

FRONT-WAVE BOOMERS

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Introduction

Setting the Scene

One afternoon in July 2019, Philip and I met at a Calgary coffee shop. We were there to talk about aging, and Philip had a lot to say.

At seventy-one, he was pulling back from his small consulting business, and he was wondering what to do next. It wasn't that he was missing the work (though, during his career, it had "fed his soul"). It was that he now had questions about what might lie ahead.

"So now I'm in this space," he said. "What am I to do? I have energy. I have enthusiasm, but I don't know where it's going ... It's a disquieting time of life, is what it is."

Philip was probably speaking for many people in his age group. At seventy-one, he was at the front wave of the baby boom – the generation classified as those born between 1946 and 1965 that now makes up more than 25 percent of the Canadian population. Those born in 1946 turned sixty-five in 2011. Like Philip, they're now in their mid-seventies. Over the next decades, millions more will be following them as they head much deeper into old age. Philip would not be the only one with questions about how this move would go. "You can be so busy that you don't take any time to figure out where you're going, or where you should be going," he said. "I know that I'm going somewhere else. But I don't know exactly where that is."

Melanie, another front-wave boomer, described herself as “treading water.” At seventy-two, with a seventy-six-year-old husband whose health had taken a sudden downturn, she was primarily concerned about housing and sources of support over the long term. She and her husband were living in a house that was too big, in a community that was not particularly sociable and where contact with younger people was hard to establish. “What’s going to happen next, and am I going to be prepared to deal with it?” she asked.

In another conversation that summer, Cynthia talked about concerns that were in a different league. At sixty-four, she was younger than Philip and Melanie, but she was in a more precarious position when it came to aging. She was living on a disability pension, on her own, in subsidized housing. She went to aquafit and yoga classes and walked her dog in the dog park. But she had no close social connections.

“I live in poverty, social isolation, with declining health, mental illness,” she said. “There’s no one who will care for me ... The only thing that gets me out of bed in the morning is my dog.” Cynthia said she had “great clarity” about her situation. “I want to speak to you because I want the voice of someone in my circumstances to be heard.”

I wanted her voice to be heard, too, along with the voices of Philip and Melanie and as many front-wave baby boomers as I could find. I reached out to them because I was also deeply interested in what they could tell me about aging. I, too, was a front-wave baby boomer, concerned just as much as they were about the future of (very) old age that was to come. Back in 2019, when I spoke with Philip, Melanie, and Cynthia, I was seventy-two, and wondering, as they were, about what might lie ahead. But as a technically retired but still engaged professor of sociology, I had questions that went beyond the personal.

For some time I’d been interested in the massive demographic changes happening in Canada, and what the consequences might

be. The latest census, in 2016, revealed that the proportion of people aged sixty-five or older had reached an all-time high, surpassing for the first time the number of children under fourteen. That growth was mostly due to the entry of the baby boomers into the ranks of the old. We were living longer at a time when greatly reduced fertility rates had produced fewer young people than in previous generations. The result was a demographic revolution that researchers, policy-makers, and media pundits were trying to come to terms with.

The baby boomers driving much of the change were not like the generation of elders who preceded them into (very) old age. A whole range of social factors contributed to the differences. We were better educated. Our working lives had been spent in an increasingly information-based economy, so we would be bringing different skills and experiences with us as we aged. More significantly, we had fewer children, if we had them at all, and the geographic mobility shaping our children's working lives often meant that family members did not live close at hand. Mobility also disrupted the stability of neighbourhoods and the proximity of friends. Who would be around to care when this enormous cohort reached the stage of needing care?

As a sociologist, I considered front-wave boomers to be at a critical stage, on the brink of challenging life changes that were likely to have broad social implications. I wanted to find out the extent to which they were prepared, or preparing, for (very) old age. When I got to work in 2019, addressing this question was my primary goal.

BACK THEN, THE MOST popular view of aging, constructed to some extent by front-wave boomers themselves, was that it was a time of freedom and opportunity – at least for the lucky ones. Having retired from paid employment with pensions in hand and in generally good health (and with the expectation that this stage would be long-lasting), they could travel, volunteer, cultivate hobbies, enjoy their families (especially if they had grandchildren), and spend time with friends.

That was the view of aging promoted in the media – along with advice about keeping fit to maintain this lifestyle for as long as possible. Labelled the “third age,” this period between retirement and (very) old age was seen as a time when (with careful attention to pursuing a healthy lifestyle) people could enjoy “successful aging.” A search for books on “successful aging” on Amazon and other online vendors revealed just how commonplace the idea had become. There was also a whole new category of popular books geared to boomers seeking to reframe – or reinvent – their careers. These new careers were called “encore careers” in a stage that one researcher called “encore adulthood.”

Critics of the focus on “successful aging” (and there were many) noted that it might work for the lucky ones, but it excludes those who have health problems and other disabilities, those who struggle financially, those whose families don’t fit conventional patterns, those whose lives are difficult in other ways, and those in Indigenous or other communities with quite different perspectives on what successful aging might look like. Those people are aging too. As author and activist Ashton Applewhite put it in a *Globe and Mail* opinion piece, “All aging is ‘successful’ – not just the sporty version. Otherwise you’re dead.”

