



# 5

## Theories and Research in Explaining and Understanding Aging Phenomena

### Chapter Overview

This chapter introduces you to the theoretical and research-based processes of studying aging. Major theoretical developments will be covered and applied to contemporary aging issues. The aim of this chapter is to give you a foundational perspective of why we need different theories to understand aging processes, and to help students to recognize differences in assumptions about human behaviour, principles, and propositions. In addition, major research approaches will be covered, including qualitative and quantitative perspectives.

### Learning Objectives

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

- Define theory, understand why theories are constructed, and tell how they are used to explain and interpret aging phenomena.

- Appreciate why we need different theories to understand aging processes, and recognize differences in assumptions about human behaviour, principles, and propositions.
- Articulate the strengths and limitations of the theories covered.
- See the value of applying the life-course perspective as a bridging approach to the study of aging and how it can be combined with other theories (e.g., feminist gerontology, age stratification, intersectionality) to link structural and individual processes of aging.
- Understand the reasons why we require different methods to conduct basic and applied studies of aging, including mixed-methods approaches.
- Describe several unique research methods for studying older adults.
- Comprehend the complex issues surrounding the protection of older people's rights through ethical research practices.
- Understand the need for a multi- and a trans-disciplinary approach (in theory and methods) to questions and issues about growing and being older.

## Key Facts

**cohort analysis** A comparative analysis of specific birth cohorts. (p. 159)

**cohort-centrism** Interpretations or views of the world in which generalizations about a social phenomenon (e.g., the aging process or the status or behaviour of older people) are derived on the basis of studying only one age cohort. (p. 145)

**cohort flow** A process in which a series of birth cohorts, varying in size and composition, succeed one another over time. (p. 145)

**gender relations** The interaction of men and women based on the changing definitions and roles of what it means to be male or female in a particular social group. (p. 137)

**global reciprocity** Considering long-term reciprocity in relationships as part of the social exchange perspective. (p. 136)

**guardian** A person lawfully invested by a court with the power to make some or all personal-care decisions on behalf of a person who is mentally incapable of personal care. (p. 162)

**hypothesis** A prediction about the relationship between two or more variables. (p. 131)

**independent variable** The antecedent variable that is hypothesized to explain the outcome of a relationship between two or more variables. (p. 152)

**role** A social definition of the behavioural patterns, rights, and responsibilities expected from those occupying a specific status position. These normative expectations serve as guidelines for behaviour in specific situations. (p. 133)

**socialization** A complex developmental process by which individuals learn and internalize (adopt) the norms, roles, language, beliefs, and values of a society or subgroup. (p. 133)

**social phenomenon** An observable fact or occurrence that appears in social life on a regular or patterned basis. Most social phenomena stem from the influence of one or more persons on another

person or group. They represent patterns of behaviour, thoughts, or events that comprise the basic data and knowledge of sociology. (p. 131)

**structural lag** A period of social change in which social norms and social institutions fail to keep pace with changes in individuals' lives. (p. 147)

**theory** A set of interrelated propositions that presents a tentative explanation for a phenomenon. (p. 131)

**Variable** A concept (such as age) that has more than one value and to which numbers can be assigned to measure variation from one situation, individual, or group to another situation, individual, or group. (p. 131)

## Study Questions

*See below for answers.*

1. What is the life-course perspective? How does it bridge individual and structural approaches to social phenomena?
2. What are ethics in research? How can researchers protect older participants?

## Additional Resources

### *Articles*

Raina, P. 2015. [It's time to treat aging as an asset, not a burden](#), the conversation.

### *Videos*

McMaster University. 2015. [Nature vs. Nurture vs. Father Time](#). (2:26 minutes)

Why do some people age gracefully, while others encounter problems? With the population getting grayer, the time to find out is right now.

Pan American Health Organization. 2016. [What is the life course approach to public health?](#) (4:55 minutes)

The life course approach suggests that your current state of health is usually a result of your previous life experiences.

### *Websites*

AGE-WELL NCE (Aging Gracefully across Environments to Ensure Well-being, Engagement and Long Life NCE Inc.), [www.agewell-nce.ca](http://www.agewell-nce.ca)

Canadian Association on Gerontology, <http://cagacg.ca>

Canadian Consortium on Neurodegeneration in Aging (CCNA), <http://ccna-ccnv.ca>

Canadian Frailty Network, [www.cfn-nce.ca](http://www.cfn-nce.ca)

Canadian Institute for Health Research - Institute of Aging, [www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/46837.html](http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/46837.html)

Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging (CLSA), [www.clsa-elcv.ca](http://www.clsa-elcv.ca)

NICE (National Initiative of the Care of the Elderly), [www.nicenet.ca](http://www.nicenet.ca)

## Study Questions—Answers

1. Our journey through life is like a road map: it involves many possible routes and many alternative destinations and outcomes. The pathways (sometimes termed *paths*) we follow as we age are a product of our place in history, of our place in the social structures of our world, of agency and the decisions we make, and of the consequences of earlier decisions we made. There is both continuity and change in adult lives over time, and our experiences in later life are shaped to some degree by those we encountered earlier in life. Hence, there is considerable variability among older adults in shared experiences across the life course and in later life. The life-course trajectory changes direction or shape when a new event leads to a branching point. The decision to move in a new direction may be voluntary or involuntary and may be influenced by external historical, geographical, social, or political circumstances. The life-course perspective provides an analytical framework for understanding the interplay between individual lives and changing social structures, and between personal biography and societal history. (pp. 139–142)
2. All research involving older respondents must ensure privacy and guarantee protection from harm. The research process must protect participants from any physical or mental harm, such as worry, anxiety, or physical or mental anguish. Locher et al. (2006) have addressed some of the ethical issues involving research conducted with homebound older adults. Often, these persons are socially isolated and may not be monitored closely by others. Therefore, they could be vulnerable to unsafe or threatening situations during a research project. The author identified two major ethical issues that might arise when conducting research with homebound older persons. First, older people may experience “therapeutic misconceptions” wherein they mistakenly believe they are to receive some form of treatment or cure for some illness or disability that is of concern to them. And second, the researcher may experience role conflict as to whether to continue the research with a given person if the researcher becomes aware of a situation in the home that is immediately or potentially harmful to the participant, such as personal neglect or abuse or exploitation by a caregiver (see Chapter 12). Those who live in a retirement or nursing home or who are cared for by others in their own home must be protected from any possible retaliation by caregivers who may be criticized by an older person during an interview. A particularly difficult ethical issue involves how to respond if the observer or interviewer suspects, or is told by the older person, that physical, psychological, or financial abuse or neglect is occurring. Who should be informed, how, and when? These are difficult decisions, especially if concrete evidence is lacking or if there is no legislation clearly defining what must be reported and to whom, and what the consequences are for the “whistleblower” or for non-reporting. These are issues that researchers and their staff must understand and resolve before entering the field to conduct interviews or observations involving older people. (p. 162)