

Statement of the Problem: Canada is experiencing a rapid growth in population aging, and it is occurring more rapidly in Atlantic Canada than in the rest of the country (Shiner, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2013). Women age 85 and older are the segment of the population least likely recognized for their capacities and contributions to society, are one of the fastest growing segments of the population and this trend is expected to triple when boomers begin entering this age group in 2031 (Statistics Canada, 2012), yet little is known about the experiences of these older women as they strive to navigate their daily lives, maintain their independence and continue living as active members in society. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of community-dwelling women, age 85 and older, living in rural areas and small towns, and to uncover new knowledge about how these women, many with limited income and transportation options, continue their chosen lifestyles and independence. I intend to fill a gap in educational, gerontological and feminist research on how older women adapt and adjust to aging in a society where ageism and sexism exists, and services are limited. I will explore independence from the perspective of women 85 and older and the barriers and enabling circumstances that affect their personal welfare. Critical analysis of educational possibilities will identify opportunities for growth and productivity to enrich the remaining years of life. The overarching question guiding this study is: *How do community dwelling women age 85 and older maintain independence and continue being productive citizens in rural and small town Canada where there are injustices based on age and sex?*

Literature Review: Recent analysis of Atlantic Canadian data on women age 85 and older revealed that 47% lived in rural communities, 68% were non-drivers and 60% did not leave their homes on a regular basis (Bryanton, 2014). Older women are most likely to be limited in their day-to-day travel due to lack of transport options (Toucotte, 2012). Yet transportation is an enabler that promotes older peoples' well-being (Fristedt, Dahl, Wretstrand, Björklund, & Falkmer, 2014), self-reliance, and maintenance of social ties (Dye, Willoughby, & Battisto, 2011). Older women's identity is defined within a complex array of power relations and government policy that privilege some women and disadvantage others (Soin and Tan, 2013), 'othering' excludes the aged person from the everyday life of society (Gilleard & Higgs, 2014), and ageism is a barrier emphasizing the failing of physical and mental capabilities, and the elderly themselves internalize this image (Chaffin & Harlow, 2005). Calasanti, Slevin, and King (2006) imply that a feminist framework provides an understanding of the diversity of older women and ways of being old. Critical geragogy, education of, and by, elderly people increases well-being and learning (Formosa, 2005; Maderer & Skiba, 2006). Merriam and Kee (2014) argue that community well-being can be promoted through lifelong learning with and by older adults, and promotes critical reflection and action in older women (Findsen & Formosa, 2011).

Significance of this Research: Few researchers specifically examine the experiences or wants and needs of the growing population of women age 85 and older living in rural areas and small towns. Those living in these locations have higher rates of poverty, poorer housing and less access to services (Kivett, 2001), and are most likely to receive or need transportation assistance (Milan & Vezina, 2011). In this study, I will address transportation and other issues that impact women as they age, and collaborate with older women to create new knowledge. Working together to consider information for understanding and formulating solutions is proactive and allows individuals to collectively identify and generate solutions to inequalities that influence their participation as citizens in society (Freire, 2011). This study will contribute to understanding and development of programs and policies for older adults, specifically for women who have crossed the threshold into the category of the oldest old in our society.

Theoretical Framework: Critical pedagogy, the combination of education and critical theory, critical gerontology and a feminist framework will guide this research. Underpinning this study will be the concepts espoused by Paulo Freire (2011). It will be further defined by critical geragogy, a concept which treats teaching and learning as a collective and negotiated enterprise amongst older adults (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). Central to this study will be critical geragogy principles which include a commitment to the transformation of ageist social structures, use of a communal approach and liberatory education to empower older people (Formosa, 2002).

Methodology and Methods: A mixed methods case study will be used to combine the power of stories and numbers, to develop a more complete understanding of the experiences of older women and to compare, validate, and triangulate results. In this study, the case is defined as the province of Prince Edward Island (PEI). The inclusion of an entire province in this study is of great utility as it will make it possible to extrapolate lessons of national significance that affect women across Canada who live in similar situations. The sample will consist of community-dwelling women age 85 and older who represent the majority in “the oldest-old” category. This study will be conducted in 4 phases. **Phase 1** a survey including demographic questions, closed-ended and open-ended questions related to how they maintain independence and do the things they want and need to do, to continue being productive citizens. Participants will be a random sample of 100 community-dwelling women 85 years and older. **Phase 2** is focus groups that will follow the analysis of phase 1 results, and will consist of 5 to 7 women per group. Facilitated semi-structured interviews based on the survey results will clarify findings and gather further information. **Phase 3** will involve collecting data through photovoice with 7 to 10 women to identify, examine, analyze, and act on issues related to their ability to remain active and independent in their community using the power of their photographs and stories to build public awareness (Wang & Burris, 1997). Phase 3 will culminate with participants in this phase meeting to reflect and share experiences on the research process of photovoice and to share their photographs and stories to create public awareness. **Phase 4** the document/discourse analysis to identify policies that oppress or emancipate older women, and will be used to identify policy gaps and development of recommendations. Thematic analysis allows for themes to emerge using inductive coding (Fereday and Muir-Cocharne, 2006), and will be used to guide the qualitative data analysis. Qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) will be used to aid in coding and organizing qualitative data. SPSS software will be used to analyse the quantitative data.

Academic and Professional Experience: Currently I am in my fourth semester as a Ph.D. student, under the supervision of Dr. Elizabeth Townsend who is an expert in Adult Education and Occupational Sciences. My decision to advance my research career evolved through educational experiences as an older adult and my activist career for older students and older adults. I served as Coordinator of the PEI Senior Citizens’ Federation, President of the Canadian Organization for Part-time Students, and I co-founded several organizations on PEI including the UPEI Mature and Part-time University Students, the Seniors Active Living Centre, the Voice for Island Seniors Newspaper, and the Seniors College of PEI. I received an Honorary Doctorate from UPEI in 2000 primarily due to my voluntary contributions to older adults on PEI. Over the past 12 years I worked as a research coordinator for many studies on aging based at UPEI. This SSHRC award, beginning in 2015, will allow me to continue my Ph.D. studies full-time. In year one of this study, I will focus on developing my dissertation proposal and obtaining an ethics certificate. Year two will be devoted to focus group and photovoice data collection and analysis. In year three, I will complete the document/discourse analysis, finish the writing process, and defend my dissertation by the end of 2018.

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