

SEX DIFFERENCES IN THE EXPERIENCE OF AGING*

Dolores Gold

The major economic inequities between older men and women have been well documented, with 80 per cent of elderly women having incomes under \$10,000, compared to 54 per cent of elderly men. This income difference between elderly women and men is, of course, part of the total context of economic disadvantage that women experience compared to men throughout their lives in our society.

Socio-economic factors have been found to be major determinants of the psychological well-being of elderly people in western society. Consequently, one can well ask, since elderly Canadian women are so disadvantaged economically, how do they compare psychologically to elderly men? No large-scale representative survey of the psychological functioning and adjustment of elderly Canadian men and women has been made to date to answer this question. However, in recent research my colleagues and I interviewed and assessed the psychological functioning of approximately 400 elderly people living in the Montreal area. Comparisons between the women and men in our study revealed a consistent pattern of psychological differences indicating that the experience of aging appears to be more difficult for women in our study.

The elderly people in our study were all aged sixty-five or over and were volunteers who were recruited through a variety of agencies that work with aged people — for example, local community centres, university-alumni associations, retirees associations, and groups affiliated with various religious organizations. All of the elderly people in our study were living independently in their own homes in their communities and thus can be considered to be a sample of people who were

Il existe de grandes différences de niveaux de revenus entre les canadiennes et les canadiens âgés de 65 ans et plus. Ces différences nous permettent de prévoir efficacement le fonctionnement et l'adaptation psychologique des personnes âgées. Au niveau national, il n'existe aucune recherche qui ait comparé le fonctionnement psychologique des hommes et des femmes âgées au Canada. Cet article, cependant, donne les résultats de comparaisons faites entre 400 hommes et femmes du troisième âge, de niveaux socio-économiques variés, vivant dans la région montréalaise. Les résultats indiquent que, bien que les facteurs de prévisions du bien-être psychologique soient les mêmes pour les hommes et pour les femmes, ces dernières ont moins de ressources pour faire face aux problèmes du vieillissement, et vivent ce phénomène plus difficilement.

*This article is based upon research supported by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and from the Conseil québécois de la recherche sociale.

coping well with the requirements of aging. Each person was privately interviewed and given a battery of standardized psychological measures that provided a fairly comprehensive assessment of the person's psychological state including personality and cognitive functioning and adjustment. Approximately half of the people in our study identified English as their main language, while the other half of the study claimed French as their main language. Our volunteers were recruited in such a way that approximately half of the elderly people had middle-class socio-economic backgrounds, that is, education at the university level and occupations that were rated as being professional or managerial in nature. However, in the case of our elderly middle-class women, most were considered to have middle-class backgrounds by virtue of their husbands' occupations, since most of these women had not been consistently employed outside their home for any long duration of time. The elderly people who were considered to have working-class socio-economic backgrounds had levels of education that were below high-school graduation and had been employed in occupations that did not require extensive training and did not allow self-supervision. All the women and men of working-class socio-economic background had a history of employment.

There were several major differences between the women and men in our study; overall, the women had lower levels of education, lower income levels, and fewer of them were married compared to the men, while more women were widowed. These sex differences are typical of the general population of older Canadian women and men. However, these differences between the groups can confuse the comparisons between men and women and so require the use of special methods of statistical analysis which we employed in our

data analysis to untangle the relations among the factors involved.

In general, we found that the factor of social class had the largest and most consistent effect on our data, with people who had higher levels of education and middle-class occupations functioning better on personality, adjustment, and cognitive variables. However, the gender of the elderly person also had a significant impact on our measures of psychological functioning. We found that women described themselves to a significantly greater extent than did men as having more anxieties, as leading more stressful lives, and as having less money to provide for their everyday necessities. In addition, the women perceived elderly people in general in more negative terms than did the men. They described the average old person as having more problems of all types, as being more limited by environment, and as being less satisfied with his/her life than did the men. In fact, on some measures the usual advantage of middle-class status for psychological functioning was not so for women married to men who had middle-class occupations. These women had levels of poorer psychological functioning that were comparable to those of elderly men and women of working-class background.

It appears that the cushioning effect of middle-class socio-economic background as protection against the losses and difficulties of old age is not as efficient for women who gain such status in the traditional way, by homemaking for men who can provide them with a middle-class lifestyle, as it is for men who can attain their middle-class status through their own economic, educational, and occupational achievements. We are presently conducting analyses which will allow us to compare the psychological functioning of elderly women who are considered to have middle-class socio-economic back-

ground by virtue of their own occupational level or by virtue of their husbands' occupations. We expect to find that those elderly women who had held professional or managerial occupations before they retired will be more similar psychologically to middle-class men, with both groups having lower depression, anxiety, and stress scores, and higher levels of income than the elderly women of middle-class background who do not have a history of professional employment.

The men and women did not differ on measures of memory functioning; however, when they were asked to rate the adequacy of their memory for everyday tasks, the women described their memory as being significantly poorer than did the men. This picture of lower self-confidence in their own abilities fits in with the general picture of poorer psychological functioning by the older women. It is noteworthy that the factors that predict good cognitive functioning in elderly people are the same for both men and women — higher levels of education, habits of daily activities that require intellectual effort such as reading, writing, playing games like bridge and chess, and a relative absence of anxieties and difficulties in coping with life.

One could argue that this general picture of greater distress revealed by the women does not represent real differences in numbers and intensity of problems between elderly women and men. Instead it is possible that these differences are due to women's greater willingness to admit to problems or to complain more about the same levels of problems. However, if this argument that the sex differences represent one of style rather than substance is true, then one would expect women to have poorer scores on all the measures that assessed problems, which they do not. In fact, the women and men did not differ in their descriptions of their health. Thus the wom-

en's poorer scores do not appear to reflect a generalized willingness to complain; rather they appear to describe problems in specific areas of psychological functioning.

We must emphasize that one must exercise caution in generalizing from these results. Clearly our sample of elderly people is not representative of the whole country. Thus it is necessary to extend and repeat the findings in this study before one can draw conclusions about the existence of widespread differences in psychological functioning between elderly Canadian women and men. However, the findings in this study do reveal a consistent pattern of differences that are in accordance with the results of other research examining the effects of socio-economic status on the well-being of elderly people.

The factors that predict good psychological functioning for elderly women and men are the same — higher levels of education, being married, good physical health, a level of income that is seen as sufficient for daily needs, leading active lives that offer a variety of social rewards that are perceived by the individual as being obtainable through her/his own efforts. In this sense, then, elderly men and women are clearly very much the same psychologically. However, the Canadian historical and cultural contexts provide the two sexes unequally with these resources and so lead to different outcomes in the experience of aging for women and men.

Further Reading:

National Council of Welfare, *Sixty-five and Older: A Report by the National Council of Welfare on the Incomes of the Aged*. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, Cat. No. H68-11/1984 E.

Dolores Gold is a Professor of Psychology in the Psychology Department and a Principal Member of the Centre for Research in Human Development at Concordia University.

