR

Representing the spring, renewal, vision, good food, and childhood (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010). Grandmothers played crucial roles in developing and sustaining children, families, and community (Anderson, 2011). In some Indigenous communities, grandmothers and grandchildren knew each other’s need and took care of one another (Anderson, 2011). Even if women elders were physically compromised, they could engage in supervising the work of the younger community members, such as doing laundry and preparing food and medicine (Anderson, 2011). Grandmothers played important roles in the community, cycling power and knowledge back to the younger generations (Anderson, 2011).



SOUTH DOOR

Representing family and community relationships as well as values, identity, education, and cultural heritage (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010). Women elders were “spirit teachers” and “life teachers” (Anderson, 2011, P. 128). Elder women were literal and metaphoric “torchbearers”, keeping alive the fires necessary for both physical survival and for the “health, wellbeing, and longevity of their communities” (Anderson, 2011, p. 131). In some Indigenous communities, grandmothers and “old ladies” were “the teachers of everything” and facilitated community safety as well as teaching foundational knowledge necessary for individual and community identity (Anderson, 2011, p. 144).