As far as front-wave baby boomers were concerned, that seemed to me to be the crux of the matter. Resolute focus on the period when we might be expected to be healthy and active failed to take account of the fact that, unless death came first, the “young-old” would eventually become very old. Even for the lucky ones, the independence and autonomy we might have prized earlier on would probably diminish. We would enter the “fourth age,” and life would change again.

For the front wave of baby boomers in 2019, this fourth age was getting closer. For most, it probably represented everything that “successful aging” was not. Gerontologists Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs described it as a “black hole.” But it was a black hole that, as

noted earlier, would soon be absorbing a record proportion of the population, in Canada and elsewhere. Boomers like me, now in our seventies, were the front wave of a cohort spanning twenty years. What would the fourth age be like, for us? Would we be ready for it?

Many things, collectively, could make a difference – including good genes, good health, good finances, and good luck. But from all I had learned, out of past research and the experiences of my own family and friends, I knew that what would make a difference (on top of almost everything else) was our connections to people – connections that were going to look quite different from those of our parents. Unless we died first, the time would come when we were going to need people – to share our lives, give support when necessary, accept (and appreciate) what we were able to give in return, and keep us connected to the wider world. These social ties would be critical. Where we might find them and how they could be sustained as we became very old seemed, to me, to be the big questions.

The background material that helped prepare me was thought-provoking. I learned a lot about baby boomers as a cohort, as a generation who grew up at a particular time in history that would shape our life experiences and our thoughts about the future. Our passage through that period was distinctive; along the way, it produced many changes – in family life, in communities, and in social connections – that would make our old age different from that of our elders. It also became clear to me that we were aging in a society in which views about old age were often patronizing, if not unkind. Baby boomers were experiencing a lot of criticism. Ageism was all around us, and we often internalized it. That, too, would shape our experience of very old age.

ALL THIS WAS INFORMING my thinking as I started research in earnest. I knew that front-wave boomers were not a homogeneous group. Though we had grown up and into old age at the same time, we hadn't all experienced it in the same way. I wanted to talk to people living

in different circumstances and regions across the country, people whose backgrounds were as diverse as I could find.

I wanted to know how prepared they were for old age, which was rapidly approaching, and, in particular, the people who would be in their lives to support them. Informed by my reading, I had many questions. I wanted to hear about their family ties, their friendships, and their educational and work backgrounds (a telling link to current and future financial status); I wanted to know how they were spending their time and the state of their health.

Between May and December 2019, with the help of community organizations, seniors' centres, personal and professional networks, and word-of-mouth referrals, I located and spoke with more than one hundred people across the country, ranging in age from sixty-two to seventy-seven (with an average age of sixty-nine). There was a roughly equal number of women and men. About half were currently married or partnered, about 80 percent had children, and about 10 percent were single and without children. There were also differences in terms of educational and work backgrounds, income level, sexual orientation, and ethnic or cultural identity. They all had decades of adult life experience to share. Along with their backstories, I got a clear sense of their present circumstances, particularly the people in their lives. Given my interest in their preparedness for the years to come, we also looked ahead. Our conversations were immensely rewarding. They gave me a rich and detailed base of information to draw on, and after reviewing it in the early months of 2020, I was prepared to write the book.

I didn't anticipate that a global pandemic would force challenging life changes on everyone – and a widespread shift in thinking about aging. Not surprisingly, COVID-19 also forced a shift in my own thinking. How would the pandemic affect the lives of the people I had spoken with and others like them across the country? How would it affect their current experience, as aging baby boomers, and their thinking about what was to come?

THE PANDEMIC WAS DECLARED in March 2020. Public health authorities focused on “seniors” as a homogeneous group whose members were considered equally vulnerable to COVID-19. Quebec premier François Legault’s March 14 request to people over seventy not to leave their homes unless necessary was perhaps the most explicit example of a concern that was widely articulated.

The pandemic’s most devastating impact in Canada during the first wave was in long-term care homes, which became hotbeds of infection with alarmingly high death rates. (By May 25, 2020, 5,324 long-term care residents had died of COVID-19 – 81 percent of all COVID-related deaths.) The crisis brought attention not only to the quality of care available in such institutions but also to the experiences of the overworked and underpaid workers who were hired to provide it. Care of the very old, in Canada and elsewhere, began to receive the kind of attention that would surely cause front-wave baby boomers (who might be next in line to need care) to take notice.

All of this seemed likely to push those I had spoken with to confront their age in new ways. Financial worries and health concerns were likely to increase the longer social isolation continued. And, most important from my perspective, the social connections available to them would likely shape how they experienced the constraints of lockdown in their communities.

Local responses to the pandemic would likely shine a bright light on strengths and weaknesses, resources and deficits in the homes, families, and neighbourhoods of the people I had spoken with. They might, in some ways, foreshadow what was further down the road. I wondered if the material I had gathered in 2019 might now be telling only part of the story. It seemed important to add a second goal to the research: to find out what lessons about aging might be learned from the pandemic.

