



6

Social Structures, Social Inequality, and the Life Course

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, you will learn how our interactions with others will help shape our identities, and how social relationships form the foundation of our social structures. These social structures are created over the life course and influenced by personal histories, social class, race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Social structures also contribute to social hierarchy, where opportunities become available based on power. This often contributes to inequalities and conflict between members of different social structures or hierarchies.

Age structures, a form of social structure, influence the way people are treated at any given age, depending on history, culture, and religion. The status of older people, whether they are valued for their wisdom, or seen as a burden to society, depends on how age is socially constructed. It will be seen in this chapter that age also interacts with characteristics of the individual, such as race, gender, and ethnicity, and can influence power similarly to social structures.

Age and social structures do not act alone to determine a person's identity. Each person has some degree of control over their own life course—something referred to as *agency*. Agency can influence our position in a social structure by helping us acquire the capital to change our own destiny. There are many theories that guide the study of social structures and aging, but no single one can fully explain the social phenomenon of age structures.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to do the following:

- Understand how our interactions with others help shape our identities and how social relationships form the foundation of our social structures.
- Elaborate upon on several ways in which social structures, hierarchies, and agency interact to influence identities and social relationships and to shape life-course trajectories.
- Utilize theories and conceptual models to explain how life chances and opportunities across the life course are influenced by social inequalities based on intersections of social class, gender, race, age, or ethnicity.
- Understand why some members of society experience a cumulative disadvantage in later life, in particular, older women, and the role of power relations in these patterns.
- Identify areas of our daily social life that are age-segregated as opposed to age-integrated, why this occurs, and the effects on aging.
- Explain how agency can influence our position in a social structure by helping us acquire capital to change our destiny.
- Discuss the existence and influence of gender gaps and generation gaps in the family and/or in society.
- Reflect on the question as to whether retirement and economic security needs in later life foster generational equity, generational inequity, or intergenerational independence.

Key Facts

- The baby boomers comprise approximately 10 million Canadians, about one-third of the population, most of whom are either in their retirement or pre-retirement stage of life.

Key Terms

age grading The process in which age determines social location, roles, norms, and interpersonal relationships. (p. 181)

age structures Social dimensions of age that affect individuals and society. (p. 167)

assimilation A process by which an individual or group becomes more like the dominant group in such cultural elements as language, dress, values, and identity. (p. 175)

cohort Individuals born in a specific year (1990) or in a specific period of years (1990–5). (See also *generation*.) (p. 167)

generation A unique group of people (e.g., baby boomers), born during the same period, who have experienced and reacted similarly to significant social, political, or historical events that emerged at particular points in their life. These special events or factors have led members of the cohort to think and behave in ways that make them different from other generations. (p. 178)

generational analysis A comparison of age cohorts outside the family structure. (p. 180)

generational equity The perceived or actual fairness in the distribution of publicly funded resources and obligations across age groups and generations. (p. 193)

generational unit Within a generation, a subgroup whose members demonstrate unique styles of thought, dress, and behaviour at a particular point in their life (e.g., hippies, skinheads, rappers). (p. 179)

lineage effects A comparison of generations within extended families. (p. 180)

social differentiation The separation and ranking of positions based on ascribed attributes (e.g., age, gender, class, ethnicity, race) or achieved roles (e.g., spouse, parent, employee). (p. 180)

Study Questions

See below for answers.

1. What are the two attributes of social position? How can they create unequal access to opportunities and rewards?
2. What are the similarities and differences between older men's and older women's experiences of aging?

Additional Resources

Articles

Bump, P. 2014. [Here Is When Each Generation Begins and Ends](#), *The Atlantic*.

Hansen, D. 2017. [Do workers prefer older or younger leaders?](#), *The Globe and Mail*.

House, S. 2015. [The Growing Generational Divide](#), *The New York Times*.

Hudon, T. and Milan, A. 2016. [Senior Women](#) Chapter in *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report*, Statistics Canada, 89-503-X.

Kenyon, M. 2018. [How to build safe spaces for LGBTQ seniors](#). *TVO Current Affairs*.

Lennartsson, C., Eyjólfsson, H. S., Celeste, R. K., Fritzell, J. 2018. [Social class and infirmity. The role of social class over the life-course](#). *SSM-Population Health*, 4, 169–177.

