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Older Adulthood, Education and Social Change

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Abstract

The outcome of demographics which point to a rapid increase in the number of older adults in the population has been widely debated in the literature. However, it has been examined primarily from the perspective of an unrealistically optimistic or unduly pessimistic view of the future, with few attempts to provide other alternatives.

This thesis is structured in three sections. The first backgrounds the context of the research question, the relevant literature, the prospect of gender bias in that literature and the historical development of government policy towards ageing. The second section presents a theoretical perspective for social change, examines the development of social movements and puts a case for a new social movement arising out of the increasing number of older adults and supporting educative processes. The third section reports on empirical research based on interviews in Australia and New Zealand with leaders of organisations involved with older adults and focuses on drawing conclusions from the research in relation to the research question.

The theory proposed in this thesis is based on the premise that an opportune time in history exists for older adults to contribute to social and political change. However, for senior members of society to undertake this role will require education in some form, to act as an agency or catalyst to initiate an organised social movement. Findings of this research support the view that the majority of older adults remain fit and healthy and do not conform to the medicalisation approach to ageing on which government policy and, to a large extent, public attitudes, have been formed. While there would be problems of organisation in the formation of a new social movement there are no insurmountable obstacles to overcome. The greatest difficulty would seem to lie in overcoming inertia, sectional interests, generating the leadership and developing innovative and imaginative educative processes.
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