One way to find out was to follow up with my participants, and between March 2020 and March 2021, that’s what I did. Having committed to keeping them informed about the progress of the research,

I had already arranged to send update messages. But the messages during the pandemic became check-ins as well as updates. Nearly everyone responded, at least once, often two or three times, over the course of 2020 and beyond, to let me know how they were doing. I also contacted a representative group of some thirty participants, who agreed to more frequent check-ins by phone (or Skype or Zoom).

The check-ins were revealing. During the first wave, there was anxiety but also resolve and a willingness to make the best of what everyone hoped would be a health crisis of short duration. Most people thought they would manage.

The summer of 2020, when restrictions lifted, was a welcome reprieve. But as fall and winter approached and we experienced the second and third waves, resolve often led to COVID fatigue.

For those with the resources to access it, technology such as Skype and Zoom enabled connections that, while not ideal, were better than nothing. As one participant put it: “I can’t imagine what an extended lockdown would be like if it happened ten years ago. As much as I’m getting tired of Zoom, I have to say I’m very thankful for it.”

But while all participants had at least minimal online access (or at least a telephone), social isolation was a real concern for some. By the time of our last conversation, one self-professed introvert was barely leaving his house. Another was committed to getting outside and walking, but apart from some distant family connections, there seemed to be no people with whom he was in close touch.

In the meantime, Canadians were dealing with media reports on the pandemic’s consequences, particularly among the very old. The heavy death toll in long-term care homes had alarmed seniors’ organizations and advocacy groups, and led to reports calling for wide-ranging structural and institutional change in care provision. But changes instigated in some provinces were not enough to prevent a second spike in cases in long-term care settings, and more deaths. Indigenous communities were also found to be particularly vulnerable.

Another grim consequence of the pandemic in long-term care settings was the social isolation enforced on residents to reduce infection rates. The media reported often on anxious family members unable to visit elderly residents and accompanied their reports with images of residents, shut in and dependent on (intermittent) contact with care workers to sustain them. These images drew public attention to social isolation in a way that had perhaps never happened before.

But it wasn't only in residential settings that alarm bells were ringing. The mental health effects of the pandemic were recognized by health care workers and family members, among others, to be widespread, and social isolation, particularly among older people, was a rising concern. The availability of social resources, always known to be important, now achieved much greater significance.

In this sense, the pandemic was a case study. It was demonstrating all too effectively what happens when our existing *social* resources are put to the test. It exposed major faults in the care system, among other social problems. And, as months passed with endless media coverage of the crisis, a pattern of heightened ageism began to emerge.

Viewing the pandemic as a case study from which lessons could be learned was a useful way for me to frame the information I had gathered in my follow-up work and fulfill the project's second goal. The people who took part in my research could be viewed as participants in the case study. They had valuable insights to offer. With differential access to social supports and relationships, some managed well (often rising to the occasion as helpers and supporters). Some managed, albeit with occasional concerns and anxieties. And some did not do well. There were lessons to be learned from all of them.

IN EARLY MARCH 2021, as vaccination programs were getting underway across the country, I was ready to end the follow-ups and move on. I now knew much more about front-wave baby boomers – as a cohort with a distinctive history and as individuals with diverse

resources and needs. It was time to think more deeply about what I had learned and to look ahead, once again, to the future of (very) old age in postpandemic Canada.

Thinking about what we front-wave boomers might want in our own very old age led me to think more about who we were. Who we were would have a lot to do with what we might want and what we would be willing to settle for. I knew we were not a homogeneous group, and I remembered the observation that not everyone who lives through the same period experiences it in the same way. But we had, collectively, lived through times that were different from those experienced by the generation before us, and we'd experienced a social world that had changed with us. There would be some shifts in our experience and our thinking about very old age.

The pandemic gave us a graphic picture of a particular *kind* of very old age – the kind lived in congregate settings, like long-term care facilities. It probably confirmed our conviction that this was not the way we intended to spend our final years. (Indeed, a survey conducted in July 2020 found that almost 100 percent of respondents sixty-five years and older planned to support themselves so they could live safely and independently in their own homes for as long as possible.)

But neither would we want to be lonely and isolated, like some of the older people whose stories came to our attention during the pandemic. We would want agency and autonomy. And if we lived long enough to need care, we would want it delivered by people who could appreciate and value us as individuals worthy of care.

By March 2021, when I was preparing to move on, these concerns were becoming part of an unprecedented society-wide conversation about elder care and aging. If we front-wave boomers had ideas about what we wanted, others did too. Those advocates and researchers who had sounded the alarm bells were getting more public attention; thoughtful analyses about what needed to change were

emerging, along with recommendations and models for doing things differently.

These urgent conversations had the potential to change the environment in which the next generation of elders would grow very old. I needed to take this potential for change into account and to ask whether what I had learned about front-wave baby boomers fit with the different future that seemed to be taking shape. Putting these two pieces together, at a time when answers were sorely needed, became the third and final goal of this book.

