

BEING OLD TODAY AND TOMORROW: A DIFFERENT PROPOSITION

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Résumé — Ce texte présente l'essentiel des idées contenues dans un document soumis par les auteurs lors de la phase I de l'Etude démographique. Le document original a été publié avec quelques modifications mineures par la revue française "Futuribles" ("Vieillesse d'aujourd'hui et de demain: une même âge, une autre réalité?", *Futuribles*, 1987, 110:3-21). Les auteurs ont accepté de résumer ici en anglais les principales avenues de recherche qui y étaient suggérées. Une bibliographie importante accompagnait cet article, lequel est disponible dans la collection de tirés à part du Département de démographie à l'Université de Montréal.

Abstract — The following text presents the main ideas contained in a research orientation paper made by the authors within the first phase of the Demographic Review. The original document was written in French and was published after very minor editing by an international, Paris-based review *Futuribles* ("Vieillesse d'aujourd'hui et de demain: un même âge, une autre réalité? *Futuribles*, 1987, 110:3-21). The authors have agreed to summarize in English the principal avenues of research they have put forward in their proposition as being relevant to the demographic future of Canada and its social and economic implications. An extensive bibliography documented the original text, which is available from the reprint series of the Département de démographie at the Université de Montréal.

Key Words — aging, characteristics of the elderly, future impact

Aging in Canada

Nobody will contest that population aging constitutes the main demographic challenge which will face Canadian society at the outset of the 21st century. That one Canadian citizen out of five will be considered as "aged" is now part of the foreseeable future, whereas only half as many were identified as such in the 1981 census. Such a trend and its consequences have recently blossomed into priorities both within the scientific community and at the level of governmental policy-making.

Most of the time, population aging is viewed as a gloomy perspective that will afflict Canada, as well as most Western societies, in numerous areas at the individual and collective levels. That greater numbers of people will have access to a third and even a fourth age, and that declining fertility will continue to increase the proportion of the aged in society, seems to be leading to an increased quantity of problems in the future. Such a view is based on the observation of the very real problems that are linked to old age as it is lived today, and we have no intention to deny their existence. However, the problems that arise in old age are very often the result of characteristics acquired all through life, such as education, work experience, financial situation and health linked to life habits. We strongly feel that today's adults have already acquired certain characteristics that are bound to make them enjoy a more productive and autonomous third age than that known by today's elderly. It is our opinion that rather than simply projecting the present situation, research should be encouraged that would aim at identifying how old age may differ in the future. Until now, few studies have been undertaken in that direction, although many researchers have started to address some of the main questions that such an approach raises.

Will the Elderly Still be Predominantly Women?

This is the first answer we need to know if we are to grasp the reality of being old in the next century. The widening gap we have witnessed between male and female life expectancies may not be here to stay. For example, we need to measure the impact on morbidity and mortality of today's adult women adopting "masculine" lifestyle characteristics, such as professional careers, smoking and use of alcohol.

How Will Elderly Women Differ Tomorrow?

The future of elderly women lies in the important changes from which they will have benefited. The first to come to mind is equal access to education at all levels: we will have to wait until approximately the year 2020 to witness the first generations of older women who have gained equal access to university, but the progress made will have been felt much earlier. The second change — which is linked to the first — is the increasing labour force participation of women, with access to better jobs and greater financial independence. Marriage and motherhood will have been less of a restraint on older women of the future, and in their case, we may witness a transformation of the dreaded “empty-nest” period into a productive and fulfilling “age between ages”.

Will the Elderly be Financially More Secure?

The answer to the preceding question will no doubt indicate that elderly women of the future cannot help but be better off financially. A careful examination of certain characteristics of today's labour reinforces our impression that both men and women will enjoy greater financial autonomy. Such characteristics include the increasing number of jobs that offer private pension plans, the proportion of adults who own their lodging and the general increase in income and spending power. On a different level, the reduction of parental responsibility and its attached financial burden may act as an incentive for better preparation for retirement.

Being an Elderly Couple: Will Marital Instability Become an Asset for Greater Autonomy?

The last two decades have seen Canadians modify greatly their attitudes and behaviour regarding marriage. The marital instability observed with today's adults will inevitably colour differently their old age. We can expect that a greater number of couples reaching their golden years will consist of different partners than when the wedding bells first rang. If and when widowhood occurs, the survivor might be better prepared to live alone, having probably already known periods of loneliness following one or more break-ups. Here again, and particularly for women, autonomous behaviours will have been acquired well before the advent of the third age.

*Isolation in Old Age: Will Friendship and Relations
Network Supply for Dwindling Kinship?*

Isolation is often perceived as one of the less appealing aspects of reaching old age. Solitude *per se* has very little to do with the chronological age one has attained: it is, rather, created by life in a society which, willingly or unwillingly, erects very efficient barriers between elderly people and others in that society.

The first such barrier is retirement: in spite of the rosy color that it is often painted, retirement is most frequently thought of as being the end of one's useful and productive life. The prospect of one Canadian in five being thus considered "22-out of circuit" should bring about an examination, both by researchers and policy makers, of the threshold of retirement and its social and economic implications.

At the same time, the demographer should examine with interest another facet of isolation in old age: the evolution of kinship structure which — through the combined effects of reduced mortality, falling fertility and changes in marital behaviours — will modify the support network upon which third age can rely. It has been demonstrated that at age 65, modern man can still count on having as many relatives as did his ancestors of a few centuries ago. Lower mortality has counteracted declining fertility. However, the kinship structure of today is totally different. Any further increase in life expectancy or decrease in fertility, combined with more frequent marital disturbances, will have an impact on support networks for the future elderly. Society urgently needs to be able to estimate this impact. It seems probable that such support networks, which were traditionally sought downwards through the family, will be transferred laterally through a friendship network. The success and exact nature of such a transfer may be questioned and should be evaluated in terms of the increased load it may or may not put on public support systems.

Will the Elderly of the Future Enjoy Better Health?

The fundamental question here is to determine to what extent the gains we make against death can be interpreted as being gains in terms of quality of life of the years recuperated. Are we really progressing towards a true "rectangularization" of mortality, with almost everyone living through a healthful third age and reaching a fourth stage, only to face decline and inevitable death? How far are we from eliminating social inequalities in the areas of health and death? Should scientific research be geared towards prolonging the life of the

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dying or towards improving the quality of life of the living? Our society has reached a point where ethical choices will have to be made in order to establish scientific priorities.

Will the Elderly be the Same Across Canada?

No research on the future of old age in Canadian society would be complete without looking into the regional disparities in population aging.

Conclusion

By resolutely searching for positive indicators of the characteristics of the future elderly, we do not wish to drift into futile optimism. Population aging will bring its load of problems, but we firmly believe that apocalyptic visions of aging must be mitigated. By drawing a realistic profile of the positive differences we can expect to see in the next generations of the elderly, the future of an aging Canada will appear brighter: at least shall we be ready to respond to its real needs.