Qmutinty, 2015. [Aging Out: Moving towards queer and trans competent care for LGBTQ seniors](#).

Statistics Canada. 2012. [Generations in Canada](#), *Census in Brief*.

Videos

AdAge. 2015. [Dodge Wisdom](#). (1 minute)

Chrysler found its sense of humor again for Super Bowl XLIV after a few years of stern-faced lecturing and sermonizing and rallying—some of which was moving and beautiful, but overall was getting a little long in the tooth.

American Association of Retired People, (AARP). 2016. [Disrupt Aging Playlist](#). (34 videos)

DisruptAging.aarp is a place to have a new conversation—often funny, sometimes raw, always honest—about how we want to live and age. We will celebrate all those who own their age. We will hold a mirror up to the ageist beliefs around us. We will feature new ways of living and aging, and the products and solutions that make this possible. We will partner with companies and communities to create new solutions that work for all of us at any age. And we will get this story—our story—out there. It's time to change the conversation.

Fabulous Fashionistas. 2015. [Youtube Playlist](#). (8 videos)

Meet the Fabulous Fashionistas: Bridget, Daphne, Jean, Lady Trumpington, Gillian, and Sue. These six astonishing women are the pioneers for a different type of old age. An old age you can look forward to with excitement rather than dread.

Facts. 2014. [57 Years Apart: A Boy and a Man Talk about Life](#) (4:35 minutes)

Huffington Post. 2016. [Aging in their own Words](#) (10 videos and stories)

Huffington Post sat down with seniors in Australia, Brazil, France, Germany, Japan, Kenya, Pakistan, South Korea, Spain, and the United States to learn more about their experiences. With over 617 million people around the world 65 years and over, these videos are by no means comprehensive. But these 10 people offer us something we can all learn from: insight into the experience of aging, in their own words.

Ultimate Software. 2015. [Four generations in the workplace. What's that like? \(2:06 minutes\)](#)

Is there really a generational divide in the workplace? Find out what it is like with millennials, Gen-Xers, Baby Boomers, and Traditionalists all working in the same place.

Vidmantas, T. 2011. [Nothing Changes: Being 50](#). (1:39 minutes)

This award winning video highlights the major achievements of famous people in later life.

Websites

Canadian Association of Retired Persons (CARP), www.carp.ca

Egale, LGBTQI2S Seniors, <https://egale.ca/seniors>

Exceeding Expectations (US), www.exceedingexpectations.nyc

Generation Squeeze, www.gensqueeze.ca

Study Questions—Answers

1. Social positions, with variations in status and power, are assigned on the basis of either ascribed attributes (race, gender, ethnicity) or achieved attributes (class, age, education), all of which represent social constructs. These stratification systems mean that some people have higher (or lower) status and more (or fewer) opportunities to acquire valued rewards, and they experience different lifestyles, challenges, and opportunities as they move through life. This leads to competition for, and sometimes conflict over, scarce resources among occupants of the various social strata. (p. 169)
2. In later life, gender differences are further magnified because women followed different life trajectories at work, at leisure, and in the family; and they experienced different lifestyles from those of men. These differences reflect the “feminization of later life.” Clearly, more, but not all, older women are vulnerable in later life because of lifelong gender differences. The financial and health implications of having less education, moving in and out of the labour force, and having major responsibility for the home, for child care, and for parent care are magnified in later life. Inequalities are more likely to occur if an older woman survives her spouse, receives a reduced pension when she is widowed, and depletes her savings if she lives into her eighth or ninth decade. The economic situation of older women is compounded by gender-based pension policies of the past, which were based on the assumption that all women were married and dependent on their husbands. Women are therefore disadvantaged in accessing adequate pensions due to the following:
 - life events, such as marriage and child care, which affect labour-force participation rates
 - working part-time or withdrawing from the workforce, thereby reducing pension benefits
 - engaging in unpaid activities, such as caring for sick or older parents
 - receiving lower earnings and fewer advancements in the workforce than men
 - living longer than men so that pensions must be spread over more years of life
 - experiencing widowhood, divorce, or singlehood, which significantly reduces income level and thereby increases the need for pensions. (pp. 172–175)