THESE THREE GOALS DROVE the book's structure. The first four chapters elaborate on my pre-pandemic goal – to paint a picture of front-wave baby boomers, in all their diversity, and explore their readiness for (very) old age. [Chapters 5](#) and [6](#) take up the book's second goal – to find out what lessons might have been learned about aging – and ageism – during the pandemic as social and other resources were put to the test and differences in people's situations became clear. The final two chapters take up the book's third goal – to look to the future and to examine both the challenges and the changes that might lie ahead in the field of aging and eldercare. In [Chapter 7](#), I explore the possibilities for doing things differently (now an urgent part of research and policy discussions) in the context of the diverse needs and resources of front-wave baby boomers who will be experiencing those changes first-hand. This is a critically important but often overlooked perspective, which I explore in more detail in [Chapter 8](#). Here I also put forward some strategies – at the personal and social level – for reimagining aging.

BY THE TIME OF MY LAST check-in with Philip, Melanie, and Cynthia, well over a year had passed since our first conversations. It was illuminating to see what could happen, even in a year, on our aging journey.

Philip was dealing with an emptying nest and preparing to sell the family home. He was also searching for new ways to direct his energy and enthusiasm. In his last email, he wrote: “I still am missing something to strongly latch on to which expresses my need to help the present environmental and social challenges of our time.” But he also noted a recent Zoom call with a group who recognized and echoed his feeling. He reconnected with them often. “So I’m not alone, which helps.”

There had been ups and downs in Melanie’s life too. Her husband’s health had improved, but there had been a death in the immediate family. She was still thinking about next steps in terms of housing, but long-term care homes would not be in the picture. As she put it, “If I ever needed one more reason why I will not be going to one [it’s] the effects of COVID.”

Cynthia reported doing a bit better after our initial conversation, but in response to one of my invitations for a follow-up, she told me she was depressed and not up to chatting. So I was delighted to get a more positive response to a later check-in and to learn that people had been reaching out to her. She wrote: “I am doing well! Thankfully I am able to join a small yoga class two times a week. I also forced myself to accept an invitation from friends in [city] to join them in their ‘bubble.’ I have been there for three week-long visits and it has helped immensely. Not feeling so isolated. Other long ago friends have connected too – strange times.”

In my case, big life changes came from a happy source. Just weeks before the pandemic was declared, I became a grandmother. That long-awaited grandchild’s arrival led, in short order, to major down-sizing and an interprovincial move. For the first time in many years, I had family members close at hand, with all the potential for the giving and receiving of support that our geographical separation had long prevented. And I could be a grandmother-on-the-spot – a role I relished. At the same time, I faced the challenge of getting to know a new community and making new friends.

As it turned out, this has been, for me, a time of surprising growth and change. But I know it won't last forever or even, possibly, for long. I, too, am heading into very old age, when things will change again. But as I've discovered, I'll have some great companions on the journey. Their stories are at the heart of this book.

1

Background on the Boomers

Baby boomers will soon be heading into very old age in unprecedented numbers. To understand what this looming future might look like, we need to know much more about them – what might make them distinctive as a cohort growing up and aging in a particular historical period.

The best and obvious place to start is the period when they were born. In the words of historian Doug Owrarn, it was the right time, for many reasons. He went on to write a book about Canadian baby boomers to illustrate why they were so fortunate – and so influential.

Owrarn prefaced his book by noting how rare it was, historically, for people to think of themselves in terms of their generational identity, and for children and adolescents to have such a profound influence on the larger society in which they were growing up. But, he argued, that was the case for the baby boomers, for three main reasons.

The first was the sheer size of their generation. Between 1945 and 1946, Canada saw a 15 percent increase in births. This trend lasted for twenty years and saw more than 8 million babies born in Canada. Live births rose from a low of 227,000 in the mid-1930s to more than 353,000 in the mid-1940s, to a peak of 479,000 by the late 1950s. The

baby boom transformed the age balance in the Canadian population. First as babies, then at every age as they grew up, baby boomers constituted what Owram, quoting another historian, called “the pig in the python.” At every stage of their young lives, their numbers required major social transformation.

The second reason for baby boomers’ influence was that they grew up in prosperous times. The immediate postwar period saw almost unprecedented economic growth. The standard model of the 1950s family, with father as breadwinner and mother as homemaker, came about at least partly because of the number of families that could manage on a single breadwinner’s earnings. This economic security allowed society, and parents, to focus on children, something that had not been possible in earlier decades of Canadian family life.

Another feature of family life during this period was its relative stability. In 1961, 94 percent of the 7.8 million children in Canada lived with married parents – the highest proportion observed over the past century. And while greater stability of family life would not necessarily guarantee the happiness of all its members, it did mark a significant, and potentially consequential, shift.

