

From daughter to daughter

a poster about a mother's experience

Conceptual and theoretical understanding of ageing

In life there is one thing you can always count on, and that is the inevitable and systematic passing of time. As far as I know there is no way to stop or reverse time although certain beauty or cosmetic companies try to tell you differently. This inevitability of ageing is deeply tied to my conceptual understanding of what it means to be part of this universe. I see ageing as a process of change from the moment of conception until death. Almost all things go through a changing process; there are few things that don't "age" and air is the only one I can think of. Everything from trees to the sun to humans age and eventually fade away or explode. Trying to distance ourselves from the idea of ageing, as Western, neoliberal, colonial ideology does, it doesn't make the concept of losing one's family any easier, but for me, this helps in framing the knowledge that connections aren't severed upon death. My first experience with death was when I was 11, when my cat, a Norwegian Forest Cat named Petit Chat, who we got the same year I was born, got cancer. As a family we put him down because we could see he was in pain. We buried him in our back yard in California and I always took comfort in knowing he could prowl the hills in death as he did in life.



Michelle and me



Andrea, Sophie, and me

Interview with Sophie Braccini-Lucacher

I originally wanted to speak with my grandmother, Michelle Lefebvre, for this poster but she is in a bad place emotionally. She is currently making the transition from living alone in her Parisian apartment to living in a longterm care facility in suburban France and the transition is proving to be very difficult for her. I asked her if she would talk to me and she said no, even though I did not specify the topic. Instead I decided to talk to my mother, Sophie, who is 64 years old. She is a first-generation French immigrant in the US and lives with my father Robert. They lead comfortable middle class lives. Michelle is my last living grandparent and my mother (her daughter) is not happy about how ageing feels in America. Although she acknowledges some privileges and benefits of ageing and overall feeling young on the inside, she is not happy to be phased out. She is not happy to be considered fragile, weak or declining. During our 1-hour interview and follow up chat a few days later she touched on three main topics: ageism, ageing in the mothering role, and the capitalistic implications of ageing.



Michelle

Ageism

My mother feels that, as a woman, and particularly one past menopause, society starts treating you differently; you become part of a different social group and society makes that very clear. She said "...either they're talking too loudly, they tell you to be careful, or they think that you're stupid... you've lost your value... it's debilitating" (Sophie Braccini-Lucacher, personal communication, 2022). It is clear from my interview with her that she feels like ageism is prevalent in her life. She sees and feels that older people like herself are treated poorly in society (Azulai, 2014). As a cis-gender, White woman I think my mother finds ageing particularly difficult because of its institutionalized and socially constructed components and ties to self-sufficiency, self-responsibility, and individualism (Azulai, 2014). Ageism works within a system of oppression to hide age away, and disenfranchise people based on their age (Azulai, 2014). What makes my mother feel antiquated are the thousands of micro aggressions that she sees within government institutions, movies, TV and advertisements that stigmatize age and imply that one should act in accordance with the cultural context that their age, gender and other cultural cues prescribes (Rozario & Cerienzis, 2009). My mother wants to rebel against the dominant, normative or expected ways of ageing because she's come to realize that there is no "right way" to age (Rozario & Cerienzis, 2009), and that there is only what society tries to tell you is normal. Although my mother is a White, cis-gender, immigrant settler she tries to question and identify the normative discourses about racism, gender binaries, sanism, and agism so that she may break out of them in an attempt to break their perpetuation from generation to generation (Wilson & Schellhammer, 2021). I, like my mother, am incredibly privileged. We both try to recognize our privilege and hope to use this knowledge to unlearn the capitalist, colonial, oppressive and racist ideals we know. As children, my brother Michael, sister Andrea and I were always encouraged to speak our minds and to stand up for other people, and as much as I love my father Robert, I credit my mother for this.

Capitalism

My mother also talked about the capitalistic implications of ageing and how this contributes to economic vulnerability. "You feel it less in France because there is an economic safety net but in the US you feel it. Society gives you violence; taking out a loan is much harder, renting a car becomes much harder, society sends you an image of disability and in a materialistic capitalistic society, the old people cost more. They don't create or contribute and since mental capacity doesn't count, old people become totally "useless" because there is no capitalistic value in ageing. You must save up for when you're old, or else you'll just be a weight on society" (Sophie Braccini-Lucacher, personal communication, 2022). When talking about the ageing American and Canadian populations it's important to recognize how positionality and intersectionality play a huge role in how capitalism frames and structures one's life. The compounding effects of different people's intersectionality based on racialization, queer & trans identity, disability, socioeconomic status and many other aspects affect the way people interact with social institutions (Bhatia, 2020). There are many people who will never retire or engage in "active ageing" because they cannot afford it. The limited supports for ageing Americans is further compounded by the decimation of kinship structures in favour of linear relationships (O-Sullivan, 2021). Within one's linear family you are expected to be able to support yourself and your parents, and if you can't, you've failed as a productive member of society.



Robert and me

Mothering/Roles

Sophie spoke a lot about what she considers to be the normative "mothering role", how it defined her as a young woman and how that's changed over the past 30 years. She noted the clear difference between the value she felt in society when my siblings and I were young versus now, at 24, 27 and 29. "When your children are grown not only do you (as a mother) lose your value as a mother, but you also lose your children. They move out, and go on with their lives, and you love them, and nothing could make you happier. But at the same time when you are older you lose your defining role as a leader or person of vital importance, and it's the same with ageing; when you're older you don't lose your value as a human completely, but you become diluted, you get distended" (Sophie Braccini-Lucacher, personal communication, 2022). I think my mother's frustration with her changing identity as an ageing woman is framed by the disassociation she experiences from the loss of respect and appreciation she feels she is going through (Rozario, Derienzis, 2009). In *Life Stages and Native Women*, Kim Anderson talks about how as (Indigenous) women age, they come to serve their communities in different ways, especially after they pass menopause. As they become elders, they take on leadership positions and gain more responsibilities, which distinguishes them as different types of elders (Anderson, 2011). When I talked to my mom about a "balance between principles of autonomy, self-determination and non-interference ... and practices of reciprocity and collectivism..." (Anderson, p. 132, 2011) she thought that she might feel more valued and understood as a human being and that ageing might take on a new perspective that isn't only tied to her age number, allowing her freedom from becoming invisible (Rozario, Derienzis, 2009).

Social work implications

Through this course, and the other courses I have taken in this program, I have come to realize that language is essential to decolonial, anti-oppressive and anti-racist social work practice. How and when we choose to speak or not speak defines who we will become as social workers. Working alongside populations who are vulnerable to ageism both at the beginning or the end of life requires that we know when to advocate for care and when to listen and learn from those who have a lot to teach us. Seeing value in each human being and recognizing the humanity in everyone is essential to working with the elderly. I would like to see social workers advocating for change that will give older generations hope and make them feel excited about their futures.

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