



Understanding the experiences of racialized older people through an intersectional life course perspective



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ABSTRACT

This article proposes the development of an *intersectional life course perspective* that is capable of exploring the links between structural inequalities and the lived experience of aging among racialized older people. Merging key concepts from intersectionality and life course perspectives, the authors suggest an analytic approach to better account for the connections between individual narratives and systems of domination that impinge upon the everyday lives of racialized older people. Our proposed *intersectional life course perspective* includes four dimensions: 1) identifying key events and their timing, 2) examining locally and globally linked lives, 3) exploring categories of difference and how they shape identities, 4) and assessing how processes of differentiation, and systems of domination shape the lives, agency and resistance among older people. Although applicable to various forms of marginalization, we examine the interplay of racialization, immigration, labour and care in later life to highlight relationships between systems, events, trajectories, and linked lives. The illustrative case example used in this paper emerged from a larger critical ethnographic study of aging in the Filipino community in Montreal, Canada. We suggest that an *intersectional life course perspective* has the potential to facilitate a deeper understanding of the nexus of structural, personal and relational processes that are experienced by diverse groups of older people across the life course and into late life.

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Introduction

While the impacts of im/migration on older adults have been addressed to some extent in existing social gerontological literature (Anthias, 2008, 2013; Baldassar, 2007; de Haas & Fokkema, 2010; Dwyer & Papadimitriou, 2006; Koehn, 2009; Lai & Chau, 2007; Treas, 2008), relatively few conceptual or theoretical frameworks have explored how identity categories such as 'race'¹ and racialization² can intersect with life events across the life course. Often housed in the sub-discipline of 'ethnogerontology', works on racialized communities have focused on the biological, psychological, and social implications of aging (Jackson, 1985), and the causes, processes, and consequences of ethnicity, national origin, and culture on individual and population

aging (Torres, 2015). The impacts of 'race' and racialization are beginning to be addressed in studies that focus on aging in relation to transnationalism and im/migration (Baldassar, 2007; Crewe, 2005; Torres, 2012; Treas, 2008). Yet, while these efforts have made significant inroads to understanding the realities of racialized older people from immigrant communities, few frameworks explicitly bridge the personal stories of aging with the wider structural barriers and the unique realities and histories that have shaped racialized communities and older people's lives. Moreover, few studies that use a life course perspective have considered interlocking forms of oppression. This represents a missed opportunity for a more integrated analysis of the interplay between identity categories, individual chronological life events and the impact of institutions, policies, and broader histories and systems that come to shape identities over a lifetime. What continues to be missing in this scholarship is how systems of oppression such as colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism are interlinked and shape key events over the life course, and jointly constitute later life experiences (Hulko, 2009a).

Researchers have suggested that the problem of understanding the impacts of 'race' and ethnicity is connected to a number of assumptions in the field of gerontology and the study of aging more generally (Phillipson, 2015; Torres, 2015). For instance, understandings of 'race', ethnicity, and age are dominated by solution-based approaches that

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¹ 'Race' is an identity category that partly forms the basis of one's social location (others being gender, ethnicity, social class, age, ability and faith) (Hulko, 2009a).

² Racialization refers to broad social processes (including colonialism and cultural privileging) in ascribing social meaning to the term 'race'. This definition acknowledges how the meanings and effects of 'race' shift across time and space; and constructs racial difference, categorization, and exclusion between groups (Henry & Tator, 2009).

privilege models of success and continuity (Daatland & Biggs, 2004; Torres, 2012). Marshall (1999) suggests that the models and frameworks used to explain aging are often culturally specific, and based on experiences and/or outcomes of communities that are assumed to be stable and homogenous. However, despite the call for increased recognition and responsiveness to the diverse pathways of aging, scholars have argued that additional theoretical work is needed to integrate the structural forces that impinge on the individual with personal trajectories of aging (Anthias, 2008; Koehn, Neysmith, Kobayashi, & Khamisa, 2013; Settersten, 2009; Torres, 2015).

In response to the call for more comprehensive frameworks, a handful of authors have focused on intersectional and interlocking approaches to the study of aging (Dressel, Minkler, & Yen, 1997; Hopkins & Pain, 2007; Hulko, 2016; Krekula, 2007), with a small body of literature connecting issues of aging to historically marginalized groups such as racialized older people (Anthias, 2008; Calasanti, 1996; Hulko, 2009a; Koehn et al., 2013; Torres, 2015). As Koehn et al. (2013) noted, there is significant potential in understanding that “people experience the effects of a country’s social inequities as simultaneous interactions between multiple dimensions of social identity (e.g. gender, age, sexual orientation, visible minority and im/migration status) that are contextualized within broader systems of power, domination and oppression” (p. 10). While Dressel et al. (1997) provided earlier guidance in using interlocking oppressions/intersections to account for structural forces that shape experiences of aging, other scholars have begun to explore its relational, temporal, and spatial dimensions (Hopkins and Pain, 2007; Hulko, 2009a; Krekula, 2007). Using the concept of age relations, Calasanti (1996) examined structural inequalities in retirement policies and their impact on older women in the United States. Her findings elucidate how labour market inequalities, characterized by lower participation in employment and reduced social security benefits earlier in the life course, come together to impact life course privileges such as lifetime earnings and access to pensions. This type of analysis acknowledges what Estes (1999) describes as a structural view of aging which presupposes that the “status, resources, and health of, and even the trajectory of the aging process itself, are conditioned by one’s location in the social structure and the relations generated by the economic mode of production and the gendered division of labour” (p. 19). For instance, Hulko’s (2009b) work with older people experiencing dementia, highlights how experiences of marginalization and privilege shape older people’s views on life with dementia. By focusing on subjectivity and voice, Hulko’s (2009a, 2009b, 2016) work demonstrates how social processes such as racialization and gendering vary temporally and spatially, while systems of oppression are historically and culturally situated (Hulko, 2009a, 2016).

