

Increasing older adults' civic engagement is the aim for many social policy initiatives and is closely linked to successful aging models. Closer examination is required to consider outcomes that go beyond the “win-win” thinking of how civic engagement is mutually beneficial for both the individual (e.g., health benefits) and the community (e.g., community strengthening) (1,2).

Rethinking “successful” aging

Successful aging has dominated the field of aging and older adults for decades and has influenced policy, practice, and media discourse (3). However, critiques have identified many exclusionary and problematic assumptions of this framework including its ableism, its lack of cultural perspectives, and the failure to account for socio-economic inequities beyond an individual's control (3). As a model, successful aging relies on three components: disease and disability avoidance; maintaining physical and mental functions; and social engagement (4). Social engagement in this model involves maintenance of interpersonal relationships and productive activities (4). These productive activities are defined as informal help-giving and volunteering work (4). It is out of this model description that connections are made between successful aging and civic engagement.

Linkages between participation in civic activities and successful aging have been promoted at a global, national, and municipal level. The United Nations provided a framework to guide how societies globally should respond to aging, which included the recommendation to “[p]romote civic and cultural participation of older persons as strategies to combat social isolation and support empowerment” (5). Canada has adopted approaches to promote greater community involvement of seniors under the World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Community Initiative (6) and the New Horizons for Seniors Program (7). In contrast to negative views on aging that position seniors as frail, dependent, and burdensome, successful aging approaches focus on seniors remaining healthy and involved in their communities. These models define successful aging as a state of being where a senior is independent, productive, and engaged (8) and are framed as successful aging, healthy aging, active aging, or productive aging (8, 9, 10). By remaining healthy and community-engaged, seniors are an asset to their

Acknowledgements

CRIAW-ICREF acknowledges its presence and work on the Indigenous Territories. We respectfully recognize the legacy of colonization upon Indigenous Peoples.

Researched & written by: Sarah Moreheart

Design & layout by: Elizabeth Nguyen

Reviewed by: Marion Pollack & Marilyn Porter

Published by: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIA-W-ICREF), 250 City Centre Avenue, Suite 807 Ottawa, ON K1R 6K7

ISBN: 978-1-77483-035-2

communities rather than a burden. These approaches seek to change ageist assumptions but taken uncritically, may lead to deepening inequities that devalues the diversity of lived experiences and perspectives of older adults.

Aging successfully is seen as an individualistic burden; the onus is on the senior themselves to ensure they are meeting the standards of successful aging. Those individuals who do not or cannot follow these rules are unsuccessfully aging (11). However, individual responsibility for health needs to be examined carefully under the intersectional effects of gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and geographic location, among other factors. Individual health is dependent upon different factors, many of which remain beyond an individual's direct control to modify such as having adequate income, access to appropriate and affordable medical care, living in safe accommodations and safe neighbourhoods, and living without a disability. Such attributes are not equally available or even possible for all individuals. Concepts of successful aging are particularly problematic for older women, who face greater pressure to hide signs of physical aging (12). Older women in Canada are more likely than older men to have a disability (13), live with chronic illness and need informal assistance to manage everyday activities (14), and live in low-income households (15). Poverty, access to services, and vulnerability to abuse are exacerbated by racialized identities, immigration experiences, and the effects of colonization for Indigenous populations in Canada (15,16). Focusing on an individual's choices and behaviours without the context in which an individual has control to change or improve their condition can have important consequences. Individuals who do not keep up with societal expectations may be viewed as less deserving of benefits and services, and programming and policy will cater to those who can demonstrate that they have aged the “correct” way, which invariably privileges those who already possessed the means to age successfully (11).