The third reason for boomers’ influence was that they were linked to a turbulent decade. As Owram puts it: “Much of the myth, and hence the power, of the baby boom lies in its connection with the fabled decade of the 1960s. Hippies and dope, free love, flower power and women’s liberation, Vietnam, the Kennedys and [Pierre Elliott] Trudeau, university protest and the Beatles – the decade has few rivals as an age of change and excitement.” This was the decade during which the oldest baby boomers came of age, and, in Owram’s view, their experiences gave them the sense that they were different, not just in terms of numbers and opportunities but in character as well. They were expected to *make* a difference.

BY 2019, CANADA HAD been transformed by aging baby boomers into a (demographically) older society. To put it more vividly, the baby

boomer “pig” was now headed to the end of the python. They were approaching very old age. How that future “fourth age” would go would be significantly shaped by the past they had experienced, both as individuals and as members of a generation growing up during a particular time.

Sociologists who study aging call this a life-course perspective. One key principle is that “large events such as depressions and wars, or the relative turbulence or tranquility of a historical period, shape individual psychology, family interactions and world views.” Some of the enduring transformations in Canadian social and cultural life that emerged during the baby-boom years cast long shadows.

Consider family housing. Greater prosperity and larger families influenced the development of suburbs in major Canadian cities. As Owram notes, “hundreds of thousands grew up, as had their parents or grandparents, in city homes, rural farmhouses, or small villages,” but the suburb was “the great phenomenon of the age and came to typify the childhood of the baby-boomer.”

The house in the suburbs came to represent a cultural ideal of family living that persisted well beyond that initial baby-boom growth. In the early years, it also reconstituted traditional family connections. Apart from the fact that children outnumbered adults in most neighbourhoods, parents and children lived apart from older family members. Isolated nuclear families were the new norm. And they generally lived in neighbourhoods made up, in terms of socio-economic status and race or ethnicity, of people just like them.

The baby boomers also sparked a transformation in education. The years from 1952 to 1965 – the older boomers’ school years – saw increased pressure on the public education system. More schools were needed to accommodate unprecedented numbers of children. There was also a growing sense, among postwar parents, of the importance of their children getting a good education.

This reworking of the education system had several effects. For the first time, classrooms were segregated by age. As Owram observes,

“In earlier generations the predominance of the small school meant that the ‘child’ in the row next to you might be three grades ahead and three or four years older. As schools exploded in size, and as consolidation took hold, that changed. The grade system, finely dividing children by age, reinforced and further refined the identity of one’s peer group.”

Another effect was the emergence of a pronounced youth culture as baby boomers reached adolescence. When the parents of baby boomers went to school, most children could be expected to finish Grade 8. But high school beyond that level was still for the most privileged. As late as 1951, the majority of fourteen-to-seventeen-year-olds were not enrolled in school. Baby boomers had different expectations. By 1954, more than half of fourteen-to-seventeen-year-olds were in school, and by the early 1960s that percentage had risen to three out of four. High school became an important focus of this new culture and in various ways set up baby-boom teenagers for the dramatic changes of the 1960s.

In high school, they were subjected to a curriculum that introduced them to ideas about democracy and social justice – an important and perhaps not surprising postwar legacy. And it was in their high school years that they became exposed to the other great innovation of the later 1950s – rock and roll. Young people’s music emerged as a force and would grow even more powerful in the decade to follow.

WE IDENTIFY THE BABY boomers with the drama and excitement of the 1960s, but they didn’t all experience the decade in the same way. The perception is that they were *responsible* for the drama and excitement, but Owrain suggests another view, that “however much the baby boom was a force within the decade, so too were events of the decade crucial in shaping the history of the baby boom.”

Whereas questioning authority might have seemed dangerous during wartime, and premature during the time of peaceful recovery

in the 1950s, it was both possible and called for in the 1960s, a decade defined by challenges to American policy on the Cold War and communism and events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam War. Challenges to authority also came from the civil rights movement and the women's movement, which had their roots much earlier than the 1960s. In Canada, this was also the era of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec.

So there was a lot in the world, and at home, to be concerned about – and a generation of young people, the beneficiaries of prosperous times and an education that had taught them to value democracy and challenge injustice, was ready to take up the fight.

Not all baby boomers joined the revolution. The action happened, in Canada as elsewhere, mainly on university campuses. And though university attendance was much higher by the early 1970s than it had been in earlier decades as the baby-boom “pig” reached post-secondary age, only one in six eighteen-year-olds had enrolled. But this was a generation raised to value and identify with their peers. Though not all boomers went on marches or joined boycotts, there were other things they shared such as clothes, music, or drugs – all features of the hippie-led counterculture. As Owrarn writes, “This was, after all, ‘the’ generation, and the sense of being involved in a vast peer-group revolution was very very powerful.”

Changes also happened in the world that boomers did not create or contribute to, but that would greatly influence their future lives. The publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson's enormously influential book *Silent Spring* and the stunning 1968 photograph *Earthrise*, taken from outer space by a US astronaut, marked the start of the present-day environmental movement.

