Editorial:
Contexts of Aging

The request to write an editorial on a set of articles brings with it a challenge – to find a theme that connects the work of a group of authors who wrote their articles independently of each other. Fortunately, finding the theme to weave together a discussion of the six papers in this volume of the journal was not difficult. All are about contexts of aging.

It is only recently that we have come to appreciate the importance of the settings in which older people live their lives. Our traditions are much more naive. For a long time we viewed aging as a period of inevitable decline. Phrases like "what can you expect at your age" or "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" emerged from this understanding of aging. Subsequently, concerns about ageism led us to a period of immense optimism about the possibilities that come with age. The CBC program "It's About Time" exemplified that era. In that program we were presented with images of seniors who spent their time skydiving, mountain climbing, running marathons and operating multinational corporations. Phrases like "you're not getting older, you're getting better" typified this understanding of aging. Yet it was clear that neither image accurately reflected the lives of very many Canadian seniors.

We now recognize that seniors are a heterogeneous group of people who have had six or more decades of diverse experiences and time to develop their values, beliefs and idiosyncrasies. They are more unlike one another than are people in any other age group. And we have begun to explore the complexities of the ways in which they differ. One approach to understanding this diversity has been to examine the interactions between seniors and the various environments in which they live their lives.

This ecological approach to understanding human experience and behaviour is the paradigm that informs my research and teaching in Human Ecology.[1] Some of the assumptions of this paradigm are that people live in a set of physical and interpersonal environments; that people are influenced by and in turn have an influence upon these environments; that the relative importance of environments differs across individuals and for the same individual across time.

For several years, I have been thinking about how to conceptualize the key environments of older people. I see six environments or contexts that are particularly important in understanding the lives of older people. These can be viewed as concentric circles, with closest environments having the most direct relevance to the older person. At the centre is the *personal environment*, comprising the individual's characteristics such as functional and cognitive status and personal resources such as income. These characteristics provide the opportunities and constraints on interaction with

other environments. Next is the *"near" environment* that includes the attributes of the place where the person lives and the artifacts in that place. The *interpersonal* environment includes the important people with whom the person interacts including members of the person's social or caregiving networks. The *physical environment* includes aspects of the built environment and natural environments that are outside the household. The severe Canadian climate is a feature of this environment. The *cultural environment* includes beliefs about aging and the place of seniors in the population. Finally, the *policy environment* is the set of policies and programs that may influence senior's relationships with any of the other environments. Articles in this issue reflect an interest in various of these contexts.

In her article on the interactions of seniors living in private housing for the elderly and their physical and interpersonal environments Maltais speaks to the issue of the "best fit" between seniors' personal resources and their environments. She is interested in how the built and interpersonal (caring) environments might influence the social integration of residents. Maltais identifies several environmental resources that might influence social integration. Level of services provided can be seen as a proxy for the supportiveness of the physical and service environments. Perception of environmental control by the resident reflects the resident's belief that she/he can have some impact on her near environment, while tolerance level of caregivers toward seniors and their decision making input is an indicator of the supportiveness of the interpersonal or caring environments.

Maltais found that service level and perception of environmental control were the most important predictors of social integration, and that there was interaction between the physical and personal environments. Having a sense of control over one's near environment was most important to seniors with high levels of functional ability, while too much environmental control was stressful for those who were frail. She concludes that seniors need different organizational environments depending upon their level of frailty, an argument for the need to find the "best fit" between personal and other environmental resources.

The main context in the article by Wielink and Huijsman is the caring environment. They studied the attitudes of community-dwelling people over age 65 toward receipt of informal versus formal care in "care-need" situations: short- and long-term housekeeping help and personal care. The authors found that as care needs become heavier, seniors are more likely to prefer formal help, although preferences are influenced by caregiving experience, gender and household composition. Overall, both formal and informal care were seen as detracting from living independently since both were viewed as evidence of increased dependency. Thus, being in receipt of care is an indication of reduced ability to influence one's environment.

In their conclusions, Wielink and Huijsman argue that personal preferences of senior consumers will have a powerful influence on what types

of services are used. They discuss whether a fit between seniors' wishes and available caring resources should be crafted by attempting to change seniors' preferences for care or by changing caring resources to meet those preferences. Further, they suggest that these issues should have an impact on the development of policies related to long term care for seniors.