Civic engagement as necessary public service

With the aging of the baby boomer cohort (those born between 1946-1965), social policy has been directed to the “unprecedented opportunity [for seniors] to direct their energy towards a positive social purpose” (17). Globally, both governmental and non-governmental agencies are searching for methods to mobilize this potential “army of volunteers” to address community problems and lead social renewal (18–20). Volunteer seniors are envisioned to improve public education systems through tutoring and mentoring children, preserving the environment, providing respite care, enhancing service delivery in non-profits, and offsetting the financial strain connected with supporting seniors (19,21). In Canada, funding through initiatives such as the New Horizons for Seniors Program are directed to “empower seniors in their communities

and contribute to improving their health and well-being” (7) through program objectives such as promoting volunteerism among seniors or engaging seniors in mentorship activities. Applications are strengthened that support national priorities including “supporting healthy ageing” and “helping seniors to age in place” (e.g., providing practical supports to help seniors remain in their homes for longer) (7). While these senior-led and senior-orientated programs are promoting the social inclusion of older adults, the strategies are asking seniors and community groups to address critical needs. Larger investments in home care and long-term care facilities, or comprehensive mental health programs, or investments to alleviate housing or medical costs delivered by trained and salaried staff can be avoided by using unpaid senior volunteers at a cost-savings to federal programs. Similar programs can be found in the United States in which more direct connections are made between using “the full range of time, skills, and experience of older individuals ... to provide direct services to persons with disabilities and to bolster the Caregiver Support Program” (19) where the “delivery of services largely depends on the efforts of unpaid volunteers” (22)

Linking civic engagement with successful aging may ultimately deepen stigma and discrimination of older adults, especially women, racialized populations, and those with disabilities. Societal expectations for seniors to provide service, especially through the public and organizational-mediated form of formal volunteerism, can create obligations that are burdensome to meet.

Seniors are positioned as either useful or un-useful depending upon their capacity to make productive contributions (e.g., through volunteering, through caregiving). Embedding civic engagement as a social expectation, as a means to earn one’s place in society, can reinforce structural inequities (23). Marginalized groups, due to discriminatory practices and health, social, and financial inequalities accumulated over their lifetimes, are disadvantaged in the opportunities, resources, and available choices and these inequalities are exacerbated by the experiences of ageism and sexism (12). Older women globally face more economic insecurity than men as a result of discriminatory practices experienced over their lifetimes (e.g., gender pay gap, interrupted employment patterns due to caregiving/parenting, precarious and informal work) (24). Some are required to continue working and simply do not have the free time to participate in formal volunteering activities.

For other older women, decisions on how to spend their time may not include engaging in narrowly defined civic engagement activities. After a lifetime of working or caring for family members or participating in supporting their community in other ways, some are choosing to pursue activities that, due to their lack of focus on providing service, are considered “unproductive” such as travel, creative pursuits, or leisure activities (e.g., joining a language class), or include volunteering in ways that are not mediated through

an organization. Allowing individuals to self-define what brings them fulfillment and well-being is a more inclusive approach to determining what is determined as “successful” aging (25).

References

1. Minkler M, Holstein MB. From civil rights to ... civic engagement? Concerns of two older critical gerontologists about a “new social movement” and what it portends. *J Aging Stud.* 2008 Apr 1;22(2):196–204.
2. Serrat R, Chacur-Kiss K, Villar F. Breaking the win-win narrative: The dark side of older people’ s political participation. *J Aging Stud.* 2021 Mar;56.
3. Martinson M, Berridge C. Successful Aging and Its Discontents: A Systematic Review of the Social Gerontology Literature. *Gerontologist.* 2015 Feb;55(1):58–69.
4. Rowe JW, Kahn RL. Successful aging. *Gerontologist.* 1997 Aug;37(4):433–40.
5. Madrid Plan of Action and its Implementation | United Nations for Ageing [Internet]. Madrid: United Nations; 2002 [cited 2023 Feb 25]. Available from: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/madrid-plan-of-action-and-its-implementation.html>
6. World Health Organization. Global age-friendly cities: a guide [Internet]. World Health Organization; 2007 [cited 2023 Feb 25]. Available from: <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/43755>
7. Canada E and SD. New Horizons for Seniors Program [Internet]. 2018 [cited 2023 Feb 25]. Available from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/new-horizons-seniors.html>
8. Sinha S, Griffin B, Reppas-Rindlisbacher C, Stewart E, Wong I, Callan S, et al. An Evidence-Informed National Seniors Strategy for Canada-2nd edition [Internet]. Toronto, ON: Alliance for a National Seniors Strategy; 2016 [cited 2023 Feb 26]. Available from: <http://nationalseniorsstrategy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/National-Seniors-Strategy-Second-Edition.pdf>
9. Healthy Aging and Wellness Working Group. Healthy Aging in Canada - A New Vision, A Vital Investment from Evidence to Action. 2006.
10. Rowe JW, Kahn RL. Successful aging. *The Gerontologist.* 1997 Aug;37(4):433–40.