In the context of immigration, Anthias (2008, 2009, 2013) problematized notions of belong and identity by noting the absence of frameworks that address unequal power relations and structures of differentiation. She introduced the concept of ‘translocational positionality’, a concept informed by intersectionality, as way to focus on positionality, and the “crisscrossing of different social locations, but also ... to the shifting locales of people’s lives in terms of movements and flows” (Anthias, 2008, p. 17). While concepts such as ‘translocational positionality’ have relevance, a step-wise guide is needed to extend intersectional analysis to account for the interplay between individual stories, social relations, and structural forces.

This paper makes the case for an *intersectional life course perspective* that equips researchers and decision-makers with the means to better understand the relationships between the structural and institutional forces that shape everyday life narratives of older people at marginal and racialized social locations. We propose an innovative theoretical lens—the *intersectional life course perspective*—to enable a more nuanced and comprehensive examination of the diversity and heterogeneity of the late life experiences of racialized older adults. To do so, we discuss how key concepts from intersectionality theory (as originally conceptualized by Collins, 2000 and Crenshaw, 1987) can be linked with

elements from the life course perspective (proposed by Elder, 1974). Not intended as a final static model, we propose this new perspective as a means to begin the conversation about how theory may better incorporate intersecting and interlocking oppressions into understandings of the late life among marginalized communities. We do so by first introducing key concepts of the life course perspective, and intersectionality. We then explore our proposal of an *intersectional life course perspective* that takes into account elements of both the life course and intersectionality. Finally, we put this framework into action through the case example of Rizza, a retired domestic worker who immigrated to Canada. Rizza’s case offers a unique opportunity to tease apart identity categories (such as gender, ‘race’, ethnicity, and age), and key concepts over the life course (such as im/migration, labour, and retirement)—specifically exploring how roles, identities, and expectations shift as older racialized immigrants navigate systems of domination throughout their lives. Here, intersections of ‘race’, gender, im/migration, and labour reveal how later life experiences are uniquely attached to various Canadian policies which have historically marginalized, and continue to marginalize, racialized immigrant older adults in Canada.

The life course perspective

The life course approach is considered a leading theoretical and methodological perspective in social gerontology. Offering an ontological and holistic view of life, this approach has generally been used to understand how transitions and trajectories impact one’s life (see Clausen, 1986; Grenier, 2012; Hareven, 1994; Hutchison, 2015). Where differences occur on theoretical and geographical lines (Dannefer & Settersten, 2010),³ the best known iteration of the life course in North America, is that proposed by Elder (1974, 1994), which outlines how the life course can be understood through structured pathways (i.e. social institutions and organizations), and individual trajectories (i.e. roles, statuses, development) that shift over time to impact individual identities and behaviours. Elder’s (1974, 1994) life course perspective is based on four major concepts. First, *human lives and historical times*, whereby lives are seen as intertwined and defined by significant events that produce long-lasting effects. Second, the *timing of lives*, indicates how events occurring at specific points during a timeframe could have different consequences for different people. The third key concept, *linked lives*, denotes the interrelatedness and interdependence of human relationships across the lifespan. Finally, the life course takes into account the key concept of *human agency* and the ways in which people make choices, adopt strategies, and articulate experiences of resilience when encountering structural constraints (also see Dannefer & Settersten, 2010, Settersten, 2003, and Hutchison, 2015).

The life course perspective has been widely used in social gerontology, and in particular with regards to ‘race’ and ethnicity in the United States. Studies examining health disparities along racial/ethnic lines are the most representative type of life course research, with predictive models being used to situate class, ‘race’, ethnicity, and gender (Brown, Richardson, Hargrove, & Thomas, 2016; Kim & Miech, 2009; Warner & Brown, 2011). For instance, Glymour and Manly (2008) focused on the life course patterns of cognitive aging among older African-Americans, and the impact of geographic segregation, migration patterns, socioeconomic position, educational and occupational opportunities, and encounters of discrimination. Similarly, Warner and Brown (2011) examined disability trajectories, and noted racial and gendered health

³ See Marshall (1999) and Grenier (2012) for review of the life course and transitions. The distinction between ‘personalological’ and ‘institutional’ that is made by Dannefer and Settersten (2010) is particularly helpful in understanding the differences between the life course perspective as articulated in North America and Europe. While we acknowledge (and use in other work) the European perspectives on the life course that are more attuned to the interplay of structures and social institutions, we situate this paper in the North American scholarship that is more closely connected to intersectional perspectives and empirical research with racialized and immigrant communities.

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