Another change, with implications much closer to home, was the development of the birth control pill. It was first introduced to Canada in 1960, though at the time it was illegal to advertise or sell any form of contraception. Doctors could prescribe it only for therapeutic, not birth control, reasons. But with growing pressure from

the medical community and the public at large, the law was changed in 1969. In effect, contraception was decriminalized. That same year, following Pierre Trudeau's famous comment that there was "no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation," homosexuality was also decriminalized. (Sadly, decriminalization did not end homophobia and discrimination against the LGBTQ2S+ community.)

BY THE EARLY 1970S, the oldest baby boomers had reached their mid-to late twenties. The country in which most of them had grown up had changed, at least partly thanks to them. Owrarn summarizes it neatly:

In some cases, as in the women's movement, environmentalism, and gay rights, issues raised in the 1960s gained momentum. In other instances issues ceased to be controversial simply because they had been accepted by society as a whole – premarital sex being one obvious example, and rock music another ... Older Canadians picked up notions that had originally been identified with youth, and youth found that maybe there were those over thirty who could be trusted after all.

The baby boomers moved into jobs and (later than their parents) started families of their own. And all this, too, was happening in a changing world. For one thing, the prosperity of the 1960s was giving way to greater economic uncertainty. Getting – and keeping – a job became more important.

Most of them, however, managed to do just that. A Statistics Canada study of the working lives of baby boomers between 1983 (when the oldest were in their thirties) and 2010 (when they were in their sixties) found that about two-thirds had entered their fifties in jobs they had held for at least twelve years. In fact, most had worked for the same firm or organization for far longer – often twenty years or more – and even this was considered an underestimation, since most

had started their longest job before 1983. This suggests working lives that were quite stable. (By contrast, one-quarter of the sample had more mobile working lives and lower annual earnings and years of pensionable service.)

Advances in technology created other workplace changes. Even the oldest of the baby boomers were part of an economy that, over the decades from the 1970s, became increasingly computer-dependent and knowledge-based. Using Canadian census data from 1971 to 1996, researchers found that this trend was widespread across industries and occupations. Exposure to computer technology was, of course, job-dependent to some extent, but the work experience of many front-wave boomers made them comfortable with information and communications technology outside of work as well.

One of the most substantial changes to the Canadian labour market during the working lives of the boomers was the participation, en masse, of women. In the early 1950s, about one-quarter of women aged twenty-five to fifty-four participated in the labour market (which meant that they either had a job or were looking for one.) In contrast, virtually every man in the same age group was participating. From 1953 to 1990, the labour force participation rate for women grew steadily, rising from about 24 percent in 1953 to 76 percent by 1990. Women's growing workforce participation led to a significant increase in their earnings, which more than doubled between the mid-1960s and 2010. More women were working full-time and in well-paid occupations.

Women's greater participation in paid work and the influence of the women's movement signalled a shift in ideas about family roles too. This shift was reflected in two pieces of legislation enacted in the 1960s. The first, as noted, was the introduction of the pill and the decriminalization of contraception in 1969, which paved the way for family planning in a way not available to earlier generations. Fertility rates began a decline – from an average of 3.1 children per woman in 1965 to 1.6 per woman by the mid-1980s. The second was the 1968

Divorce Act, which extended the grounds for divorce to include a no-fault option based on separation of at least three years. The legislation signalled a shift in the way people perceived marriage. Within a decade, the rate of divorce in Canada increased six-fold. (There was another spike in 1986, when the minimum separation period was reduced to one year.)

More divorces meant more remarriages. By 1997, 34 percent of marriages involved at least one spouse who had been previously married and, in almost half these cases, both spouses had been married at least once before. In many cases, divorced parents brought children to new partnerships. In 1994–95, nearly 9 percent of Canadian children under the age of twelve lived in a stepfamily.

THESE TRENDS AFFECTED baby boomers born and raised in Canada to settler families – the majority, in demographic terms. But they were joined, over the years, by boomers from many other countries. Immediately after the Second World War, the immigration boom mostly favoured people from the United Kingdom. But the 1950s to the 1970s also saw the arrival of immigrants from Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Portugal.

World events also led to the massive movement of refugees and migrants from different parts of the world to Canada. Examples included the arrival of 60,000 boat people from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the late 1970s; 85,000 immigrants from the Caribbean (for example, Jamaica, Haiti, and Trinidad and Tobago) and Bermuda in the 1980s; 225,000 immigrants from Hong Kong over the ten years leading up to its return to China by the United Kingdom in 1997; and 800,000 immigrants from India, the Philippines, and the People's Republic of China in the 2000s. All had experiences that differed from the majority of Canadian baby boomers who grew up in stable, suburban-dwelling, predominantly white households.

The experiences of boomers born to Indigenous parents also differed in sobering ways. In 1966, when white boomer children were

sitting in suburban classrooms, twelve-year-old Chanie Wenjack was running away from his residential school near Kenora, Ontario. He died in the attempt, from hunger and exposure. Chanie, an Anishinaabe boy, had grown up on an Ontario reserve and was sent to a residential school with three of his sisters when he was nine. His death sparked national debate and led to the first inquest into the treatment of Indigenous children in residential schools. The (non-Indigenous) jury concluded: “The Indian education system causes tremendous emotional and adjustment problems for these children.” They recommended that “a study be made of the present Indian education and philosophy. Is it right?”