Robb, Denton, Gafni, Joshi, Rosenthal, and Willison consider the interpersonal environment of seniors by studying seniors' contributions to assisting people who are part of their informal networks. Their article is about the economic value of this assistance that might otherwise have been purchased on the market. The authors found that seniors participate more in unpaid help than do younger Canadians. They are almost twice as likely to be involved in formal help and one and one-half times as likely to engage in informal help. In fact, they provide almost half of all of the unpaid help activities of Canadians. By placing seniors in the context of other providers of care, Robb et al. provide a reminder that if we only consider seniors as receivers of resources, we will never consider their contributions.

Hallman and Joseph's article is focussed on the physical environment and the geography of caregiving. Specifically, they address the question of how proximity influences the amount and nature of participation in informal eldercare. They point out a reality of caregiving in Canada – in most cases there is a distance barrier that must be dealt with. Hallman and Joseph provide evidence that women and men have different time-space issues in caregiving and conclude that women are more likely to reject distance as a barrier to caring than are men. They found that women caregivers travel further and longer to provide care than do men and were more willing to be proactive than men in dealing with problems of distance by arranging relocation for themselves or their relative. Yet they also found that while women appeared more willing to be proactive in dealing with time-distance constraints they did so at a cost of working harder and faster. The authors argue that the next step in understanding the gendered geography of eldercare is to move from a dyad analysis to analysis of networks of family caregivers to older relatives, thus looking at "family geographies".

Two articles in this volume address issues of culture, but in very different ways. Gee writes about an aspect of the cultural environment of seniors, their ethnic identity, while Connidis and McMullin's research is, in part, focussed on the cultural construction of beliefs about families.

In the introduction to her research on ethnic identity of Canadian seniors who were born in China, Gee notes that there has been little research on the study of aging and ethnicity in Canada. She argues that elderly Chinese Canadians do not experience normal aging in the Canadian context. Rather they "are in the process of forging out their aging experience in a Canadian context that, for the first time, allows them a social environment that is less constrained and constructed by racist immigration policy" (p. 5). For most, that identity is Canadian. Only a

minority of the respondents in her study retained their Chinese identities. For them, their rejection of the identity of the cultural majority seemed to have a negative impact on them. Rather than being buffered by having connections to others with similar experiences, they had lower levels of perceived social support and health. Gee concludes that more needs to be known about context and that "social researchers cannot simply assume the benefits of retaining ethnic identity, despite the current academic celebration of difference" (p. 18).

Connidis and McMullin address the question of whether those who are childless accept the societal view that in later life the childless are at high risk for loneliness and isolation. They report on a study based on interviews with seniors who do not have children. The majority of these seniors reported both advantages such as having fewer worries and being financially better off and disadvantages such as lack of companionship and loneliness. Of interest is the finding that those who report worrying about loneliness and isolation have similar levels of life satisfaction to those who do not report these disadvantages. Similarly, those who worry about lack of support and availability of informal care when they might need it have similar social ties to those who report no such worries. The authors conclude that the childless likely have accepted some of the stereotypes associated with having no children.

The authors of articles in this issue provide a glimpse of the state of our understanding of how seniors influence and are influenced by the environments in which they live. The concept of congruence between values, preferences and personal resources of seniors and their key environments is implied in their work. In my view, we need to move this concept of "best fit" to centre stage. If we accept the paradigm of older persons as agents in their lives, then we need to focus our research on how their environments enhance or detract from their abilities to engage in life as fully as possible. We need to remember, as well, that the "fit" between seniors' needs and their environments is not static but must be reconsidered as environments change. The *Canadian Journal on Aging* provides an excellent forum for this discourse that will be best informed by the variety of methodological approaches and disciplinary backgrounds exemplified by papers in this issue.

Note

1   See, for example, Keating, Fast, Connidis, Penning, and Keefe (1997).

Reference

Keating, N., Fast, J., Connidis, I., Penning, M., & Keefe, J. (1997). Bridging policy and research in elder care. *Canadian Journal on Aging / Canadian Public Policy Special Joint Issue, 16*(Supp.), 22–41.

Norah Keating