11. Holstein MB, Minkler M. Self, Society, and the “New Gerontology.” *The Gerontologist*. 2003 Dec 1;43(6):787–96.
12. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The rights of older women: the intersection between ageing and gender [Internet]. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights; 2021 Jul [cited 2023 Mar 3]. Available from: <https://www.decadeofhealthyageing.org/find-knowledge/resources/publications/the-rights-of-older-women-the-intersection-between-ageing-and-gender>
13. Burlock A. Women with Disabilities. 2017. (Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report).
14. Statistics Canada. Senior Women [Internet]. 2016 [cited 2022 Nov 6]. Available from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14316-eng.htm>
15. Canada E and SD. Social isolation of seniors: A Focus on Indigenous Seniors in Canada [Internet]. 2018 [cited 2023 Feb 27]. Available from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/seniors/forum/social-isolation-indigenous.html>
16. Mandell N, Borrás J, Phonepraseuth J. Recent Canadian Immigrant Seniors: A Literature Review of Settlement Experiences and Services: Knowledge Synthesis Report [Internet]. Toronto, ON: CERIS; 2018 [cited 2023 Feb 26]. Available from: <https://www.niagaraknowledgeexchange.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/10/IWYS-Knowledge-Synthesis-Report-Seniors-report-Sept-2018.pdf>
17. Harvard School of Public Health-MedLife Foundation Initiative. Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement. Harvard School of Public Health-MedLife Foundation Initiative; 2004 p. 162.
18. Hansen T, Slagsvold B. An “Army of Volunteers”? Engagement, Motivation, and Barriers to Volunteering among the Baby Boomers. *J Gerontol Soc Work*. 2020 May 18;63(4):335–53.
19. Reilly SL. Transforming Aging: The Civic Engagement of Adults 55+. *Public Policy Aging Rep*. 2006 Sep 1;16(4):1–8.
20. Zedlewski S. Will Retiring Boomers Form a New Army of Volunteers? [Internet]. Urban Institute Retirement Project; 2007 [cited 2023 Feb 26]. (Perspective on Productive Aging). Report No.: 7. Available from: <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/46871/411579-Will-Retiring-Boomers-Form-a-New-Army-of-Volunteers-.PDF>

21. Gonzales E, Matz-Costa C, Morrow-Howell N. Increasing Opportunities for the Productive Engagement of Older Adults: A Response to Population Aging. *The Gerontologist*. 2015 Apr 1;55(2):252–61.
22. Administration for Community Living Office of Performance and Evaluation: Volunteerism Study [Internet]. 2021; [cited 2023 Feb 26]. Available from: https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/programs/2021-08/ACL%20Volunteerism%20Study_Final%20Study%20Report%20August%202021.pdf
23. Martinson M, Halpern J. Ethical implications of the promotion of elder volunteerism: A critical perspective. *J Ageing Stud*. 2011 Dec;25(4):427–35.
24. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Advocacy Brief on Older Women: Inequality at the Intersection of Age and Gender [Internet]. United Nations; 2022 Mar [cited 2023 Mar 3]. Available from: <https://www.decadeofhealthyageing.org/find-knowledge/resources/publications/inequality-at-the-intersection-of-age-and-gender>
25. Chambre S, Netting F. Baby Boomers and the Long-Term Transformation of Retirement and Volunteering: Evidence for a Policy Paradigm Shift. *J Appl Gerontol*. 2018 Oct;37(10):1295–320.