It took until 1996 to close the last residential school, after some 150,000 students had passed through the system. It’s hard to say how many, like Chanie Wenjack, were of baby boomer age, but it’s likely a good proportion of Indigenous people aged sixty-five and older in Canada today share a residential school background.

Some might also have endured other forms of family trauma related to the so-called Sixties Scoop, which saw Indigenous children removed from their families and communities – often without their parents’ or bands’ consent – to be adopted into predominantly non-Indigenous families across Canada and the United States. Estimates vary, but recent research has found that more than twenty thousand children may have been affected – often with serious psychological and physical consequences.

FROM THIS HISTORY, it was clear to me that front-wave baby boomers would be approaching very old age with highly diverse backgrounds. Life did not unfold uniformly even for those doted-on baby boomers who’d grown up in stable suburban homes and youth-oriented communities.

A life-course perspective also recognizes that people have agency; they make choices within the constraints and opportunities available to them. Educational and job opportunities put people on different

paths. So, too, do relationship choices, the presence (or absence) of children, and other social supports. Life paths are also affected by gender and race. And people are linked. The bonds of kinship link generations, and we connect with people at all stages of our lives. Our lives are “embedded in relationships with people, and are influenced by them.”

For baby boomers approaching very old age, these relationships would be critical. Important as other dimensions might be – health, financial security, and physical safety being the main ones – it is people who would make a difference. With this in mind, I used the baby boomer background information I gathered to examine relationship issues that might make our experience of very old age different from that of our own elders.

Demographically, as our spiking divorce rate suggests, front-wave boomers were less likely to stay married, if we married at all. In a study of divorce in Canada, sociologist Rachel Margolis and her colleagues found a tendency for couples to divorce later in life and noted that baby boomers have “more tumultuous marriage histories” than previous generations. They are the group most likely to have experienced divorce and most likely to be currently divorced (about 10 percent, in 2018). Later-life divorce is another feature of some boomer families, though the trend is less marked in Canada than in the US.

Though a high proportion of baby boomers had children (around 90 percent by their mid- to late sixties), we had fewer of them. And those children – many of them millennials facing their own challenges – are also having fewer children and at a later age. This has had obvious implications for baby boomers, whose transition to grandparenthood might be delayed – or might not happen. In the mid-2010s, while upwards of three-quarters of people in their late sixties and early seventies were grandparents, some had been grandparents-in-waiting for quite a while. Overall, boomers have far fewer family connections than our forebears did.

Even for those boomers who do have children and grandchildren, contact with other family members might not always be straightforward. The constraints of work in a global economy – and women’s greater participation in it – might leave little time for family support. Work commitments might also mean that families are geographically dispersed. Transnational migration might separate families even more dramatically. Family connections can also be shaped by relationship breakdowns and divorce. And in families across the board, relationships might not always be warm and supportive. Finally, there is a significant minority of front-wave boomers who have neither children nor grandchildren, now coming to be known in the research literature as “elder orphans.” For them, relationships outside their families might be the most significant.

So where might those relationships be found?

Our parents tended to find connection and support in the communities where they lived. But by the time we were approaching very old age, communities, just like families, were changing. The house in the suburbs had been a draw for boomers raising families, just as it had been for their parents, and many older boomer couples still lived in the suburbs. But in physical, geographical terms, the suburbs might now be less stable, more car-dependent, and less familiar than the sociable, interconnected neighbourhoods – the “communities of place” – they had once been. And not all older boomers have partners. According to census data, in 2016, some 28 percent of households in Canada were single-person. More than a quarter of them housed people over sixty-five. Neighbours didn’t always know neighbours.

Of course, communities of place were not the only communities around when I embarked on my research. Social ties had been transformed by the internet, social media, and the mobile connectivity of cellphones. Evidence suggested that older baby boomers were making good use of these information and communications technologies (ICTs for short). Many had experience in workplaces where they were commonplace. As one group of Canadian researchers commented:

“To an appreciable extent, it is not so much that the aged have started using ICTs, but that long-time users of ICTs have grown into older age.”

But who they might be connecting *with* raised questions and concerns. Other research suggests that as baby boomers age, they tend to have fewer personal connections close at hand and, significantly, fewer connections to younger generations. That, too, would impact their experience of aging.

AS IT TURNED OUT, the people who agreed to speak with me represented a richly diverse set of life experiences and backgrounds. Where people grew up, the cultural context of the 1960s, the constraints they faced, and the choices they made about school, work, and family – all of these things, among others, did indeed foreshadow what came later for many.

