

Barry D. McPherson. *Aging as a Social Process: Canadian Perspectives* (4th ed.). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2004.

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RÉSUMÉ

Coleman et O'Hanlon étudient la recherche sur le développement normatif du vieillissement, en mettant l'accent sur les éléments qui démontrent un développement positif. Ces recherches sont illustrées au moyen de discussions portant, entre autres, sur l'adaptation, le développement émotif ainsi que l'influence des attitudes et des relations sociales sur l'expérience que constitue le vieillissement. L'ouvrage est bien écrit, bien pensé, toujours intéressant à consulter, et il présente des évaluations ainsi que des résumés critiques et intégrés des résultats. Cependant, le fait que l'on qualifie de théories de développement normatif certaines théories pour lesquelles il y a peu de preuves et le fait que l'on néglige l'influence de la continuité des processus psychologiques ainsi que l'influence des considérations socioéconomiques en matière de développement, constituent des faiblesses. L'optimisme des auteurs à l'égard de la situation globale du potentiel humain en matière de vieillissement tend, à l'heure actuelle, à éclipser les preuves.

This book by Barry McPherson is the fourth edition of Canada's first textbook on aging. *Aging as a Social Process* is a comprehensive text that elucidates and links the physiological, psychological, and social domains of aging within the context of what are known as individual and population aging. As the title implies, the book focuses primarily on the social processes of aging embedded in the micro-, meso-, and macro-level environments. It therefore balances individual-level experiences and social-structural forces connected to the causes and consequences of aging. It has been updated and expanded to reflect the increasing diversity in aging and the aged and the concomitant growth in research. This is captured through the integration of theory, research, and policy, from multiple perspectives and methodologies, applied to a wider range of substantive issues than in previous editions of the text. For instance, Aboriginal people and aging, homelessness, dating and sexuality, gay and lesbian relationships, end-of-life care, home care, and older drivers are but a few of the topics added or significantly supplemented in this new edition. In particular, I found the inclusion of a chapter dealing with individual and population health a needed and welcome addition. A life-course perspective on these topics that embraces the multiplicity of experience as individuals move through life stages, exposed to different historical and cultural contexts and facing and creating different life choices and chances, connects the material presented in this text.

This book is divided into four parts, with a total of 12 chapters. Part 1 contains four chapters that provide an introduction to individual and population aging. Chapter 1 sets the stage by exposing the reader to a number of fundamental terms and definitions, which become the building blocks of the text. The different domains of aging processes – biological, psychological, and social – are interlaced with the ways in which aging is structured and constructed, including the ubiquitous issues of age stratification, ageism, identity, and ethics. In chapter 2, aging processes are positioned within historical and cultural contexts, highlighting several diverse ethno-cultural groups facing unique experiences in the pre-literate and contemporary periods, as well as during modernization processes. These include, for instance, nomadic tribes, the ancient Hebrews, and Asian cultures and there is a sizable section on aging experiences among the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. Chapter 3 provides an introduction to the physiological and psychological aspects of aging; whereas chapter 4 uncovers demographic and geographic approaches to aging. The latter chapter has been updated using 2001 census data. Part 2

addresses the social and environmental context of aging. Chapter 5 covers the principal theories and perspectives found in this field and offers an instructive presentation of research methodologies. Students will find the clear descriptions of theories, located within the context of their origins in traditional sociological theory, helpful to their understanding. Social inequality and social change, positioned within a life-course frame, comprise chapter 6, while the chapter following synthesizes the living-arrangement and housing literature. The general topic of Part 3 is aging and social institutions, beginning with a chapter on family ties, relationships, and transitions, in keeping with the life-course theme. Chapters 9 and 10 cover two other major institutional realms in which life transitions occur: work, retirement, and economic security; and social networks and social participation. These chapters are organized around the principal issues found in the literature, such as mandatory retirement, pension reform, the feminization of poverty in later life, volunteerism, and lifelong learning. Part 4 completes the book with chapters on social support and public policy and on individual and population health in later life.

These final chapters address some of the most challenging issues facing an aging population, including home care policy, developing a coordinated continuum of services for the elderly, privatization of health care and health care reform, and end-of-life care, to name a few.

The integration of numerous highlights and discussion/review sections for each chapter helps to bring the material in the text to life, making it student-friendly. Indeed, the response of students in my class using *Aging as a Social Process* has been very positive. This is a text that has condensed the essentials of social gerontology, with a strong Canadian flavour. This text also assists the reader in identifying not only what is known about key subject areas but also what is *not* known. The identification of major gaps in our knowledge base is useful for researchers, practitioners, and future gerontologists in shaping their research agendas. Although some topic areas receive cursory review, the reader is encouraged to delve deeper into specialized literature to augment the coverage in this text.

Aging as a Social Process is a highly recommended book for students taking Sociology of Aging, Introduction to Gerontology, or other related courses. It is also a useful resource for persons conducting research or for professionals engaging in policy or program development targeting the elderly of today or tomorrow. The strength of this text is not only that it synthesizes and integrates a complex literature into a very readable form but also that it weaves this together with a life-course theme that places contemporary issues and experiences within historical and experiential context. McPherson certainly fulfils the promise articulated by C. Wright Mills (1967) that the sociological imagination enables us to understand the social world by interconnecting history and biography. It serves as a guide for those who have chosen gerontology and its inherent challenges as a field of study and hopefully a career.

References

- Mills, C. Wright. (1967). *The sociological imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.