Of all my participants, Sam’s was the story that most closely fit the popular image of the turbulent, exciting 1960s. Sam was seventy when we met. Born in San Francisco, he came of age as the hippie movement was emerging. He joked about seeing a T-shirt whose message read: “I may be old, but I saw all the great bands.” (The message resonated – he listed seeing the early concerts of Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin, and Led Zeppelin.) But he also remembered participating in the protests that were another feature of San Francisco life. He described the scene as “a real eye-opener, culturally and in a whole lot of ways.”

Sam was also representative of the group of Americans who fled to Canada to avoid being drafted to fight in the Vietnam War. He was twenty when he arrived, and when his first relationship broke down (and when amnesty had been declared for draft dodgers), he returned to the United States to complete a university degree. He then came back to Canada, started a new family, embarked on graduate studies, and became a college instructor – a job he held till he retired.

Mary, also seventy when we first spoke, grew up in an upper-middle-class family in Toronto and had what she described as a fairly typical 1950s upbringing until her high school years, when she, too, became involved in protest movements. She opposed the Vietnam War, was involved in an antipoverty coalition, then dropped out of university after her second year to live (briefly) in a commune. In 1975, after five years away, she returned to university and, like Sam, embarked on graduate studies, which led to an academic career. When we spoke, she had a partner, two daughters, and three grandchildren. She was a devoted grandmother.

These classic 1960s coming-of-age stories were the exceptions, though. Gary went from high school in southern Ontario to training as an electrician, marriage at twenty, then a long-term job in a steel mill. Janet grew up in Saskatchewan, married at twenty, and did secretarial work while her husband was at university. Later, she balanced caring for her two children with working as an office administrator, selling real estate, and taking courses to train in home design. She later worked with a realtor, staging houses for sale.

Tariq was born in India and immigrated to Canada in 1972, when he was twenty-three. He had completed a bachelor of commerce degree in India, but his first job was as a bartender (in his own estimation, a very good one) at Toronto's Royal York Hotel. He conceded that he should have carried through with getting Canadian qualifications in his field; instead, he worked in a variety of retail and other jobs until he started a long-term position with Canada Post. He retired in 2013. He and his wife (also from India) raised four children. When Tariq and I met, he had three grandchildren living in the United States.

Anika was born and raised in Sri Lanka. When we met, she was seventy-two. She had come to Canada with her husband and two children more than thirty years earlier, to escape Sri Lanka's bitter civil unrest. She considered herself lucky to have got an office job in

a friendly Italian company, where she worked for more than twenty years, until her retirement at sixty-nine.

Mike, seventy-four when we met, was the only child of a single mother who was determined to keep him busy and out of mischief. She bought him a membership to the Winnipeg YMCA. His involvement in its programs, from a very young age, launched him on a long career in recreation management.

Angela lived all her life in Vancouver. She did office work until her retirement in 2013. She also raised two children as a single mother, and there were struggles along the way. When we met, she was seventy-one, and life was much better. She had three grandchildren, to whom she was devoted and whose presence in her life influenced some of her volunteering. All her family (siblings, too) lived nearby, and she was still in touch with friends she had known since preschool. There was also a new partner in the picture.

All the stories I heard included turning points. Life intervened in surprising or happy or tragic ways to send people in directions they could never have predicted. Happy interventions included meetings with people who turned out to be life-long partners, or side interests that turned into meaningful work. But I also heard about early illnesses, life-changing accidents, financial stresses, relationship breakdowns, the death of partners, and the death of children.

A life-course perspective helped me understand how people's present circumstances had been shaped by what had gone before. As other researchers discovered, privilege tended to play forward, just as disadvantage did. Cynthia's situation (described in the Introduction) was one example. It was echoed by Leslie. She was sixty-three when we first spoke, and living on a disability pension in subsidized housing. Leslie was adopted, and her family connections broke down as she grew up – partly because family members didn't accept that she was lesbian. She started but didn't finish nurse training and spent most of her working life as a personal support worker, until an

accident forced her into early retirement at fifty-nine. (She was one of those baby-boom workers whose working life was unstable.)

In addition to her living situation, and her poor health, Leslie had no surviving family and few friends. Her situation was, in a word, precarious. In fact, by 2019 there was a growing recognition among gerontologists that *precarity* accurately characterized the aging process for many vulnerable groups – including those living in poverty. In the case of Cynthia and Leslie, precarity was made even more acute by the absence of social support.

In all the stories I heard, I came to appreciate, again and again, the power of our connection to people. The life-course principle of linked lives was one way to think about this. And there were other helpful perspectives. For example, another feature of family (and other) connections is that we tend to carry them with us as we (and they) age. Researchers call this the *convoy* model of aging. Who is in our convoys as we age determines the social ties we can call on for emotional, and practical, support.

The convoy model builds on work by sociologist Mark Granovetter, whose 1973 study, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” has had a lasting impact on researchers’ thinking about social ties. He distinguishes between strong ties (close, intimate friendships) and weak ties (distant or more instrumental). His point is that we need both – dear family members and good friends who sustain us emotionally, and a range of other people to connect us to the wider world.

Our lives are embedded in relationships with people. People are at the heart of our experience of aging and our thinking about getting even older. All the people I spoke with helped me to see this clearly.

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